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THE GOD WHO IS! EXODUS 3:14–15

Joseph B. Flatt

In response to Israel's plight in Egypt about halfway through the fifteenth century B.C., God prepared Moses to be the human agent in delivering His people from bondage by training him for forty years in the desert near Mount Sinai as a shepherd for his father-in-law. He learned the art of hillside shepherding so that he might be an effective shepherd of God's sheep. Near the completion of this on-the-job-training "seminary" experience, God miraculously communicated via the famous burning bush that He wanted Moses to return to Egypt and lead in the glorious deliverance of His people.

Moses' initial response was similar to the later replies of Samuel who finally said, "Speak, for Thy servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:10); of Isaiah who recorded his unique encounter with the Lord, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isa. 6:8); and of Saul, when journeying to Damascus to cause havoc among believers, ". . . suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who art Thou, Lord?'" (Acts 9:3-5).

Unfortunately Moses backed off this bold "Here am I" response to God's summons to a feeble "Who am I?" when he realized the specifics of God's plan included personal adversarial appearances before Pharaoh! He wanted no

part of the preposterous plan which called for him to stick his finger in the face of the despotic monarch and demand the release of the Israelites.

Appreciating Moses' understandable fear of the fury of arrogant Egyptian Pharaohs, God reiterated His intention to keep His promises to the covenant nation and pledged His personal presence with Moses when he entered the royal court. Because Moses also doubted that the Israelites would accept his leadership without collaboration, God settled the issue by graciously identifying Himself as the singular "I Am."

The marvelous climax of the account of this divine confrontation with Moses is recorded in Exodus 3:10-15:

Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain. Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I am who I am"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" And God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, 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 this is My memorial-name to all generations."

Though this passage yields many truths, three didactics regarding the central fact that God is the One who is must be highlighted.

In identifying Himself as the "I Am," God intended to encourage Moses in the assignment to lead the Israelites out of Egypt by showing him that his God, and He alone, possessed all the power and authority needed for the task.

Though we must not presume to know the mind of Moses or fully understand the intent of God, three thoughts help us sort out the opening verses of the full context (2:23-3:15).

But I, for one, am grateful that Moses saw himself through the spectacles of humble reality. Perhaps if he were living in our current climate of marketing-based Christian enterprise things may have been different. He could have attended a seminar or read a book guaranteeing success in Pharaoh's court. Maybe he could have researched the strategy of successful supplicants before the royal throne over the last three years.



Moses realized that he was inadequate for the task. An unbiased reading of the text leads to the simple conclusion

that Moses clearly comprehended the nature of the task, reviewed his own character and abilities, and concluded that he wasn't the man for the job. Yes, this was a backing down from his original bold let's-get-at-it bravado. Yes, we may use Moses as a negative model of simple submission to the Lord's wishes for believers' lives. Yes, it may have been a lack of faith. Yes, this account may suggest classic excuses of the obstinate heart for not listening to and rendering obedience to the Father.

But I, for one, am grateful that Moses saw himself through the spectacles of humble reality. Perhaps if he were living in our current climate of marketing-based Christian enterprise things may have been different. He could have attended a seminar or read a book guaranteeing success in Pharaoh's court. Maybe he could have researched the strategy of successful supplicants before the royal throne over the last three years. Or, better, he might have conducted a survey of the royal cabinet members, his target audience, in order to determine their preferences in religious matters of concern to the nation.

I jest of course. But indeed, the contemporary church needs more leaders who gladly and quickly humble themselves before God as they consider the awesome appointment to serve God in contemporary culture. David Wells perceptively summarizes the current plight in the evangelical church:

The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources. Bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his

judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.¹

Arrogance, pride, smug independence, or grandiose successism must not be tolerated among Christian leaders. All manipulative attempts to manufacture spiritual results are doomed to miserable, albeit attractive to some, failure. Give us more churchmen who confess with Paul, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

God normally uses human beings to accomplish His work. In fact, as vividly illustrated in the case of Moses, God often uses people who are acutely aware of their inadequacies. The Father is looking for humble servants who possess a high view of God as well as a realistic (low) view of self. The United States Marine Corps may be looking for a few good men, but God is looking for a few humble servants. This is good news. After all . . .

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:25–31).

God's promise, "I will be with you," is the one essential tool needed by the Christian leader. The "God who is," coupled with an inadequate, yet willing, human being, is

an unbeatable team. This formula was designed to embolden and empower God's leaders. On fourteen occasions God promised to be with Isaac and Jacob. So the same promise is granted by Jesus Himself, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). When doing God's bidding the people of God never go it alone.

