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Zi Wei Xie April 15, 2015

Exodus 3:14: Arguments for Incoherency and Non-literal Methods

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Abstract
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God's response to Moses' request for His name in Exodus 3:14 has been the subject of fervent biblical debate among scholars and commentators for some time. It is not entirely clear what the Almighty means by "I am who I am." The very use of "I" suggests that the phrase denotes some essence of His identity, but the tautological syntax remains unexplained. Traditional scholarship has tried to "edit" the original text or explain the incoherency of the name as representative of the mystery befitting of a god, but there does not seem to have been any proposals that actively interpret the narrative aspects or figures as part of understanding the divine name. This thesis will argue that non-literal methods not only reveal significant insight about the name but also are functionally appropriate tactics for assessing situations as complex as "I am who I am." After presenting the specifics of these tactics, the thesis then offers an interpretation that integrates the narrative structure of the name as part of the argument. The aim is not to give a definitive solution that solves the time-tested enigma but a meaningful explanation that makes its issues less formidable.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Out of respect for tradition but mostly my amusement at how similar the introduction of writers are when discussing Exodus 3:14, I will introduce my thesis by saying something to the same effect: God's answer (and supposedly His name) in Exodus 3:14 is mysterious and remains one of the most difficult and debated pieces in all of biblical literature. The poetic lure in the tautological format of the divine name – Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Hebrew Original) or "I am who I am" – connotes significance, but it is also annoyingly unsatisfying as it seems to say everything about God and nothing at all. As such, one might simply accept the name as incomprehensible or that it "just is" and move on, but those who ponder the enigma longer will find themselves up against a bevy of questions: what does the name mean? Is there something wrong with it? Why does God say it the way He does? Does it indicate or signify anything? This thesis will be addressing these and similar issues but will focus specifically on the latter two. In the end, my ultimate goal is to reveal new and illuminating angles from which readers can better understand God's iconic reply, and maybe (with luck) help some suffer fewer restless nights thinking about what it all means.

On its own, verse fourteen (where "I am who I am" occurs) is capable of mass confusion. The subsequent verses are similarly puzzling and have prompted many scholars to respond accordingly. Chapter One provides preliminary information on the nature and issues of the holy name as well as an in-depth look at the divergent responses that address it. I begin by discussing the very concept of a name, both in general and how it applies in Genesis and Exodus (the two most relevant books of the Hebrew Bible for this thesis). I then move to examine the divine name specifically. The name has a number of translations and a few retranslations have even been argued for, but no one version is more comprehensible than the next. I lay out the underlying

components of the incoherency and aim to give readers a solid understanding of the complexity and resulting problems associated with "I am who I am." In my analysis, I question certain assumptions and make explicit the ambiguities that undermine "I am who I am" as a name. The chapter then proceeds to review the proposals of various scholars for interpreting the holy name. This review is divided into two parts, the first of which will look at philological attempts and the general patterns specific strategies in this class take. Philology has a few related definitions, but the one I focus on is with regards to linguistics. The second, less emphasized, part of the review examines the less common "figurative" stances, which usually involve explaining the divine name in terms of Moses' mission or God's attributes. Some of the methods in both parts of the review are fundamentally different from the questions this thesis addresses, and so our "solutions" do not necessarily exclude the others nor can they be necessarily compared directly. I nonetheless present my own thoughts on these approaches and say why I find them unsatisfying or, more importantly in some cases, risky to use.

Chapter Two is where I present and argue for the relevance of certain narrative elements in reading the divine name, and I begin with a discussion on incoherency – the primary aspect of "I am who I am." Up until this point, this thesis has been mostly concerned with mostly "backdrop" material and the "whats" of the holy name's problems, but there has not been a serious look at how incoherency happens and what it means for readers. I substantiate this part of my argument using Noël Carroll's paper on narrative aspects, then argue for narrative perspective in the Exodus dialogue using works by both Carroll and Bal Mieke. I also present a paper by Richard J. Gerrig and use his concept of the p-response to argue that incoherency actually plays a role more practical than being "just there" in the name; in particular, incoherency draws the reader into the text, which would not likely have happened had the name been

presented in a more coherent format. The final segment of this chapter emphasizes using metaphor and symbolism for interpreting "I am who I am." Using the work of Janet Soskice and Mari Womack, I argue for both non-literal approaches' ability to handle complicated situations like the incoherency of God's name, especially since the narrative context allows for it, and there is much information that lies beyond the bare text of the dialogue and Hebrew Bible. It is important to note that I am not merely seeing the different ways certain narrative elements or God's name can be interpreted metaphorically or symbolically, but also showing that the methods themselves are apt choices for addressing the issues inherent. Chapter Two presents some of the most important parts of my argument as I introduce and substantiate my claims without any removal of the incoherency. It also sets the stage for the next chapter where I actually use the aforementioned methods to interpret the divine name.

Chapter Three is where I actually begin assessing the bush dialogue and the divine name in narrative context. I start with a brief background of Moses' life before his fateful encounter with God and bring up incoherency again. My focus now, however, will be using incoherency as a "sense" – that is, straightforwardly, the feeling of incoherency – and I argue that this sense very ably demonstrates Moses' psychology (i.e. his shock and extreme hesitancy) when realizing the magnitude of the commission God has called him to complete. In this regard, God's name is not so much a denotation of His identity as it is a reflection of His messenger's emotions and thoughts in having to deal so closely with divinity for the first time. This chapter will also be devoting a few important pages to the relationships between God and Moses' predecessors, specifically Adam and Abraham. The former demonstrates the significance of God's bush appearance, and the latter shows what a close relationship with the Almighty looks like. These contrasting cases will then be used to see where Moses stands in his own relations with God at

the time of the encounter. I then proceed to assess the image of the burning bush. In addition to the obvious symbolic attributes of fire it gives off, I also argue that it yields very significant insight not only about the relationship between messenger and God, but also that these details reshape the way the dialogue dynamic is interpreted. The bush brings Moses' own name into discussion and the origin of his name will represent the pivotal point of this chapter. The image of water and function of speech will also contribute to the discussion as they both are relevant in the dialogue and are also direct signifiers of God's power. Finally, I argue how the information aforementioned portrays the dependency of God, and that His specific appearance before Moses is as much for a restoration of His own power as it is for the liberation of the Israelites.

A big theme in this thesis is an overall argument for a fundamentally different approach in interpreting the divine name, one that deals heavily with the rich narrative that surrounds the dialogue in which it appears. Considering narrative aspects deviates from the more common practices that intensively analyze the linguistic and syntactical details of the name only. Moreover, the way these elements are assembled provide insight that current, less technical approaches do not offer. While it is never my intention to overthrow normative progress – the contributions of scholars are an invaluable part of better understanding the holy name – I do attempt to present a case different from these contributions. Incoherency will be a reoccurring aspect in this thesis, and it is important to realize that it is not necessarily a problematic feature, as it can be incorporated for very insightful analysis. I argue that metaphor and symbolism not only allow use of incoherency but, as a result, allow readers to transcend the complexity of the divine name. In short, incoherency is not unintelligibility and should be taken advantage of. Moses is not simply ignored when he asks for the divine name, and that an explicit answer about

such an intimate detail about God is given at all allows readers a rare opportunity to probe the potential significances that lie dormant below the enigma.

Before this thesis formally begins, a few notes should be made on the biblical texts that will be used in the arguments to follow. Apart from a brief quotation from the Book of Isaiah in Chapter Three, the rest will focus exclusively on Exodus and Genesis as they appear in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* edited by Michael D. Coogan. The reason for the former is obvious (it is where the divine name appears), but the latter requires a bit more explaining. Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible and is appropriately a book of origins at its core, not only relative to the creation events but also to the establishment of God's role in human affairs and institutions. Contrary to what some might expect at first, Genesis does not necessarily serve to convey some religious ideal or moral virtue that permeates the rest of the Bible. There are a few observations of faith, miracles, and inspirational inklings, but these are easily overshadowed by the more rampant character flaws and events that threaten the ever delicate relationship between man and God. As Everett Fox notes in his *Genesis and Exodus*, "… the entire book is replete with … tensions and continuity-threatening situations. There are barren wives, brothers vowing to kill brothers, and cities and even a world destroyed by an angry God" (Fox 5). Fox's observations speak to the narrative difficulty readers must navigate in Genesis and subsequent texts. The most prominent stories and accompanying morals are not optimistic, but "standing at the Bible's outset, they challenge readers to develop other models for understanding … " (Coogan 10), which is an important theme this thesis advocates in understanding the divine name. If for nothing else, the fantastic and highly pictorial structure of the origin stories provides "a rich store of narratives [that] offer nonscientific, narrative, and poetic perspectives on the value and

meaning of the cosmos that pertain to other dimensions of human life" (10), which is fundamental to any rich non-literal experience.

