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The book of Exodus sets the scene for the Exodus event with the telling of an extended conversation between Moses and God on Mount Sinai (Exod 3.1—4.17). The questions and reservations that Moses voices and the responses that God provides set the stage for some of the central themes that run through the biblical account. My intent is to illuminate the theme introduced by Moses' second question, in Exodus 3.13.

Moses' first question was about himself and his worthiness to lead: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod 3.11). God's short response ("I will be with you") echoes a theme of divine presence that is significant in the second half of the book of Genesis (see Gen 26.3—5, 24; 28.13–15; 31.3, 5; 35.1–3; 39.2–4, 20–23; 48.21). He is the God of the *fathers* (ancestors), who proved his covenant love over the course of three generations. God's response prompts a second longer—and more substantial—question from Moses: "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?,' what shall I say to them?"

Moses' second question (and God's response) surprises many interpreters, because the name that God gives in the following verses is a name that the reader has already encountered as the name of the God of their fathers. It is the name *Yahweh*, the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*), *Jehovah*, which is usually translated in English as "the LORD," written fully in capital letters. It is also the most frequently used name for God in the book of Genesis. Over the centuries some scholars have taken Exod 31.3–15 as one of several pieces of evidence that betray the existence of multiple conflicting sources within the Pentateuch. Source critics such as Martin Noth argue that this passage comes from a source (the "Elohist source") that assumes humans did not know the personal name of God until God revealed it to Moses here on Mount Sinai.[1] Passages in Genesis that use the Tetragrammaton represent, they contend, a different source (the "Yahwist source"), one which assumes humans knew the personal name of God from the beginning of human history.

I am convinced that source critics reach such conclusions about this passage too quickly. I believe they misconstrue the motivation behind Moses' second question, and so they misunderstand the meaning of God's response. The assumption of Noth and others like him is that the name itself—the letters and their pronunciation—has never been known before this event. They argue that God's name was unknown to the Israelites—or anyone else—prior to this encounter on Mount Sinai. What is lacking here is an explanation of how the Israelites are expected to confirm the accuracy of this newly revealed information when Moses shares it with them, if the Israelites have never known it before Moses speaks it to them. It is logically inconsistent to assume that no human had known the divine name before this moment.

We might be tempted to assume that the Israelites would not expect Moses to know the name of God but this, too, is based on an unsustainable assumption. The assumption would be that even though Moses knew his Israelite heritage (see Exod 21.1–14), he did not know God's name. So, according to this view, Moses is really

1. M. Noth, *Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 41–45.

asking for a sort of secret password, which will let the Israelites know that Moses truly is what he claims to be (a leader sent by God).[2] But Moses could have become familiar with the divine name before he fled from Egypt, so simply knowing it would not have been a remarkable occurrence.

We get a hint of the more likely motivation for Moses' question from the nature of God's answer. That answer consists not simply of a name, but it points to the deeper, core meaning of the name. It is that deeper meaning that answers the deeper significance of the question Moses poses on behalf of the people. God sends Moses to Israel, and it should be obvious this is in response to their prayers for deliverance. So the deeper significance of the question is "How will God deliver his people from slavery in Egypt?" Is he able? The people need reassurance and courage to approach the Pharaoh and prepare for their departure. Closer examination of God's initial answer and repeated references to God's divine name in the subsequent events of the Exodus bear out this understanding of the people's question.

The *idem per idem* – "I am who I am"[3]

God does not respond with a simple answer to Moses' question; he leads up to the name with a sentence— "I am who I am."[4] The answer bears the technical designation, *idem per idem*, "the same by the same." This enigmatic response has been the subject of several interpretations. In my opinion, four of these fulfill the most important characteristic of any interpretation—they make sense in the context.

1. **Existence.** Theologians such as Martin Buber and Raymond Abba adopt the view that God's answer is a statement of self-existence. Most Hebrew scholars agree that the name comes from *hawah*, the archaic Hebrew verb that precedes *hayah*, "to be," which is well known in Biblical Hebrew. Thus the name *Yahweh* literally means "he is."[5] According to this view, God's *idem per idem* answer to Moses intends to tell the people that the God of their fathers truly exists, "he is who he is," or better, "he is who is." This distinguishes him from the presumed—but ultimately non-existent—gods of the Egyptians, and so he intends to show everyone that *he* truly is God.
2. **Holiness.** G. R. Driver is one who goes a step beyond the previous interpretation, saying that God not only is the one who is, he is unique in his existence. He is God, and there is no other being that is as he is. What God will display in the Exodus points beyond mere existence to the unique and supreme nature of *his* existence. It will manifest his divinity, his total otherness, his holiness.[6]
3. **Mild Rebuke.** As a common variation on this, many conclude that God's statement is not actually an answer, but more like a refusal to give an answer. He is who he is, and any attempt to name him implies a desire to comprehend him, thereby implying his finitude. Because God is holy, because he is totally other, human beings cannot fathom him. And yet giving a name in part implies that they can fathom him. So the name of God—"he is"—is open-ended, as if to say he cannot be fully defined or fully understood.[7]

   Involved in this is the notion that knowing someone's name translates into the possibility of control over him/her. A good example of this notion comes from Egypt, in a text describing how certain priests came to know a special name of the god Re. Anyone stung by a scorpion could come to these priests, who would

2. Moses H. Segal, *The Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), 5–6.

3. For a fuller discussion of this construction—and one that contradicts the conclusions expressed here—see G. S. Ogden, "Idem Per Idem: Its Use and Meaning," *JSOT* 53 (1992), 107–120.

