

Exodus 3:13-15

Introduction

In the first part of Exodus three, God came to Moses and revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush. Moses, **I** am the holy God; **I** am a consuming fire (2-6). **I** am the God who has surely seen, and heard, and who is intimately acquainted with all the sufferings of my people (7, 9). **I** am the God who has come down to deliver my people, and to pour out my goodness in a spacious land flowing with milk and honey (8). This is the God that **I** am. So now **I** will send **you** to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt (10).

“But Moses said to God, ‘**Who am I** that **I** should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’” Moses was so aware of himself that there’s a sense in which he was blinded to the God who was right there “in front of him.” God prefaced His commission to Moses by devoting six times the amount of space to a revelation of His own character, and power, and purpose. And yet what registers most with Moses is the last thing God says: “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” So Moses is filled with doubt and fear; “Who am **I**?” To which God responds: “But **I will be with you**, and this shall be the sign for you, that **I have sent you**: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” [on this “mountain of God” where **I reveal myself**].

I. Exodus 3:13 — Then Moses said to God, “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 has just asked the Lord, “Who am I?” Now he asks: “Who are You? What is Your name?”

Personal names, for us, are just a form of address. They don’t necessarily say anything about who we are, or what we’re like. Timothy means “honoring God,” but just having the name doesn’t make it true. There’s another way I can speak of my “name,” and that’s my reputation. Do I have a good “name,” or a bad “name”? What am I “known” for.” We could think of someone who tries to make a “name” for himself – or someone whose “name” was dragged through the mud. In this case, our name says something about who we are, because our name is our reputation.

So what about God? God needs no “personal” name to distinguish Himself from other gods, because He’s the only one – there isn’t any other. So why should God have any name at all? The point of God’s name is to reveal Himself – to tell us what He’s like so that we might *know* Him. My name was chosen for me before I was born by parents who didn’t yet know anything about me. My name could express a wish for me, but nothing more. God’s name is “chosen” by *Himself* in order to reveal to us just what He’s like and who He is. So now maybe we can understand Moses’ question a little more clearly: “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 isn’t worried about distinguishing which God he’s talking about. He

already knew that. This was the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (3:6). The real “problem” was this: What does this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have to do with *us*? The “fathers” had never suffered as the people were suffering now. They had known for the most part only prosperity and blessing. But the people of Israel in Moses’ day had known only slavery and oppression for many long years. So what is it about this God, who has been “silent” through years of suffering, that should now call forth all their attention and confidence? That’s the question Moses anticipates. And that’s the question that Moses—at least to some extent—is still asking himself. “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?**”

II. Exodus 3:14 — God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Remember the “be” verbs (or the “helping” verbs) in English? This is the first person singular “be” verb in Hebrew: “*eh-yeh*.” In English, we have different “time” tenses for the “be” verbs. So for the past tense, “I was”; for the present tense, “I am”; and for the future tense, “I will be.” But Biblical Hebrew doesn’t have “time” tenses at all. Biblical Hebrew has only the perfect “tense” (referring to a completed state of action in the past, or in the present, or in the future; usually the past) or the imperfect “tense” (referring to an incomplete or “still in process” state of action whether in the past, or in the present, or in the future; usually in the future). The “be” verb here in Exodus 3:14 is in that second “imperfect” tense, and yet, as always, when we translate into English we’re required to translate with one of the three “time” tenses. So which one should it be? Is this imperfect verb referring to a “still in process” state of being or action in the past, or in the present, or in the future? There’s nothing at all in the grammar to help us decide. But then God cannot be contained by grammar or by any of its rules. The idea *here* in this “imperfect” form is that we *could* translate with all three tenses at the same time – past, present, and future. If God will be who He will be, then the point is also that He **will be** who He **is** and who He has **always been**. If God is who He is, then the point is also that He **is** who He has **always been** and who He **will always be**. If God has been who He has been, then the point is also that who He **has been** is who He **is** and who He **will always be**. “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I was, **and** I am, **and** I will be has sent me to you’” Remember what the angels who stand in God’s presence never cease to cry out:

➤ **Revelation 4:8** — Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who *was* and *is* and *is to come!*

In the end, it seems best to translate God’s “*eh-yeh*” in English with a “timeless present” (understanding that God is equally “present” to the past and to the future): “I **am** who I **am**... Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I **am** has sent me to you.’” This is My name.

On the one hand, this is the unqualified, wholly independent supremacy of God. God is not tied to us; He is not answerable to us; He is not determined in any way by us or by anything at all outside of Himself. He is above us and beyond us and wholly other than us and all else that by His will exists. And so what this “name” reveals to us about God in the first place is that He

cannot be “explained” or “comprehended” by us. His ways are past all our finding out (cf. Rom. 11:33).