Finally, though the bush dialogue this thesis examines automatically necessitates the use of Exodus, there are also a few background details that will be important for understanding the significance of the conclusions in Chapter Three. The Book of Exodus follows immediately after Genesis in the Hebrew Bible and is the setting for a number of significant "firsts." Most notably, this text introduces a God who plays a more direct role in a people's fate: "This book speaks of a God who … promises liberates, guides, and gives laws to people … This deity frees his people, not by subterfuge, but by directly taking on Egypt and its gods" (Fox 233). As such, Exodus is an origin story in its own right and overstating its contributions to the Bible is difficult to do: it introduces a God "… making himself "known" to both Israelites and foreigners [,] covenant as reciprocal agreement between God and humans [,] law as an expression of total world view [,] and the use of sacred structure (Tabernacle or "Dwelling") as a vehicle for and expression of perceived truths about the world" (223). One of the most significant manifestations of God's more active role is the revelation of His name as He calls for Moses to complete the divine mission of freeing His people:

> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" [14] God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you." [15] God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations. (NRSV Ex. 3: 13-15).

Liberating the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and its significance comprise much of the Exodus narrative. Readers will see a number of milestones God establishes with his people, which explains the urgent priority of Moses' mission as it sets into motion the rest of biblical history.

CHAPTER 1
Progress and Problems

Biblical names in general come up a number of times throughout Exodus and Genesis so one might expect the name of God to appear in some form eventually. A closer look at the nature of these names (i.e. how they appear or why they are given) might shed light on the motive behind the syntax of "I am who I am." Readers will quickly realize, however, that this unexplained tautological format and other details of the divine name bring up problems in understanding it in the same way conventional names are understood. Scholars and commentators have attempted to address the issues within, prompting a number of distinct recommendations for reading through the enigma in verse fourteen. A few writers (like the writer of this thesis) incorporate incoherency as part of the interpretation, while others invest heavily from a linguistic angle. This chapter reviews both approaches in general by presenting their key arguments as well as the risks and potential flaws within. There also has not been a lot of scholarly discussion on the name's complexity itself, and the arguments to follow will also attempt to isolate individual aspects of this complexity and say why they undermine the assumption of "I am who I am" as a name.

1.1 – *Complexities of the Divine Name*

While the topic of biblical names will not be as significant until Exodus 3:14, the prevalence of names and name-related events before are fairly explicit in the first two books of the Hebrew Bible. Easily the most noticeable manifestations of this prevalence are the meticulous lineages that make known every member of each passing generation. In fact, Exodus begins with one of these lineages: "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan, and Naphtali, Gad, and Asher" (NRSV Ex. 1:1-4). Since the bush dialogue

occurs shortly after Exodus begins, most of what can be gleaned from names happens in Genesis, and while the names themselves do not offer more than informative references, how they happen and even the incentive behind specific names give potentially significant information to consider. Names come up as early as the creation events, for example: "God called the light Day, and the darkness Night" (NRSV Gen. 1:5); creatures of the earth are brought to Adam (the first man) for names: "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field" (NRSV Gen. 2:20). There is renaming: "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham … " (NRSV Gen. 17:5); and there appear to be specific reasons for at least some names: "'This is a grievous mourning on the part of the Egyptians.' Therefore, the place was named Abel-mizraim … " (NRSV Gen. 50:11). The creation examples suggest, in addition to the creative power of naming (i.e. names brings things into existence), a preference for naming both inorganic and sentient objects. The latter two convey names as beyond just giving referential information, denoting possible changes in spiritual status or an etiology. These frequent and diverse occurrences of names in Genesis build within readers a sense of how names apply and lead to the pivotal moment when God reveals His own. That they occur in the same texts also allows for direct comparisons that may shed light on the mystery of the divine name.

When referring to the divine name, there is a natural temptation to put the very word "name" in quotation marks. God's name is not a name in any intuitive sense as it notably lacks the discrete noun framework conventional names like "Moses" have, and its peculiar tautological form of delivery denotes the Almighty's essence arguably more than the words that comprise the name. There are several ways the name can be translated, and E. Schild – whose work will be examined in-depth later – provides a good glossary of these variations:

> Most translations are variations of one pattern: I AM THAT I AM (King James; Jewish Publ. Soc., R.V.); I am who I am (American Tr.; R.S.V); I am what I am; I will be what I will be (RSV mgn); I will be that I will be (RV mgn); I am wont to be that which I am wont to be; I am wont to be He who I am wont to be (MCNEILLE, *Exodus*) … (Schild, "On Exodus 3:14 – 'I am that I am'").

Subtle ambiguities in Hebrew grammar make these variations possible, demonstrating the translational differences that still happen despite the names' common syntax, as Gerardo Sachs notes in his "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh": "Hence, '*ehyeh*' signifies an action not yet concluded and can mean likewise 'I am' or 'I shall be'" (Sachs, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh"). Schild's example obviously offers versions of the holy name that do not use "I am" or "I shall be," but Sachs' simple dichotomy is enough to show that different implications arise depending on the translation used. "I am who I am" (which will be the assumed form for the rest of this thesis), for example, accentuates the time-tested, generational consistency of God and is, as such, a direct reference to His reliability as reassurance for Moses to carry out the grand mission: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (NRSV Ex. 3:6). "I shall be who I shall be" also aims to quell Moses' worries, but the focus is very different from the static essence "I am who I am" conveys; this translation emphasizes the change God is capable of, and it suggestively relies on His ability to cross new boundaries to guide Moses as a way of promising the messenger's safety. Debating the specific – "correct" – version is not often the concern of research relating to the holy name, as the Sachs' overview sufficiently parameterizes the implications of most traditional versions. There are even more translations

than what Schild provides above, but the specific translation is not as important as the common syntax that unifies them all.

The uniqueness of the holy name's syntax satisfies the basic function of the name since it specifically references God, but it is easy to tell that there are more details to this specificity than in traditional noun-names. "Moses," for example, denotes the identity of a specific person; symbolic significances and other associations may later be attributed to "Moses," but most meaningful attribution is done largely in retrospect. "I am who I am" can be treated as a noun-name in the exact way "Moses" is for comprehensibility's sake, but the extra effort in arguing for this equal treatment already suggests that there might be significances (aside from etymological or etiological reasons) in the divine name to begin with, as implied in the very use of the syntax and the resulting connotations. As such, differentiating between the holy name and proper names is more appropriate than classifying both as members of the same category, which brings into question whether "I am who I am" really is a name in the first place, especially if the details of the dialogue between Moses and God suggest otherwise. Particularly interesting is the way the messenger phrases his request for the divine name, as it leaves enough room for "I am who I am" to be interpreted differently. There seems to be sincere intent behind Moses' desire to be able to identify God, but the perspective he assumes when wording his question is that of the Israelites. Realizing that the mission will bring him before God's people, Moses requests the divine name as a legitimate response he can use for the Israelites to confirm his intentions: "The response of the people to Moses' proclamation is not regarded as a remote reaction, but as the natural one which he is sure to expect" (Childs 66); but this does not necessarily mean Moses is explicitly asking for a discrete name. The first question he asks, "What is His name?" is a question he expects to receive, but his own of "How shall I respond?" follows immediately after. The

succession of his two questions makes it easy to miss the subtle but very real possibility that "I am who I am" may not be answering the first question as it is addressing the second. The divine "name" may thus only be a general response God teaches Moses to use rather than a discrete revelation of His identity that answers, "What is His name?"

When evaluating the legitimacy of the divine name, it is also important to consider that God does not necessarily address Moses' objections in direct or literal fashion but deals straightforwardly with the concerns those objections imply instead. The implicit and anticipatory nature of God's addresses indicates that "I am who I am" is indirect and may not therefore be an answer to either of Moses' queries. The exchanges between the two figures are very uneven: terse, punchy, and unconnected, the messenger's responses evaporate in the presence of the more consistent style in God's speech. Long answers not only aim to assure Moses of his own capabilities but also to remind him of the future significance of this extremely important mission: "Almost every divine response goes beyond the immediate problem to describe and incorporate the future … The effect is to give his [God's] speech an atmosphere of great confidence and expectation which finally overcomes and absorbs the resistance of his messenger" (71). Moses' first objection, for example, calls into question his own candidacy: "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'" (NRSV Ex. 3:11); God's promise of "I will be with you … " (NRSV Ex. 3:12) serves to reassure Moses rather than to answer directly "Who am I?" Readers can argue that these questions are rhetorical, which forces God to be strategically different in His responses. "I am who I am," then, may still be a direct answer to Moses' inquiries, but it also brings the messenger's rhetorical capabilities into the conversation. This forces this issue to expand into his other questions. That the candidacy question is intentionally rhetorical raises the possibility that his subsequent questions

about the divine name are also rhetorical, which makes "I am who I am" part of the same change in strategy God uses to circumvent Moses' first objection. The manner in which God replies to Moses undoubtedly makes pinpointing the nature of the divine name even more difficult than it already is, and it brings the entire assumption that "I am who I am" is truly a name into serious question.