4. Experts in ancient Near Eastern culture contend that many names in that culture were the beginning of longer sentences, which explained the reason for the name.

5. See M. Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper, 1958), 39–55; R. Abba, "The Divine Name Yahweh," *JBL* 80 (1961), 320–328. Cross champions the view that the vowels in the divine name reflect the causative form of the verb to be. He translates the divine name as "he who creates" ("he who causes to be"). It is as Creator that God now insures the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Frank M. Cross Jr., "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," *HTR* 55 (1962), 255–256.

6. G. R. Driver, "The Original Form of the Name Yahweh: Evidence and Conclusion," *ZAW* 40 (1928), 7–25.

7. Jack R. Lundbom, "God's Use of the *idem per idem* to Terminate Debate," *HTR* 71 (1978), 193–201; most recently, Michael P. Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 30–34.

call on Re by this special name, and the god would come and heal the victim.[8] If God's response to Moses on Mount Sinai is intended as a mild rebuke, it conveys the notion that God is not at the beck and call of any human being. His response is an act of divine mercy.

4. **Freedom of Choice and Divine Omnipotence.** A fourth interpretation derives from consideration of the grammatical construction of God's initial response. There are several examples of the *idem per idem* in the Old Testament. In God's instructions in Exodus 16.22–23, he tells the people not to prepare food on the Sabbath; rather, on the day before the Sabbath they are to "bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil." The instructions do not specify what they are to bake; instead, that decision is left up to each individual. The clear sense is, "Bake whatever you want to bake…" The biblical narrator uses the same construction to describe the flight of David's men from Saul. They "went where they went" (1 Sam 23.13). The sense is that each man chose where he would go to escape Saul and his troops. The nuance of non-specificity in the construction is obvious in 2 Samuel 15.20, when David leaves Jerusalem to elude Absalom. He tells Ittai, "I am going where I am going." David will choose where he goes, but he will not disclose that destination ("I will go wherever I want to go"). Elisha employs the construction when he helps a Shunammite woman to escape the ravages of an extended famine. He tells her and her family to go and "sojourn where you will sojourn" (2 Kgs 8.1). He does not specify where they are to go, he leaves that decision to them. Finally, the Lord promises to speak in no uncertain ways through Ezekiel. He declares, "I will speak what I will speak, and it will be done" (Ezek 12.25). The sense of the *idem per idem* portion is partly its non-specificity and partly personal volition. Whatever the Lord speaks, it will be what He chooses to speak; but whatever it is, it *will* be accomplished.

   This understanding of the syntax clarifies the sense of God's response to Moses, which in turn clarifies the motivation behind the question. God's response expresses both non-specificity and God's personal volition. He is whoever he wants to be. Obviously, we must read this in the context of the Exodus. Moses is expecting the people to ask, "Does 'the God of their fathers' have the power and authority to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian enslavement?" They are familiar with theologies that associate specific powers with specific deities. Some gods have more power than others, but all are limited in some way. By asking for God's name, they would be seeking a statement about the nature and extent of his power. His answer is a claim of any and all power; whatever the situation requires, he can provide it. The God of their fathers is not limited, which stands in contrast to the Egyptians and their beliefs about multiple gods. The God of Israel is all-powerful, and he will do whatever he chooses. He has the power to back up the promise he is making to Israel through Moses.

The Name of God during the Exodus

There are numerous direct references to the name of God or related statements of divine self-declaration in the chapters that describe the Exodus event. In most cases we find God declaring, "I am the Lord," or "you/the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." Such statements constitute a consistent theme that elaborates on God's answer to Moses' question on Sinai, as they bring together an echo of the *idem per idem* ("I am") with God's personal name (*Yahweh* = "the Lord").

This theme begins with Pharaoh's initial response to Moses, when he asks Pharaoh to allow Israel to hold a festival in the desert. "Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord…? I do not know the Lord…'" (Exod 5.2). Just as the initial question phrased by Moses on Sinai points to something deeper than what the people are supposed to call God, Pharaoh's response implies more than the mere lack of acquaintance with the verbalized name of Israel's God. Pharaoh is saying that he knows nothing of the Lord's power or distinctive qualities, and so he has no reason to feel fear at the name *Yahweh*. From Pharaoh's experience, the Lord is just "some god." He shows that he is not intimidated by the name *Yahweh* by increasing the burden of the Israelites, who in turn react with anger toward Moses (Exod 5.20–21).