- Daniel 4:34–35 — His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”
- Job 9:10–12 — [He] does great things beyond searching out, and marvelous things beyond number. Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him. Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back? Who will say to him, “What are you doing?”

If we were ever to ask God for His name so that we could comprehend His ways, and if He were to respond to such a presumptuous request, the very first thing His name would reveal to us is that His ways are past our finding out because He Himself is past our finding out. Who, then, will say to Him, “What have You done?” Or, “What are You doing?” “Why this slavery in Egypt? Explain yourself to me.” To such a question, the answer will always be: “I **am** who I **am** ... Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I **am** has sent me to you.’” This is My name.

But do we dare ask, “Is that all?” Remember what the people want to know. Remember what Moses needs to know. What does the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have to do with us? What is it about this God who has been ‘silent’ through so many long years of suffering that should now call forth all our attention and confidence? Moses asks, “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?” Is God’s answer really “just” to say to Moses, “I am the almighty, supreme, and self-existent God who is past all your finding out”? If it was, then that wouldn’t really solve the “problem” would it? But that’s not *all* God’s answer. If we stop there, we don’t yet truly know His name.

Everywhere else that God says “*eh-yeh*” it’s followed by an “object” that completes the thought. In Exodus, we find the word, “*eh-yeh*,” only four times – and the first time comes only two verses before this one.

- Exodus 3:11–12 — Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” He said, “But ***I will be*** [*eh-yeh*] ***with you.***”

In both of the other places in Exodus where we have this word the point is the same.

- Exodus 4:12 (cf. 4:15) — Now therefore go, and ***I will be with your mouth*** and teach you what you shall speak.

In Genesis, we find the word, “*eh-yeh*,” only two times.

- Genesis 26:3 — The LORD appeared to [Isaac] and said... “Sojourn in this land, and ***I will be with you and will bless you...***”

- Genesis 31:3 — The LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and ***I will be with you.***”

In the first six books of the Bible, the only other places where we find the word, “*eh-yeh*” are once in Deuteronomy and twice in Joshua, where each time God says the same thing to Joshua.

- Joshua 1:5 (cf. Deut. 31:23; Josh. 3:7) — Just as I was with Moses, so ***I will be with you.*** I will not leave you or forsake you.

In Judges, God uses the word, “*eh-yeh*” only one time.

- Judges 6:16 — The LORD said to [Gideon], “But ***I will be with you,*** and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.”

In Samuel and Chronicles, God says to David:

- 2 Samuel 7:9 (cf. 1 Chron. 17:8) — ***I have been with you*** wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you.

So far, whenever God uses the word, “*eh-yeh*,” the point is always His ***presence with*** His people to sustain them, to deliver them, and to bless them. “*Eh-yeh*” [I have been / I am / I will be] **with you**. So does God use the word “*eh-yeh*” in any other way or with any other words? Twelve times in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah we hear God speak these words (or some variation of them):

- Jeremiah 11:4 (cf. 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23; Zech. 8:8) — So [you shall] be my people, and ***I will be your God...***

Twelve times – “So you shall be my people, and “*eh-yeh* [I will be] **your God.**” Are there any other ways that God uses the word “*eh-yeh*”? In 2 Samuel God speaks to David about his son when he comes to rule in David’s place:

- 2 Samuel 7:14 (cf. 1 Chron. 17:13; 28:6) — ***I will be to him a father...***

And then we read in Hosea and Zechariah:

- Hosea 11:4 (NRSV) — ***I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.***
- Hosea 14:5 — ***I will be like the dew to Israel;*** he shall blossom like the lily.
- Zechariah 2:5 — ***I will be to her a wall of fire all around,*** declares the LORD, and ***I will be the glory in her midst.***

When God says “*eh-yeh*” the message remains His commitment to His people to be present *with* them and *for* them – to help, to sustain, to deliver, and to bless. “*Eh-yeh*” [I will be] ***to him... to them... to Israel... to her...***

So what about here in Exodus 3:14, in the one place where God never finishes the sentence – except to say, “I am... *who I am*”? It’s here that we have to understand that God’s revelation of Himself—of His name—is always gracious. In other words, God doesn’t reveal His name to Moses, or to the Israelites, or to us, just for the sake of imparting information, and certainly never for the sake of driving us to a fatalistic despair. When God reveals His name to us, this is always a sovereign and wholly gracious *giving* of *Himself* to us. God doesn’t reveal His name to us just so we can know “that” He is the supreme and almighty God who is past finding out, but so that we can know *this God* (who is supreme and almighty and past finding out) personally as the one who has committed Himself to us in covenant relationship.

When Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?” the angel of the LORD said to him: “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” (Judges 13:17-18). When Manoah asks for information, God refuses to give that information to him. God refuses to tell Manoah His name. When Moses asks for a revelation of God’s character and of His commitment to His people, God graciously makes Himself known. God graciously reveals to Moses His name. And so for God to say to Moses, “I am who I am,” is not just to say that He is supreme and almighty and self-existent and past all finding out. It *is* to say that, and it’s also more than that. It is to say that *this God* is the God who is present with us and for us—past, present, and future—even when we don’t see how. “Moses, if the suffering people of Israel want to know what the God of their fathers has to do with them, say this to them: ‘I AM who I AM... I AM has sent me *to you*.’” God would have all of our questions, and all of our doubts, and all of our fears to be resolved ultimately in this one, simple(?) truth – that God reveals His name to us, and that His name is “I AM.”

But are we really to call God, “*eh-yeh*” – I AM?

III. Exodus 3:15 — God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘YAHWEH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

“*Eh-yeh*” is the first person singular “I AM.” “YAHWEH” is related to the third person singular “HE IS.”* “HE IS” means that He who is almighty and supreme and past all finding out is present with us. This *must be* because this is the *name* by which He has *revealed* Himself *to us*. This is the name by which God has said He is to be “remembered”—by which He is to be worshiped, and loved, and known—“throughout all generations.” YAHWEH. He is. And if we have any other questions, or are tempted to entertain any doubts, then we can also be reminded, and cautioned, and comforted that HE IS who HE IS.

Throughout the Old Testament, all that God was to His people could always be summed in this name. So we read in the book of Numbers:

- Numbers 6:22–27 (cf. Exodus 33:19; 34:6-8) — YAHWEH spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, YAHWEH bless you and keep you; YAHWEH make his face to shine upon you and be gracious

* Cf. Fretheim; NIDOTTE

to you; **YAHWEH** lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. “So shall they put my **name** upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

God’s name, YAHWEH, was who He was to His people – their covenant God. And so it was this name that they called upon and proclaimed.

- Isaiah 12:4 — Give thanks to **YAHWEH**, call upon his **name**, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his **name** is exalted.

It was this name that they feared and obeyed.

- Deuteronomy 28:58 (Ps. 86:11; 102:15) — [Be] careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome **name**, **YAHWEH** your God.

It was in this name that they trusted.

- Psalm 33:21 — Our soul waits for **YAHWEH**... our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy **name**.

It was this name that they praised.

- Psalm 18:49 — For this I will praise you, O **YAHWEH**, among the nations, and sing to your **name**.

It was this name that they adored.

- Psalm 135:3 (NASB) — Praise **YAHWEH**, for **YAHWEH** is good; Sing praises to His **name**, for it is lovely.

It was before this name that they bowed down and worshiped.

- Psalm 29:2 (cf. 86:9) — Ascribe to **YAHWEH** the glory due his **name**; worship **YAHWEH** in the splendor of holiness.

Conclusion

Who is the God that we call upon, and proclaim, and fear and obey, and trust, and praise, and adore, and worship? What is His name? When Jesus walked this earth, He said one day to the Jews:

- John 8:58 — Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, **I am**.

That’s more than “just” a claim to be the almighty and supreme and self-existent God who is past finding out. In Jesus, *this God* who is almighty, and supreme, and self-existent, and past finding

out is with us — to save and to help, to sustain and to bless, past, present, and future, without fail. We can be reminded now of these words from the book of Hebrews:

➤ Hebrews 13:8 — Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

In Jesus, we have YAHWEH incarnate; YAHWEH in the flesh; YAHWEH—*He is*—with us. Therefore, Jesus could truly say to His disciples on the stormy sea:

➤ John 6:20 — *It is I [I am]*; do not be afraid.

It's this name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus three that stands behind all seven of these “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John. Jesus said:

- John 6:35 — *I am* the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.
- John 8:12 — *I am* the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
- John 10:7, 9 — *I am* the door of the sheep... If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.
- John 10:11, 14 — *I am* the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I know my own and my own know me.
- John 11:25 — *I am* the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.
- John 14:6 — *I am* the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
- John 15:5 — *I am* the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

Who is the God that we call upon, and proclaim, and fear and obey, and trust, and praise, and adore, and worship? What is His name? “*He is—with us.*” “*It is I—do not be afraid.*” This is the name by which He has revealed Himself to us. And this is the name that He has revealed to us supremely and finally in Jesus.