The tri-fold introduction into which God divides His names also deserves attention as it expands the complexity of the name beyond just the "I am who I am." Of particular interest is the use of "thus" as the Almighty goes from one name to the next. After the initial "I am who I am" in verse fourteen, God then says, "Thus you say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you,'" before ending (with the exact same syntax) in verse fifteen with "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord has sent me to you.'" "Thus" indicates causality between one name and the next – that is, "I am who I am" makes "I am" happen, which in turn makes "The Lord" happen. But it is unclear if "I am who I am" can directly cause "The Lord." The names may not necessarily be direct causal agents of one another but pre-existing conditions that simply make the proceeding name possible. "Thus" may also indicate equivalence where the names are substitutable versions of one another, but this is less likely since God orders His responses in a specific way. In either case, if the divine names do have some level of significance altogether, it may be portraying God as an "uncaused cause". The cause of God is Himself – an image befitting of a god – but this is arguably already conveyed in "I am who I am" alone, leaving the repetition of the tri-fold unexplained: Are the three replies God gives all names that cause each other in specific sequence? Is perhaps one (most logically, "The Lord") the true name that for some reason requires the prerequisite "names" in order to exist? Or are all three not names at all, but rather some sequential non-response God gives to Moses only for the sake of soothing the

Israelites? The obscurity and complexity of both the tri-fold and the individual "I am who I am" make it more logically responsible to not simply assume the divine name as a name in the traditional sense; readers can only say that this is a response that may or may not denote some essence of God's identity.

1.2 – *Childs: Philological*

In *The Book of Exodus*, Brevard S. Childs provides an extensive review of the how commentators and scholars have attempted to explain the divine name. He presents his own arguments, evaluates those of others, and offers an elaborate overview of the progress that has been made in this respect. The first set of approaches he presents are those that evaluate the holy name from a strictly philological standpoint, which almost always involve some aspect of textual change (i.e. moving around whole verses or retranslating). The goal is to smooth out apparent inconsistencies and incoherent points while maintaining a reading of Exodus equal to the original, but despite the variety of unique "solutions," Childs notes that "certain characteristic patterns do emerge in the … handling of these verses" (Childs 61). For example, making more sense of the divine name to some means first understanding the tri-fold it is a part of. As mentioned in the previous section, this structure adds to the confusion "I am who I am" on its own produces, prompting some to propose a "rearranging the sequence of verses or eliminating portions as glosses" (62) to cut off the apparent redundancies; there are, however, a few important points to consider with this "editorial" technique. Different arguments exist as to which part of God's introduction should be eliminated or glossed over. The most frequent approach, for example, interprets verse fourteen as an interruption, so Moses' queries in verse thirteen can immediately be aligned with God's most sensible answer – "The Lord" – in verse fifteen. Others aim for a similar outcome but retain fourteen while eliminating parts or all of

fifteen. The cut-and-keep specifics aside, scholars substantiate their claims effectively, but no one shows why these changes are essential, especially since any direct changes to the verses cost readers the original reading. The "high degree of subjectivity" (62) of these solutions derived "in isolation from this history of the tradition of the text" can be easily inferred, and it underscores the very possible mishaps this technique runs across.

Rearranging the order and reading priority of verses thirteen to fifteen might help improve logical consistency, but it still does not answer all of the questions associated with God's enigmatic response. The tautology remains and so do its issues, leading another group of scholars and commentators to address the name in verse fourteen more directly. The most prominent solutions involve retranslating the original name into a less enigmatic (but still equivalent) form, but while retranslating makes smart use of the ambiguity of the grammar used to derive the tautology, doing so still runs into the problems reflected in the method previously discussed. Bertil Albrektson details these issues best in his "On the Syntax of I am who I am in Exodus 3:14" where he focuses on finding the most proper syntax of God's name without any advocacy for a particular interpretation: "I am only concerned with the correct analysis of the syntax of the divine answer to Moses in the Exodus narrative … " (Albrektson 16). Central to his essay is the work of Erwin Schild, whose "On Exodus iii 14 – I AM THAT I AM" offers the most convincing alternative reading yet to God's divine answer. Picking apart the grammatical details and comparing verse fourteen to other verses of similar structure, Schild transforms "I am who I am" to "I am the one who is" or " I am he who is." Albrektson commends Schild on the quality of his research but finds some of his grammatical conclusions and comparisons questionable. Since Schild never defends his analysis from critics, it is unfair for readers with no mastery of Hebrew grammar to simply accept Albrektson's rationale as definitive proof that

there are flaws in Schild's studies. Albrektson's second issue with Schild, however, requires no such esoteric knowledge and is easily detectable for any reader.

Schild's argument for a retranslation suggests that the original readings are somehow inadequate or even wrong and therefore require alternatives. If these issues exist, however, Schild never demonstrates them and only implies in his introduction that the mere incoherency of God's name is enough to justify a second option: "the answer which Moses received to his question regarding the name of the deity … is very much a mystery" (Schild, "On Exodus 3:14 – 'I am that I am'"). Schild is in good company in this respect; in fact, no scholars or commentators have ever pinpointed where the original readings are flawed: "there are in fact no arguments against the common syntactical understanding" (Albrektson 26). Readers may argue that having no argument against the original translations does not mean there is no need to retranslate them, especially if a more understandable alternative potentially exists, but this does not entirely capture the essence of Albrektson's mindset. Indeed there may be one or more "true" translations of the divine response, but in light of the many directions that have been taken in handling it, Albrektson merely cautions against accepting one specific version, even as one well-argued as Schild's. No one knows what the "true" name is, and that no one who advocates for an alternative can demonstrate the insufficiencies of the original makes retranslating riskier. This is different from saying that Albrektson prohibits Schild from even making an argument since the latter has not effectively demonstrated the need to retranslate in the first place. Not being able to eliminate the original readings suggests that readers must still deal with "the difficulties of interpretation … the original translation was designed to solve" (28), which suggests that new questions must be asked for more illuminating progress.

Philological approaches like the ones Childs presents focus extensively on answering basic "whats" in God's name such as "What is His name?" and (to a certain extent) "What does this name mean?" It explains why scholars and commentators of this class deal so much with grammar and syntax because assessing the divine name in these directions will more likely yield solutions to questions they ask, but changes to the traditional text and translations – the hallmarks of these redactional techniques – risk fundamentally reshaping the text into something entirely different. A more consensually supported change may demonstrate inherent flaws that need to be addressed, but the divergent responses implied above show that there is no agreement in this respect, and the sheer number of research-backed proposals discourage reading Exodus differently from what is originally presented. The most troubling argument against advocates of textual change, though, is the lack of argument against the original readings. There is plenty of conversation on ways to reform verse fourteen, but almost no reasons why reform is needed in the first place, aside from the assumption that any incoherency is "bad." Incoherency, though, is a strong theme in this locale of Exodus, and any discomfort it inevitably brings about does not necessarily justify its removal. Furthermore, purely technical directions do not do well in answering "why" God says His name the way He does or "how" the particular format is potentially significant. Such questions are often mysteriously left out despite their obvious importance in compelling the reader to consider the narrative context where the name is uttered.

1.3 – *Childs: Non-Philological*

To be fair, there have also been a decent number of works Child presents that parse the divine name from a more "figurative" angle that attempts to extract a meaningful message or theme from the enigma. A popular explanation involves seeing the incoherency as God's refusal to give a clearer answer, and his opting instead for a rhetorical non-response: "One can question

whether it is really an answer or rather the refusal of an answer … along with a number of other Old Testament scholars, has interpreted it as an evasion of the question … " (Childs 69). Another frequent interpretation simply sees the "name" as a representation of the mystery or indefiniteness appropriate for a deity, relying more or less on the general sense that God – being higher than man – cannot be understood in ways man can. That is, "I am who I am" simply because God is who He is, and He cannot be defined by any other parameters: "It is a non-committal, circular definition: God cannot be defined by or as anything else, he is his own definition" (Schild, "On Exodus 3:14 – 'I Am That I Am"). There have also been arguments to the contrary: instead of a portrayal of indefiniteness, "I am who I am" is an emphatic device designed to aid Moses' confidence: " … the formula is not simply an expression of indefiniteness, but emphasizes the actuality of God: '"I am who I am" means: 'I am there, wherever it may be…I am really there!"'(69). Finally, a related reading connects the presence of the Almighty to His names as the names are a play on the Hebrew root "to be", signifying God's dedication to His people. While there is nothing unreasonably wrong with these interpretations, they are also largely self-contained as the significances that arise from the divine name are only related to the attributes of God. The conclusions these approaches reach are therefore not very meaningful as they seem only be more elaborate versions of a reader's intuitive explanations for the complexity of the divine name.