8. "The God and His Unknown Name of Power," trans. John A. Wilson (*ANET*, 12–14).

Moses takes the people's complaint to the LORD, who could have responded with disappointment and anger at the people's lack of faith. Instead, he responds with a short speech that reasserts his name. The speech begins and ends with the self-declaration, "I am the LORD" (Exod 6.2, 8). Within the speech he first declares that their ancestors had not known him as "the LORD," but only as "God Almighty." This is a surprising statement, because both names are used for God in the book of Genesis. Rather than attribute this to conflicting literary sources, I prefer to see it as evidence of God's expanding self-revelation. The translation of the divine name in Exodus 6.2 is "God Almighty." The original meaning of the Hebrew name (*El Shadday*) is disputed; the traditional translation reflects the early Greek rendering of the Hebrew term. Ancient inscriptions from Israel's Canaanite neighbors reveal the occasional use of the word *Shadday* to refer to various gods. The Egyptians would have regarded Canaanite gods as local deities at best.

I would suggest that the Israelites had rationalized their enslavement in Egypt by resigning themselves to the view that *Yahweh*, the god of their ancestors, was merely a local deity, and that he was to be associated with the qualities of the Canaanite deity *El Shadday*, as their Egyptian overlords would have understood that name.[9] This would explain to the Israelites why they have remained in slavery for so many generations. If this is correct, then in Exodus 6.2–8 the LORD is declaring that he is not to be dismissed as just a distant local deity. He is declaring that he is Yahweh, the holy, supreme, and omnipotent God; and he is about to show to a much fuller extent what that really means. He reiterates his name in verse 6, when he says he will deliver Israel from Egypt; and he specifies what he means in verse 7, "Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you from under the yoke of the Egyptians." The Exodus will be his "defining moment." From this time on, the name of "the LORD" will be associated with the events of the Exodus. This is where he shows what he is made of. This is where he shows what he can do. This is where he shines.

The reiteration of the self-declaration at the end of the chapter marks the return to the main storyline (Exod 6.28–30), after a brief break regarding the genealogy of Moses and Aaron (6.13–27). In the subsequent account of the plagues, there are nine references to the name of the LORD or knowing the LORD . The LORD says four times that those who experience the plagues "will know that I am the LORD " (7.5, 17; 8.22; 10.2). With the cessation of the second plague, Pharaoh should "know there is no one like the LORD our God" (8.10), and the cessation of the seventh plague will come on cue "so you may know that the earth is the LORD's" (9.29). The LORD introduces the same plague of hail by declaring to the Egyptian court that he sends the plague "so you may know that there is no one like me" (9.14). In fact, a primary purpose in the Exodus is so that the "power" and "name" of the LORD might be proclaimed throughout the earth (9.16). The LORD provides one more self-declaration of his name during the final plague—the death of the firstborn—a catastrophe that he describes as "judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (12.12). Finally, he announces twice in the moments leading up to the parting of the Red Sea that in this final act "the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (14.4, 18).

These self-declarations point to the existence, holiness, unfathomable nature and omnipotence of God. He announces through Moses what he intends to do, and then he does those things. God must actually exist to be able to do this. The things that he is able to announce and then do are things that no other being is able to duplicate, which is the definition of divinity and holiness. The variety of the miraculous acts shows that God is unfathomable; he cannot be easily or fully defined. And finally, all of these elements together point ultimately to his omnipotence.

At Mount Sinai, Moses was concerned that the people would question God's ability to deliver them from Egyptian slavery, so he asked about God's name. God's reply is first verbal, then active, and in both cases it is the same: the LORD, the God of the fathers, "does whatever pleases him" (Pss 115.3; 135.6). He is what he is; he is whatever he wants to be. In these words and in the plagues that follow God defines himself. In this way his people come to know—though still not fully—the holiness and power of the God they worship.

Moses and later prophets frequently remind the Israelites of the name of God when they call for

9. This is one of many ideas about the historical development of Israel's understanding of God. See, for example, the surveys of views provided by Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," 225–259; and, Mark A. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

obedience to the Lord's commands. (For a few examples, see Exod 20.2; Lev 11.45; Deut 4.20; 7.17–19; 24.17–18; Josh 24.16–17; Judg 2.1, 12; 1 Sam 12.6–8; 1 Kgs 8.9, 21; 9.9; Ps 81.10; Jer 26; 34.13.) Surely such a God deserves the loyalty and trust of his people.

But the story does not end here. It will not be news to Christians that the life and mission of Jesus perform a similar function in the faith of Christians that the Exodus played in the lives of the Israelites. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus God frees Christians from slavery to sin. These events reveal who Jesus is, which is really just God revealing more fully who he is. This is where God shines, where he is glorified and where he makes his name known (see John 12.20–36; 17.1–26). These thoughts open the way to a much more extensive investigation of the name of God (and Jesus) in the New Testament, but I will leave that to others to explore.

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