Upon moving to a new community, my friend queried his daughter's junior high basketball coaches regarding their credentials to coach girls basketball. He was quite unprepared for the extensive responses documenting their pedigree and experience—especially their roundabout connections to a nationally prominent college coach in the state. The lesson is remarkably simple. God did not need to recite His credentials to Moses. He merely needed to say, "I will be with you!" Moses knew, indeed he recorded, the history of God's power and authority. The Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, and other sundry displays of God's glory were fresh in his memory! Therefore, no discussions or explanations were necessary.

So we must just enter the fray for God. He is with us. Need we more?

In identifying Himself as the "I Am" God presented Moses with an instrument to authenticate his ministry as God's duly appointed representative to the Egyptian taskmasters.

In anticipation of the time when Israel would question Moses about his authority, God's instructions to Moses were simple. "And God said to Moses, 'I Am who I Am'; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I Am has sent me to you.'"

This revelation identifies the very essence of God. Apparently God was interested that Moses focus on the

main thing, which of course was His Divine Being. Two crucial notions about God are conveyed by the usage of this famous three-word description of God.

First, God is the One who really is. God uses the "to be" verb to identify Himself. He is the One who "is," who "exists," who "comes to pass," who "becomes."² Apart from the stupendous theological concept that God simply is, there are at least three pervasive implications of this truth of the reality of God to be noted:

1) God is directly disclosing Himself to Moses by saying, "I am truly He who exists and who will be dynamically present then and there in the situation to which I am sending you."³ This truth is what people need! Infantrymen in foxholes need it. Children abandoned by divorcing parents need it. The spouse who loses his or her mate needs it. It is designed for every contingency of life.

2) This description of God tells us something of the suitability of the God of the Bible for all times. He is the answer for the Boomers, the Busters, and the "X" generation. Any notion of a changing message must be rejected!

3) Attempts to prove the existence of God are a fundamental waste of energy. God Himself simply states the truth without offering any explanations, both here and in passages such as Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God . . ." Predictably, great debates over this issue produce much confusion and frustration with little fruit. Without apology the Christian must forthrightly and compassionately proclaim this self-existent God apart from the paraphernalia of clever human reason.

Second, God, the One who is, acts. This God does not exist in static dormancy. The question "What is His name?" anticipated by Moses, was not a "Who is God?" question. Evidence from Genesis ("And He said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it'" [Gen. 15:7]) indicates that the

Israelites may have already known God as Jehovah. Rather, Moses anticipates that the Israelites would want to know what the name signifies to them in their current bleak circumstances! They are asking, "What is the character or quality of God which helps us now?"⁴ This is made clear on the occasion of the Lord's subsequent instruction of Moses recorded at Exodus 6:1-7:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he shall let them go, and under compulsion he shall drive them out of his land." God spoke further to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord; and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, Lord, I did not make Myself known to them. And I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned. And furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.'"

Additionally, and perhaps obviously in light of subsequent events, this simple declaration of the self existence of God, the God who is, was designed to paint a stark contrast to the gods of Egypt with whom Moses and the Israelites were familiar. Jehovah is real! He alone lives.

Furthermore, this God can provide consolation in the midst of trouble. He is always there. This God can be trusted. He is always loyal to His promise. There is no deception with Him. The eternal One does not change. He always

was, He is, and He will be. Moses could count on Him.

Possibly the greatest significance of the "I Am" description is that it is a statement of sovereignty. A more suitable rendering of the phrase might be "I will be who I will be." The Hebrew imperfect "expresses action or state as unaccomplished, continuing, or customary. . . . It corresponds generally to English present and future."⁵ It is a bombastic declaration of absolute, sovereign self-existence. The idea is that, no matter what the circumstances, God will be God. He does what He wants. He is completely independent of anything. He is in control. Moses could look at his task with an invigorating perspective. This is especially meaningful in light of the encounters with Pharaoh. He could know that it really did not make any difference what the Egyptian monarch or the Israelites did. He was dealing with the God who consults only with Himself. How the church desperately needs a renewed vision of this God!

Moreover, God gave Moses a glimpse of what He would sovereignly do:

But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand, and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go. And I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed (Ex. 3:19-21).

In fact, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God Himself (Ex. 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10)⁶ demonstrates that Pharaoh is a mere pawn which God uses on the chessboard of history to accomplish His ends. Near the end of the plague miracles, God Himself proclaimed His awesome power and mysterious purposes to the paltry Pharaoh:

For this time I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth. For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. But, indeed, for this cause I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power, and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth (Ex. 9:14-16).

This great lesson must be absorbed by the contemporary church. Her God is the God of the universe. He is, and He acts. He is both the Absolute One and the Sovereign One. He did not solely plan history; He invades history!