The weight of Moses' mission and the revelation of the divine name in such a specific format for the first time are very significant events, and using the attributes of God to explain His own name leaves much to be desired. A deeper, more integrated interpretation should be attempted if the text provides the right information, and a more comparative mode of reading can certainly be of benefit in this regard. Childs quickly demonstrates, however, that comparative

analysis is not necessarily easy to conduct as the bush encounter maintains a combination of traits too unique to be directly compared to other encounters of the Hebrew Bible. There have been, in fact, a number of times when God makes Himself known before man that involve details resembling Moses' experience: the Almighty has been shown, for example, to interact through an intermediary (e.g. angel) to make Himself known using a consistently formatted self-revelatory formula; and even to commission a task for his followers. The unexplained syntax and use of "I am who I am" as well as the intimate connection between this "name" and Moses' mission, however, is indeed a "first and only" of the Hebrew Bible. Childs' analysis suggests that a different approach altogether is needed to explain the peculiarities of the divine name as it relates to the mission and other narrative details. This approach will be comparative in nature, without aim for a definitive "solution" that the philological methods explored in the previous section seemingly want to achieve. Definitive solutions are not necessarily required and may even hinder the process of reaching more meaningful conclusions, which is the implied ultimate goal for any approach in general.

CHAPTER 2
Arguments for Narrative Elements and the Non-Literal

Studying the divine response in extensive detail reveals just how elaborate its complexity is, and while there has been a thorough review of the individual components of this complexity, the incoherency that arises is still unexplained, especially as it relates to the "I am who I am." Some features – like the ambiguities in God's responses and apparent redundancies – contribute partly to the mystery as discussed in the previous chapter, but the tautology is more sophisticated. That the name's syntax is a fundamental property of the incoherency has already been implied in previous comments to the effect of "the format of the divine name is mysterious," but it is important to distinguish between the reasons why readers find this difficult to grasp as this will later substantiate the significance of the syntax. Such an intensive review of incoherency is not without merits. As will be seen later in the chapter, incoherency is not a "just there" side-effect but actually fulfills the critical role in strengthening the reader's connection to the bush narrative as well as establishing the platform for metaphor and symbolism, both of which play different but key parts in the interpretation in Chapter Three.

2.1 – *Narrative and Its Aspects*

In "On the Narrative Connection," Noël Carroll devotes a segment of his paper in understanding the process of narrative comprehension and argues that anticipation is an integral part of this process. Readers develop "a broad sense of what might happen next" (Carroll 36) rather than "a definite sense of what will happen next" as they absorb the narrative at hand. Varying levels of probability are assigned and adjusted to potential outcomes as new narrative information arises. As previously mentioned, while names are only somewhat significant before verse fourteen, the encounter at the bush foregrounds the significance of names. Thus, readers have little or no expectation of how or why names "happen," but two particular details in the

dialogue drastically change this perception: God's name is made explicit (complexity and incoherency aside) and the giver of this name is God Himself. Having considered this information, readers might expect a range of potential outcomes when Moses requests the holy name: some response from God (a "normal" noun-name, a "special" noun-name, or a verbal refusal), no response from God (complete silence or a textual statement about God going to find another candidate), or textual explication of the name ("And so God gave Moses His name…"). A basic reason the reader finds "I am who I am" so hard to grasp is because it interrupts the intuition with which readers process the text until verse fourteen. Put another way, the name announces itself as an enigma, which is precisely where the incoherency arises. It is not necessarily true to say, however, that this incoherency results from the "name's" falling out of the range of anticipated outcomes readers tend to establish. Rather, a response like "I am who I am" is simply not as expected. Falling out range suggests that there is no causal link between Moses' question and God's response, but this is obviously not the case: the narrative clearly shows a logical progression from question to response and not a sudden appearance of some event that has no relations with the question. The overall significance of Carroll's analysis is the focus it provides on the syntax. Incoherency is produced as a result of the particular pattern God's name follows and not because readers did not expect it at all. Readers, in fact, cannot say with certainty what they would have expected had they known God was going to respond, and it is not until the final "form" of the response reveals that a reaction is elicited.

The above argument assumes that Exodus (and Genesis) can be read as a narrative since Carroll's concepts apply with the narrative genre specifically in mind. This is not to suggest that the Hebrew Bible cannot be read as narrative, or that it does not exhibit enough relevant features to qualify as such. As Mieke Bal notes in *Narratology*, though, since "everyone has [only] a

general idea of what narratives are, it is certainly not always easy to decide whether or not a given text should be considered a narrative, partly or wholly" (Bal 3). Narratives are often described more colloquially as "stories," and in their most basic forms – Carroll argues – they are a chronological series of events or state of affairs that relate to a common subject. He puts in perspective what he means: "Likewise, 'The Tartar hordes swept over Russia; Socrates ate Hemlock; Noël Carroll got his first computer; Jackie Chan made his most successful movie; and dinosaurs became extinct' is not a narrative … " (Carroll 24). This example not only "lacks a central subject, but also because it does not even conversationally implicate a perspicuous, reliable time-ordering of events it recounts" (24). The "time-ordering" suggests causality at play, but the way it applies to the narrative genre is a key feature that gives it its essence. Events and affairs within a narrative are best thought of as constituents of a large causal network. While events and affairs are not necessarily direct causal agents of one another, they nevertheless contribute to the overall progress of the story as a whole; one event, for example, only allows for the possibility of the next event and not the event itself. This sort of "detachment" is a big reason to the "story" feel of this genre, since possibilities are kept open moving forward. That is, readers will not always be able to accurately predict point-outcomes, but they can maintain point-outcome possibilities. The eventual realization of a series of these events and affairs in retrospect signal a particular theme their arrangement conveys.

While readers will likely see that biblical texts are more religious than narrative, Exodus and Genesis definitely have elements Carroll describes above. The texts' events and affairs indeed occur sequentially, and it is very difficult to not to find any thematic significance in the imagery, oddities, and complications of the plot. Most scholars recognize at least the narrative potential in Exodus. Childs, for example, sets aside substantial parts of his commentary for

topics such as “thematic and stylistic analysis” and calls Moses’ encounter the “call narrative.” Fox even suggests Exodus may mistakenly be interpreted as fiction if not careful: “ … there is still something unsettling about writing Exodus off as a work of fiction … For the rest of the Hebrew Bible abounds in emotional references to the experience of the exodus … at every stage of biblical literature that experience is invoked for the purpose of directing behavior” (Fox 224). Of course, merely citing the words of various writers does not convincingly legitimatize biblical texts as narratives, but their recognition (often without any explicit explanation for why the narrative genre is referred in the first place), and Carroll’s analysis together demonstrate that there is an unalienable narrative aspect of these texts, even if they are more intuitively recognized as religious. It is also worth mentioning that narratives themselves are not entirely comprised of narrative elements: “Not every sentence in the narrative text can be called ‘narrative’ according to the definitions presented in this book” (Bal 31). There is, in fact, alternation between narrative and non-narrative aspects, which is in itself important for underlying messages: “The reason for examining these alternations is precisely to measure the difference between the text’s overt ideology … and its more hidden or naturalized ideology as embodied in the narrative representations” (31). Bal’s analysis of the narrative suggests that only a narrative framework (and not a necessarily a narrative altogether) is needed to access the devices a narrative allows in interpretation. So even if biblical texts are not “true” narratives, they demonstrate the basic aspects of the genre.

2.2 – *Incoherency and the P-Response*

This section explores how incoherency relates specifically to the divine response, but it is best to first present some research that will help substantiate this discussion. In “Perspective as Participation”, psychologist Richard J. Gerrig examines the relations between reader and text; he

has particular interest in understanding how different perspectives can prompt readers to "act" on a text, and, as such, studies such topics as "Perspective and Causality" and "First-person versus Third-person Perspective." Gerrig introduces the critical concept of the participatory response (p-response) that " … generally reflect[s] a sort of voluntary participation in the narrative world" (Gerrig 304) to explain the reaction each of the topics he explores uniquely elicits from readers. A story – titled "The Eyewitness" – he uses in an experiment studying what he calls "Difference Perspectives" best illustrates the p-response phenomenon:

> When I heard the sirens, I carefully tucked the small gun into the deep pocket of my overcoat. Then I ran in the direction of the police car. When the first cop jumped out of the car, I called out, "It happened over here." I then led the pair of cops into the corner of the parking lot where the body lay sprawling. The first cop, whose badge said "Cortez," kneeled down to examine the evidence. "It looks like he took a small caliber bullet right to the heart," Cortez said. "Let me tell you what happened," I said …

The rest of the story sees the speaker explaining to police what he had seen and claiming that the alleged killer had run off. This experiment demonstrates the inherent inference the audience makes based on the presence of certain information, and in "The Eyewitness" this piece of information is the small gun the speaker tucks away at the beginning of the excerpt. Of course, the story never reveals enough information for readers to conclude who the real killer is, but this explicit detail creates immediate tendency to believe that the speaker is connected to the crime scene in some crucial way; he himself may, in fact, be the real killer, so his witness account of

the crime maybe completely fabricated. Gerrig runs the experiment with two separate versions of the story to test for any differences in reader reactions (here, the level of belief attributed to the speaker's claim to innocence). He excludes the detail of the gun in one version and finds that readers who read this altered version "gave high belief ratings in the absence of the gun … " (322). It is important to note that readers who are given the gun detail have information the policemen in the story do not; it is precisely this difference that allows these readers to produce p-responses in this study (namely, skepticism with regard to the speaker) and form narrative worldviews completely different from those who have no knowledge of the gun detail: "This is an important inference; should readers fail to draw it, they will have a very different experience of the story than will their peers" (322).

Gerrig's research gives the incoherency in the divine response a practical function and makes explicit the role it plays in the reader-text relationship. P-responses show that this incoherency is not just some syntactical by-product but is instead an integral characteristic of the Almighty's response. The very presence of this feature forces readers to engage actively with the text, and it compels them to ask questions (What does "I am who I am" mean?), draw potential inferences (God must not want Moses to know His name), and make connections (These peculiarities signify…), and so on. Mental activities like these are not as likely to come up had the divine response been framed more coherently. The "name" could have been implied, for example, (And God told Moses His name) or simply stated ("I am [noun-name]"), but it is unlikely these presentations would produce as strong of a p-response as the incoherency of "I am who I am". It is also important to note that the p-response does not apply exclusively to the inference and perspective concepts Gerrig studies; p-responses give rise to processes like inference and perspective, but this does not mean p-responses only come about when these

processes do. A fundamental conclusion in Gerrig's work is that active engagement (as indicated by p-responses) can lead to different reading experiences, depending on existing information. As already seen in the diverse research of scholars in the previous sections, even if something like inference is not as obvious in the divine response as it is in "The Eyewitness", the incoherency certainly prompts participation from readers in amounts akin to the inference experiment above. As will be discussed at length later, a close relationship with God entails man's understanding and following the ways of the Almighty. The "theological" significance from Gerrig's research, then, is the reflection of this understanding in that the incoherency of the divine response draws readers into the text to investigate some of the most rudimentary questions about God's essence. If for nothing else, Gerrig's work substantiates the importance of incoherency, demonstrating its significance being intact.

The incoherency that remains leaves readers in an interesting position. Incoherency is significant as it actively engages the reader in the text, but drawing readers in only to ask questions about the divine name is rather meaningless. Attempts to "solve" the enigma have already been shown to be problematic, but this does not prohibit the reader from at least trying to explain it. Individual components of incoherency have been plenty: the undescriptive syntax of the "name," and its lack of resemblance to conventional noun-names, the ambiguous nature of God's responses, and the apparent redundancies of the tri-fold. There are, however, implicit "flip positives" to these issues, which have already been suggested in the discussion thus far. The specific sequence of the tautology, for example, is clearly purposeful, and there is a sense of poetry in the repetition of "I am who I am" as well as the tri-fold. These cases almost automatically subject the readers to non-literal approaches as the specificity and peculiarities of their presentations strongly indicate communications beyond what only the words that comprise

them denote. As such, it becomes difficult to not consider the narrative context of the holy name as an interpretative option and assess how the enigma is significant accordingly. It is important, however, not to confuse the motivation behind this approach as mere interest in seeing how the bush narrative and God's name can be read figuratively as there are legitimate, economic reasons to use this approach in the first place. Both motivations alone might lead to the same effect, but the addition of the latter point makes argument stronger.

2.3 – *Metaphor and Symbolism*

Metaphorical analysis will be a fundamental mode of interpretation in the following chapter as it transforms incoherency and other aspects of the divine name into means for interpretation, allowing the reader to explain "I am who I am" with respect to narrative elements. Janet Soskice notes in *Metaphor and Religious Language* that there are many descriptions of what a metaphor is since "a definition of metaphor in one discipline often proves unsatisfactory to another" (Soskice 15), but it can still be generally thought of as a "figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are to be suggestive of another" (15). The basic structure of a metaphor involves a relationship between the properties of distinct items. An example Soskice provides – "rosy-fingered dawn" – illustrates how the items themselves do not necessarily have to be present of "explicit" for a metaphor to complete. "Rosy-fingered" itself is clearly not the item "dawn" directly compares to; rather, an implied item with the property of "rosy-fingered" is used to describe the appearance of "dawn." Put another way, "physical objects and states of affairs are not in themselves metaphors" (17) since they work only with the properties of the items at hand. This "property" feature explains how aspects of "I am who I am" can be used at all, but a proper context will be needed for these aspects to make sound metaphorical sense: "Dorothy Mack cites the example 'blossoms of smoke' and makes the point

that, apart from context and reference, it is unclear whether this describes gray blossoms, or billowing smoke, or feelings of emptiness, or none of these" (21). The bush narrative where God utters the divine name provides this context for incoherency, other characteristics of the tautological syntax, and even the tri-fold to be sewn with other narrative features for a non-literal interpretation of the holy name.

As metaphors only relate objects by the properties they share, symbolism is conceptually needed to justify the inclusion of the objects themselves. This is important in a non-literal analysis of the divine name and the surrounding narrative as crucial aspects like the burning bush (and its associations) would be excluded if working with metaphors alone. In *Symbols and Meaning*, Mari Womack provides an intuitive description of symbols: "[They] are, above all, a means of communication. In general terms, symbols are images, words, or behaviors that have multiple levels of meaning" (Womack 1). More precisely, symbols are able to convey messages too complex or even contradictory for a concise arrangement of words to express alone: "[Symbols] approximates a variety of human experiences. It is a concise expression of concepts that cannot be stated precisely" (3) These messages also only come from a single source, and while the messages of some symbols are culturally derived or accentuated, the relationship between symbol and message is fundamentally logical if sufficiently understood; for example: "The eagle, one of the dominant symbols associated with the United States, is admired for its sharp vision and for its ability to bring down its prey" (5). As such, it is also important not to mistake symbols for signs since the latter only carries a single definite purpose: "The sign ∞ indicates that the topic under consideration has no numerical limitation. On the other hand, the image of the ouroboros, the snake swallowing its tail, also conveys the concept of infinity, but in this case, the infinity referred to has no finite designation" (3). Symbolism plays an integral part

in assessing the divine name as it allows “I am who I am” and the tri-fold to be associated with key biblical “objects” that would not otherwise be possible.

Symbolism and metaphor cooperate to substantiate the arguments in Chapter Three, but it is important to note that, while both devices share similar capabilities, their individual functions and natures are quite different. Interpreting the divine from a purely symbolic perspective, for example, will only allow the reader to demonstrate what the name connotes or represents, but metaphor relates the name to other narrative elements through common attributes. Symbols are not in themselves a means for comparison; in fact, the relationship between the underlying object of a symbol and its messages is itself metaphorical: “These are all symbols based on metaphor, or perceived similarity … the vision and prowess of the eagle are evoked when this symbol is associated with the United States” (5). Symbols are just as relevant as metaphors in this thesis since they establish participating objects in the narrative context like the burning bush to then be assessed metaphorically. As such, it will be a fundamental component for any possibility of a more insightful interpretation to develop, especially since the most significant revelations of the divine name emerge from details of the narrative’s symbols. Nonetheless, metaphorical analysis plays the primary role of finding that “insightful interpretation” as “a good metaphor may not simply be an oblique reference to a predetermined subject but a new vision, the birth of a new understanding, a new referential access” (Soskice 57). Both devices work together to bypass the referent to focus on its conveyed properties instead, giving the reader very useful analytical tools for assessing the enigma of the name figuratively. This not only broadens interpretative space and but also raises potential for significant insight befitting of the importance of the exodus event.

The use of symbols and metaphor should not be a complete surprise since they have been the basic approaches the "figurative" scholars in Chapter One had used to attribute the incoherency of "I am who I am" to the mystery and indefiniteness of God. There have also been other attempts that associate God's name (which is a play on the Hebrew root "to be") with His presence, which conveys the name as a "verbal symbol" for Moses to say before the Israelites as an extension of His presence and as a demonstration of His commitment to them. As previously noted, however, the range of these approaches is largely confined to the attributes of the Almighty. Chapter Three will argue that the significance of the holy name extends far beyond a simple representation of God's presence. Although the use of symbolism and metaphor in this thesis is not necessarily original, the range proposed will be the main difference between the interpretations that follow and those of the above mentioned figurative scholars. As with any interpretative model, it is very difficult to empirically demonstrate which model is "correct" or "true," so while critics might contend that the use of metaphor and symbolism do not coincide with traditional church doctrine, a better understanding of the divine name can certainly be achieved with methods that deviate from tradition given enough textual support.