This revelation becomes a prominent theme of Scripture. A sampling of passages demonstrates that the concept of the self-existent God was thoroughly embedded in Scripture:

Before the mountains were born, or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God (Ps. 90:2).

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and His Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me" (Isa. 44:6).

Jesus said to them, "Truly truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58).

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne . . . "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:4,8).

In describing Himself as the "I Am," God identified Himself as Jehovah, the eternally existent One, who is to be

acknowledged forever by His people.

Because the God of Israel was in a category by Himself, God directed Moses to urge the people to perpetual worship:

And God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, 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 this is My memorial-name to all generations" (Ex. 3:15).

God became known as the absolute, only, self-determining One who exists here and now in an eternal unchanging presence. The God of Israel is now described by the name Yahweh, which is normally rendered "Lord" in most standard translations. This name appears some 6519 times in the Old Testament. A more appropriate English rendering would be Jehovah.⁷

There are several key ideas associated with this name. First, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has a reputation as the One who fulfills His promises to His people. He is the unchanging One who remains faithful to His word.



Though this was not a new God to Israel, this was the first time God used the standard third person form of the verb "to be" with the famous four consonants YHWH instead of the first person form as in verses 12-14. Thus the name technically denotes God as the "existing one."

Of the three primary names for God (Elohim, God the creator; Adonai, God the master; and Jehovah, God the self-existent one), Jehovah was His personal or proper name. This name was so sacred to godly Jews that they refused to pronounce it.

There are several key ideas associated with this name. First, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has a reputation as the One who fulfills His promises to His people. He is the unchanging One who remains faithful to His word. The concept is as remarkable as it is rudimentary. Because God actually is, in contrast to idol gods, myth gods, concept gods, or human gods, He is able to accomplish things. His promises are not the empty chattering of a bottom level bureaucrat who is powerless to effect change. His promises are the certain declarations of the Living King of the Universe. He makes history. It is not surprising therefore that normally Jehovah is His covenant name.

Second, this name is the redemption name of God. The connection to the name Jesus, who is called the Savior, is well documented. The recounting of the mercy of Yahweh appears often in the Pentateuch:

And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Ex. 33:19).

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord

passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:5-7a).

The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will extol Him (Ex. 15:2).

By the use of this name, God identifies Himself as the sole possessor of salvation who exercises the prerogative to dispense it at His pleasure. Both Jonah ("But I will sacrifice to Thee with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord" [2:9]) and David ("Salvation belongs to the Lord; Thy blessing be upon Thy people! Selah" [Ps. 3:8]) attested to this truth.

Third, this name is designed to produce courage in the people of God for any and all circumstances no matter how bleak. Several centuries after the Exodus event another giant spokesman for God offered great words of comfort to God's people:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place (Isa. 43:2).

Believers may take heart, because the awesome living God is not only on their side, He actually goes with them into the fray!

God's people came to worship God as Jehovah, the self-existent One. The significance of the name Jehovah as a lasting memorial to all generations is that it was to be used

in continual praise and worship of God as well as perpetual thanksgiving for His great deeds. What child of God should not say with Zophar, "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). Who among the redeemed would be hesitant to shout with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33). The church of God is expected to heed the psalmist's plea, "Sing to God, sing praises to His name; lift up a song for Him who rides through the deserts, whose name is the Lord, and exult before Him" (Ps. 68:4). Clearly, this memorial must never be erected in a cemetery gravestone fashion. Because God is the One who is, the memorial to Him must always be alive!

I propose that if we worship the same God as Moses, then we must know Him as the great "I Am," the One "Who Is." This God really is in the world: the world of creation, and also the unique personal world of individual believers.

I speak not of a mere theoretical understanding of God, but rather a theology which radically effects life. If one knows this God, then I envision a person of God for whom Jehovah invades his world and rules his life on a continuing basis. God is not merely an afterthought or a matter of personal convenience. I envision a person who enjoys life because he is assured that the only God who is the Sovereign of life is his God. Discouragement is not his constant companion. The person who knows this God "who is," is himself alive! I envision a person who is bold in his endeavors for God because he is convinced that Jehovah is beholden to nobody.

In short, coming to honest intellectual and spiritual grips with the truth that "God is" surely will have a profound effect upon us!

Author

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Notes

1. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in the World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 30.
2. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1968), 224.
3. Walter C. Kaiser, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:321.
4. Brown, Driver, Briggs, 552, 556. See also Kaiser, 323.
5. Moshe Greenberg, *Introduction to Hebrew* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 49.
6. See my monograph "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart" for a full discussion of this troubling concept of God's active hardening of the heart of the Egyptian king of the exodus.
7. Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 35-40.
8. See Kaiser, 323-24 for a summary of the various theories regarding the source of the sacred name and argument for this etymology.