CHAPTER 3
The Divine Name in Narrative Context

Born in a time when the Egyptian pharaoh sought to kill off all male Hebrew children, Moses was raised under royalty after being saved by the pharaoh's daughter. Later when grown, he kills an Egyptian out of rage for beating a fellow Hebrew, and news of his misdeed soon reaches the pharaoh. Fleeing in fear of his demise, Moses settles in a foreign land and raises a family – a soft setting that betrays the magnitude of the divine task that awaits him. After a brief, unexciting introduction that sees him tending to the sheep of his father-in-law, a flash of fire envelops a nearby bush, and his first encounter with the Almighty begins. It is here in their dialogue that "I am who I am" is uttered and, as discussed at length in previous chapters, the obvious challenge in better understanding this name is the incoherency within. This incoherency is troublesome at first, but the very sense of it reflects Moses' shock and inexperience in his first meeting with God as he attempts to understand Him in the intensity of the situation. Incoherency also conveys the relationship between God and Moses as distant and neutral. Their introductory exchange, the symbolism of the burning bush, and Abraham's relationship with the Almighty all substantiate this. Immediate understanding of God on part of the follower is indicative of a good relationship, but the incoherency of the name conveys the exact opposite in Moses' case at the bush. The messenger's own name is eventually brought into the discussion, and it signifies a pivotal point in the arguments of this chapter. Narrative elements from Genesis and deeper symbolic details of the bush constitute the main bulk of evaluating the significance of the messenger's name and offers insight to why Moses specifically is selected for the divine mission.

3.1 – *Adam and Abraham*

Describing the relationship between God and Moses as "distant and neutral" (as stated above) is inherently comparative, so supporting this claim means offering perspective by

evaluating the relationships between God and prior biblical figures. While many are brought up (most by name only), a select few receive enough textual attention for readers to begin a meaningful assessment. With the language of the Bible, and for other reasons – like the varying amounts of conversational detail in each encounter or whether the figure in question interacts with God "directly" as Moses does – it is difficult to confidently find perfectly suitable candidates to compare with Moses. Perfect candidates are not necessary, however, both for practical reasons and because this section is only interested in evaluating the quality of the relationship between Moses and God. Thus, only sufficient examples are needed, and that ultimately amounts to finding those whose interactions with the Almighty match that of the messenger best – specifically, those who also share an "in-presence" conversation with God. A few figures are shown to have encountered God "in-presence" on some level while others' encounters are not as clear (often, only the phrase 'And the Lord said to…" is presented, indicating only some form of communication is established). In the end, the most relevant details can be drawn from the cases of Abraham and Adam as both their histories with God best illustrate the uniqueness of Moses' situation.

The most relevant relationship details between God and Abraham can be seen in his encounter with the Almighty at the oaks of Mamre and in the Sodom-Gomorrah episode that follows soon after. The attributes Abraham exhibits in these two vignettes help readers establish a basic sense of how closely he follows God, allowing readers to then see how this closeness is absent from the God-Moses relationship. Like Moses, though, Abraham's meeting with the Almighty is also sudden: "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre … [Abraham] looked up and saw three men standing near him" (NRSV Gen. 18: 1-2). Without any apparent hesitancy and with an almost immediate detection of God's presence, Abraham pays his respects

running “from the entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground” and urges hospitality so that they may “refresh yourselves … since you have come to your servant” (NRSV Gen. 18:5). Abraham’s awareness of his social position with respect to God and the actions that follow from this awareness all convey submissiveness, and while the trait itself is important to notice, perhaps even more important is the extent to which Abraham humbles himself before the Almighty. There are several times where he is noted to be “running” to gather the items to prepare a meal, and even after he completes his preparation he “stood by them under tree while they ate” (NRSV Gen. 18:8). Abraham’s immediacy without concern for inconvenience demonstrates his willingness to serve God without question, and even when he does question the Almighty’s intentions, it is obvious he does so carefully to avoid any risk of displeasing God, as extensively seen after He reveals to Abraham His intentions to destroy two sinful cities:

> [31] [Abraham] said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” [God] answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” [32] The he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” (NRSV Gen. 18:31-32).

The “twenty” and “ten” they speak of refers to the number of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham wants to know if God is willing to destroy sinners even at the cost of those who are innocent and, realizing that he could overstep his place in probing God’s plan, he begins each of his addresses by making known his own intentions. It should also be noted that this conversation is shortened for brevity, and that the starting number of righteous that initiates this

discussion is “fifty”; Abraham does not begin qualifying his questions with do-not-be-angry comments until the hypothetical number of the righteous dwindles to the numbers shown above. This suggests that Abraham is emotionally aware of God’s feelings, and that he understands the Almighty to a point where he can detect this social pressure and respond accordingly. Abraham’s closeness with God allows them to communicate on a level that departs far from the plane Moses shares with the Almighty. Seeing an example of a healthy relationship facilitates seeing the specific ways Moses’ relationship deviates from this model, and it is this distance that contributes to the lack of understanding and trust the incoherency of the divine name conveys.

Adam’s status as the first man and the brief perks he enjoys as a result weaken his in-presence qualification as a good comparison for Moses’s situation at the bush. His unique history with sin, however, is important to consider when assessing the dynamic between man and God, and it becomes relevant later when the discussion looks at the relations between Moses and God more directly. Adam is the only one of Moses’ predecessors who interacts directly with God before sin. His disobedience against Him and subsequent exile from the holy garden marks as much the birth of sin as it does a fundamental change in the God-man relationship: “ … the Lord God sent him forth from the garden … He drove out the man” (NRSV Gen. 3:23-24). The rift that now stands between man and his Creator suggests that the in-presence interactions of the post-sin era will require more specific intent from the Almighty. Pre-sin Adam is able to experience such things as the “sound of the Lord God walking in the garden” (NRSV Gen. 3:8) and having one of his ribs removed by God Himself out the concern that he would become too lonely. These events inspire a sense of closeness man shared with God pre-sin that post-sin simply does not obtain. Even the most direct post-sin encounters such as Moses’ bush dialogue occur through some representation of God rather than God Himself. Such post-sin examples do

not necessarily indicate any deeper level of intimacy between the Almighty and whomever He chooses to share His presence with, but given the distance sin permanently implements between man and God as well as the relative rarity of encounters that occur post-sin, there is definite reason to suspect that these interactions entail much more purpose than the interactions seen before sin. Overall, Adam's unique experiences with sin contextualize God's appearance before Moses as one with purpose and arguable urgency.

Aside from representing Moses' shock, the incoherency of the divine name also demonstrates the messenger's unwillingness to agree to God's call, and his resulting desire to hear an obscure instruction that might prevent him from doing so. This would explain why God has to "repeat" His name three times, with each subsequent time being clearer than the "name" before, so his messenger receives the message. Moses is burdened with a very dangerous mission of going against pharaoh (the most powerful figure in the land), freeing the Israelites in the process, and leading them to God afterwards. Needless to say, he sees this as an absurdly grand task unfitting for someone of his lowly, shepherd-like status. Starkly unlike Abraham, who had been willing to sacrifice his only son without question, Moses shamelessly subjects God to his rhetoric and inquiries in hopes of squirming out of the situation any way he can. It is important to note that the messenger's reluctance may result from his skepticism about God's judgment and ability. Having seen the submissiveness his predecessor doggedly expresses, it is easy to see how far removed Moses is from a more intimate relationship with the Almighty compared to Abraham. God's greeting to Moses is not even a proper address. He is portrayed as shouting at Moses and already establishing distance even before their conversation begins: "God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' … Then he said, 'Come no closer!'" (NRSV Ex. 3:4-5). This "distance" attribute is the first significant representation of the incoherency in "I am who I

am" as it not only demonstrates the sub-average relationship between the Almighty and His messenger but also explains why Moses reacts the way he does.

3.2 – *Image of the Burning Bush*

The burning bush is only mentioned once, but its image is very significant for a number of reasons. Symbolic attributes readers might associate with fire – that is, anger, passion, urgency, danger, liveliness, and the like – definitely permeate the dialogue, but the bush does much more than simply set the mood. Being the pictorial start of the conversation, it can fundamentally alter the way the details around it are read. The stark sense of contrast it creates by being presented immediately after the plain opening scene, for example, conveys the suddenness of the shift in Moses' life as well as the natural shock that accompanies it: "Moses was keeping the sheep of his father-in-law … the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush" (NRSV Ex. 3:1-2). The agrarian duties that had constituted Moses' life since fleeing Egypt and the supernatural occurrence before him presents an overwhelming asymmetry between the simplicity he is used to and the enormous task God is about to call on him to fulfill. Mere fascination with the fire quickly turns to fear realizing that he is divine presence for the first time: "Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up' … And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (NRSV Ex. 3:3,6). Despite the immense sensory input that His appearance already causes, God goes straight to His purpose: "So come, I will send you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (NRSV Ex. 3:10). It is easy to why Moses immediately puts up a defense as he sets off a series of questions that aims to deflect God's request and better understand the nature of the command. The immediacy and size of the situation as well as the stunned senses Moses experiences make understanding God more difficult, mirroring the effect the divine name has on

readers. In this respect, the enigma in verse fourteen denotes as much God's identity as it does connote Moses' mindset as he tries to accept the reality before him.

The very use of the bush and its flame for communication brings up a few worthy implications about God Himself and reveals unexpected details of His relationship with His messenger. Some of these implications are best emphasized with Etan Levine's *The Burning Bush: Jewish Symbolism and Mysticism* where he delivers a compilation of scholars' observations that reflects the traditional connotations of the iconic scene. The first important aspect to notice is the selection of the bush itself as a medium. The sense of specificity in this choice suggests that it was due to reasons tailored for Moses. Indeed, "God could well have spoken to Moses from the Heavenly heights … or from the tops of mighty cedars" (qtd. in Levine 35), but that He instead " … chose to lower Himself to speak from the bush" indicates submissiveness and even dependency. God is, in some sense, "bowing" before Moses, and the urgency of the need for His messenger can further be seen in the fundamental relationship between the fire and the bush: fire (the holy element denoting God) requires the bush (an earthly element) to even exist. The fire must also be fed, and it is clear that Moses' attention – as implied in his very verbal decision to "turn aside and look at this great sight" (NRSV Ex. 3:3) – is the fuel source. God is also not prompted to speak until He sees Moses moving closer, which suggests that the fire might have lost use if Moses never approaches: "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to Him … " (NRSV Ex. 3:4). This dependency suggests that the relationship between God and Moses is not only distant but also fundamentally different from those his predecessors had, cautioning readers against reading the bush dialogue with the same assumptions they might have used in reading dialogues of the predecessors.

God's being dependent is such an uncommon concept that it might prompt some to point out that there are issues with this argument. Readers may contend that a reoccurring characteristic of the encounters between Moses' predecessors and God is some task the Almighty commands man to perform, so saying that God depends on Moses is meaningless since there is always a sense of "dependency" that comes with His tasks. Adam, for example, is told to "multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (NRSV Gen. 1:28), and Abraham had to offer his only son as sacrifice: "'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and … offer him there as a burnt offering'" (NRSV Gen. 22:2). Moses' call to free God's people under the entire image of the burning bush may ignite a greater sense of direness that makes the "dependency" feel more apparent, but this may just be a play with semantics. The missions Adam and Abraham carry out are substantial and difficult in their own right, and that they eventually comply with God's commands gives His authority meaning. One could thus reasonably say that there is always an inherent "dependence" on God's part on man to substantiate His might, but "dependence" in this case happens by default of the mutual nature of assignments in general. The key feature that distinguishes between this default "dependence" and actual dependence is the urgency that is thoroughly conveyed in Moses' encounter with God. The image of the burning bush and God's persistent negotiating with Moses despite his protests are not making the reader mistakenly imagine dependence; they provide textual details that can demonstrate precisely how this dependency occurs. It is therefore not exactly right to say that God's dependence on Moses is the same "dependence" that happens with Adam or Abraham.

3.3 – *Moses, Water, God*

Fire as the choice element of God's appearance makes it reasonable to pinpoint the relevant associations of fire and assess the ways they affect readers' perceptions of the bush

encounter. These ways yield details that further substantiate everything that has been discussed about the divine response so far, but the most insightful detail comes from the element of fire itself as it even further illustrates – in likely the most important manner yet – the dynamic between Moses and God. Perhaps most confusing about God's use of the fire element is the extent to which this "elementally" differs from the water element that He is substantially more connected to. In many ways, water is a direct symbol of the His power as it had been a crucial part of the creation event: "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters'" (NRSV Gen. 1:6). It can be found as well in the de-creation (or cleansing) event: " … I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground" (NRSV Gen. 7:4). The text also suggests that water may have existed before or at the same time as God: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (NRSV Gen. 1:1-2). The many other water appearances in Genesis implies it as an invaluable resource: " … when Isaac's herders … found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders" (NRSV Gen. 26:19-20). It need not be said, but the frequent appearances of water as well as the significant events it is attached to makes God's choice of fire suspicious. As it had been the case with the fire element, water has its own symbolic attributions as suggested in the examples above: purity, reflectiveness, strength, life, and the like. There are some darker associations as well: destruction and instability – "Unstable as water you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father's bed" (NRSV Gen. 49:4).

Easily the most significant detail to emerge from the water analysis is Moses' intimate connection to the element as it deifies him in notable ways. His biological parents had saved him

from pharaoh's purge by hiding him in a basket that was placed by the riverbanks before the pharaoh's daughter finds and adopts the child as her own, and the most interesting bit is the motivation behind her decision to call him "Moses": "She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water'" (NRSV Ex. 2:10). Moses' name as a link to the water element God is associated with portrays the messenger as a direct product of the Almighty's power. The name is only a start, though, as water and water-associated events consistently appear in the actual mission and would even at times suggest Moses' ability to wield powers like those of God in an eerily similar fashion: "Then the Lord said, 'Stretch your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers … So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea … not one of [the Egyptians] remained" (NRSV Ex. 14:26-28). The destruction of the pursuing army is obviously reminiscent of the mighty flood God releases in Genesis to destroy sin. The de-creation event reappears here in the Exodus episode, but this time with the distinction of Moses' being God's direct agent of the catastrophe that unfolds. The text makes clear that God is still directly responsible for the parting sea, but Moses is the actual initiator as he has to "stretch out his hand" for the act to ensue. The Israelites "believed in the Lord and his servant Moses" (NRSV Ex. 14:31) soon afterwards, further demonstrating the position Moses has on the social hierarchy as closer to that of a god than mere man.

Moses' fundamental connection to water – more specifically the elemental advantage water has over fire – might prompt readers to read the portrayal of God at the bush as suggesting weakness or inferiority, but this is not necessarily be the case. This reading seems to suggest that an essential part of the Almighty Himself is in the fire, but it is important to note that God only appears through an intermediary the fire merely denotes His presence for communication: "There

the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush" (NRSV Ex. 3:2). This suggests that the fire might be representing something else aside from the appearance of God, and the frequent references He makes to the importance of freeing the Israelites conveys the flame as also an appropriate representation of their oppression. This perspective presents the symbolic danger and urgency of the flame as not only connotations of a deity's holy power but also an efficient summary of His people's afflictions. Furthermore, that the representations of God and the Israelites share the same bush medium implies the bond between the two entities as inseparable and mutual. In short, their experiences are shared: " … whenever Israel is in the dire straits it is as though God Himself is in dire straits" (qtd. in Levine 36), so "In all their distress He was distressed" (NRSV Is. 63:9). God's immense desire to liberate His people and the Israelites' need to be saved also suggests interdependency, as freedom from oppression will allow Israel to establish spiritual customs and worship the Almighty: " … and this shall be the sign that it is I who sent you: when you [Moses] have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (NRSV Ex. 3:12). Moses' name as a derivative of water makes God's selection of him not surprising, as this messenger is the only one who, in some sense, can extinguish the flame of the bush and restore both God and His nation to their original states.

3.4 – *Name Reinterpreted*

While not necessarily obvious, the topic of speech comes up a number of times in the bush dialogue, and it is worth keeping mind that this is the very device God had used in the creation events of Genesis. As Childs notes, "Several interesting linguistic patterns can be observed in these chapters … 'to speak' (*dbr*) [occurs] seven times, and 'mouth' (*peh*) seven times" (Childs 70). Moses' (claim of) ineloquence is one of the more notable reason he gives in attempt to escape the commission: "But Moses said to the Lord, 'O my Lord, I have never been

eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (NRSV Ex. 4:10). God relents to his messenger's concerns and ultimately makes Aaron the official speaker instead: "'What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently … You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth …'" (NRSV Ex. 4:14-15). Despite being demoted from the active role God intended specifically for him to carry out, it is important to note that Moses remains an essential part of the commission. His brother Aaron only plays the secondary role as an accompanying mouthpiece, further substantiating the idea that Moses had been chosen for reasons outside of his speaking ability. Having Aaron in the mix changes the relationship dynamic – Moses is no longer "just" a messenger but will fulfill a role to Aaron analogous to the role God fulfills to Moses. The messenger is in a sense a direct representation of God Himself in liberating the Israelites: "'He [Aaron] shall indeed speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you and you shall serve as a God for him'" (NRSV Ex. 4:16). Speech has played an integral part in deifying Moses, connoting a power reminiscent in the creation events of Genesis. Speech is, in fact, the only device God uses for creation, as signified by the iconic "and God said…" phrase preceding each creation event; for example: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (NRSV Gen. 1:3). Creative prowess and God's voice seem closely related, and that the name is spoken to Moses is an important detail to consider.

There is also a stark contrast between the brevity of speech with which God conducts the creation events and the lengthy speeches He uses to counter Moses' objections. The power in those brief commands are all that is necessary in bringing the heavens into existence, but persuading the messenger to embark on the divine mission requires more than a few crafted responses: "The speeches of God are portrayed with consummate skill. Each objection is

carefully answered, usually with an assurance of aid over and above explanation" (Childs 71). Speech alone, however, is not enough in the call narrative. God not only relinquishes His name, but also promises three different supernatural sings and sends a second person to convince Moses to go. The effectiveness in God's speech seems to have waned, but it is not immediately clear why. When the reader returns to the urgency of His call to free the Israelites, it becomes evident that God shares an intimate relationship with His people. Israel needs Him to liberate them from their misery and to provide religious fulfillment afterwards, but God also needs their following for His covenant with their generations to be established. The oppression of the Israelites renders this covenant and their worship impossible, leaving the Almighty in a meaningless state deprived of a crucial power supply. The dependency of the bush image once again supports this, as the holy fire must "lean" on a lowly plant for sustenance. God's call for Moses from the bush – "Moses! Moses!" (NRSV Ex. 3:4) – signals as much the relational distance between Moses and God as the Almighty's desire to close that distance, and drawing Moses closer to the bush is symbolic of finding help. The messenger has exhausted all of his resistance and must now go to restore the source of God's glory, but not without proper equipment. In addition to his brother and the divine staff he is provided, God also gives him His name as a final measure for ensuring success, and the very provision of the name suggests that it functions more than just an oral emblem of His presence.

Having God in weakened form conveys the utterance of the divine name in several new ways. The tri-fold may not necessarily be intentional but indicative of a stutter instead. God verbally stumbles a few times both out of the direness of the Israelites' situation and His need to compensate for what had been the original powers of His speech. Readers might argue that God's other responses in the same dialogue is evidence against this claim, but it is precisely the

length of His speech-long replies – which allows for composure and dexterity to be detected in the first place – that conveys Him as weakened. This is not to say that God's speech function has lost all creative prowess, however, since the divine name creates His own presence in an earthly form. The circularity of "I am who I am" should not be entirely unexpected, given that water's reflectiveness is one of the key attributes of the God's element. Both the holy name and water entails returning some essence of the caster back to the caster, allowing Moses to speak the "name" of God would have allowed him to fulfill the omnipresence of the Almighty He consistently promises in the dialogue. The divine name does not have to be a conventional noun-name since a reference to the Almighty would not be as powerful as a response that can, in a very real sense through His messenger, be an extension of His very presence. That "I am who I am" is self-referring allows God to appear in human form as Moses. The symmetry between God and Moses had been evident as early as when God adds Aaron as Moses' official mouthpiece for his journey, but a more explicit manifestation of this symmetry does not happen until the mass exodus of the Israelites is complete. Moses leads God's people to the assigned mountain for worship where he maintains the distinct ability to interact with God directly and ultimately becomes distinct altogether: "And [Moses] said to [God], 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight … ? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of this earth" (NRSV Ex. 33:16). In his commentary, *Exodus*, Cornelis Houtman aptly underscores Moses' new position: "He is truly [The Lord's] intimate. The radiance in which he is bathed legitimizes him fully as [The Lord's] representative. The fear that grips people when He appears … also seizes them when they see Moses" (Houtman 733). Distinguishing himself from mere man further substantiates his essence as deific, and it is pictorially appropriate for Exodus to see the

messenger arrive at a holy mountain upon the completion of the exodus project: Moses has brought the source of God's power back to Him and is elevated beyond man in doing so.

CONCLUSION

The divine name lives up to its notoriety of being difficult to handle, but the incoherency within that has wreaked interpretative havoc through the ages can be used to explain this difficulty. Accepting incoherency as an inherent property of the divine name's syntax and comparing it to narrative elements and reader experiences that share the same feature will yield compelling information. In particular, the imagery of the burning bush, the syntax of "I am who I am," and even Moses himself not only convey the imperativeness of the mission to rescue God's people but also reveal motives for using a tautology. Furthermore, the bush narrative and Genesis contain symbols whose attributes can be metaphorically compared to form relationships that link one source to one another. Parsing this web of symbols reveals significant details about the relationship between messenger and God as well as the selection of Moses. Contrary to his "modesty," Moses is uniquely capable of quelling the flames that appear before him. God has sent the message: Israel is afflicted and so is He. Moses' mission will be as much lifting the oppression from a people, as it will be restoring the glory of God.

Philology underscores a large number of proposals that have sought to address the incoherency of the divine name this thesis addresses but from an angle that concentrates much more effort in the linguistic and syntactical details of the name and even the verses themselves in some cases. There have been an array of various "solutions" for reading "I am who I am," but they almost always involve varying attempts to change the original text by reprioritizing verse order or arguing for new translations. While important in their own rights, these proposals as a whole have failed to adequately answer why a change is needed to begin with or demonstrate the flaws that require the changes they suggest. The lack of consensus on how to "correct" the divine name is apparent, which has lead to various research-supported recommendations, which does

not necessarily amount to progress on the actual understanding of the name itself, especially since some of these methods can be mutually exclusive. As previously mentioned, that philology addresses the linguistic details of the name implies that it is working a fundamentally different set of questions regarding the holy name than this thesis does, but since both our works share the same goal of understanding the meaning of the name, it can still be reasonable to say that one can be more effective than the other. Furthermore, there have been a few general attempts to explain the name less technically, but the ones Childs gives do little more that using "I am who I am" to emphasize certain attributes (like "mystery" or "indefiniteness) of God. There does not seem to be much serious effort in interpreting the divine name in its context. Childs shows that the unique combination of traits that sets Moses' encounter with the Almighty apart.

While not often thought of as narratives, the biblical texts that have been dealt with exhibit enough necessary traits to qualify as part of the genre. Establishing the narrative allows access to features that would not be possible from a more technical platform. Anticipation is fundamental in understanding how the incoherency arises and also demonstrates how the tautological syntax of "I am who I am" (and not a complete lack of expectation) is the cause of this incoherency. Participatory response (p-response) explains why incoherency plays the critical role of drawing in the reader for active reading. The questions readers ask and any inferences they make are a direct result of this concept and would not as likely have happened had the divine name been presented in a more understandable format. Having shown the significance of incoherency as well as the syntax of the name itself (and therefore why they should not be eliminated), the challenge is then assimilating it as part of interpretation, which can be most aptly handled through the combined efforts of metaphor and symbolism. Using both devices is important, as they fulfill different roles despite similar functions. Symbolism justifies the crucial

images and figures whose attributes may then be metaphorically analyzed with those of the divine name. Attributes of one symbol or figure have also been compared. The range of comparison this thesis has proposed makes the figurative arguments of this thesis different from others, as there is heavy emphasis on the narrative space.

The exegesis of the divine name this thesis argues for as well as the supporting material for those arguments are admittedly different from where most traditional research seems to settle and will expectedly draw criticism. Safety of the norm, however, is not a good reason to forgo studying one of the most controversial and significant occurrences in the Hebrew Bible using less common interpretative methods. Moses, who is the direct receiver of "I am who I am" and liberator of the Israelites, is an undervalued aspect of this Exodus locale and therefore makes considering the significance of the name with him in mind an important task. Equally important (and which has also been a consistent theme in this thesis) is the incoherency that is not only left intact but used for interpretation, making the arguments here markedly different from the more common philological methods. Theological significance as it relates to biblical studies seems intimately tied to the quality and volume of meaning the reader derives from the hidden messages and parables of the text, and the ability of incoherency to pull readers in for a closer read about one of the most critical events in the Hebrew Bible is definitely a reason to preserve it. As Childs notes in the introduction of his own commentary (which he describes as also less conventional than most other scholarship of his time), "it is incumbent upon each new generation to study its [Exodus] afresh" (Childs xiv), and part of being a responsible writer on the divine name involves generating the respectable insight necessary to spur the next generation of interpreters on.

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