

THE NAME OF GOD AS REVEALED IN EXODUS 3:14

An explanation of its meaning

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Introduction to Exodus 3:14

The revelation at the Burning Bush is amongst the most powerful and enduring images in human history, in no small part due to the revelatory event that is Exodus 3:14. What makes this event so memorable and so fascinating is that in response to a question regarding the way in which God should be known by name, God speaks words that are by some distance the most enigmatic to be found in the Bible. To Moses and the Children of Israel these words conveyed a meaning so clear and so potent as to have inspired them to undertake the legendary acts of courage and faith recounted in the Book of Exodus. They are for this reason extremely interesting whatever their meaning, and they are also for this reason extremely important in Jewish and human history. The four enigmatic words of which I speak are *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in the first part of Exodus 3:14 and *ehyeh* in the second part.

However, these four words are made all the more fascinating by the fact that, despite countless efforts to explain them, their meaning has not been understood since at least the time of the writing of the Septuagint, more than two thousand years ago. Because of this, some have gone so far as to suggest that they are actually meaningless or incomprehensible, which would in turn suggest that the words God addresses to Moses on the occasion of his prophetic commissioning and the single word with which he was to demonstrate to the Israelites his knowledge of their God both were and are meaningless or incomprehensible. That is highly improbable, especially when we consider the events these words are said to have inspired. Moreover, neither Moses nor the Israelites appear to have had any difficulty in understanding them because neither he nor they comment upon them at all, and so the implication of the biblical text is that the words of Exodus 3:14 were both highly meaningful and readily comprehensible to those who first heard them. Furthermore,

because they relate to so timeless and universal a concern as the way in which God should be known by name, there is every reason to believe that they would be just as meaningful for us today if only we understood them and no reason to believe that they would be any less comprehensible.

This paper is henceforth comprised of two parts. Part I is a review of Jewish translations and interpretations of Exodus 3:14 undertaken during the last 2,300 years. It begins with a separate analysis of early Jewish translations into Greek and an early Christian translation into Latin because these are useful for highlighting the interpretive difficulties that attend upon this verse and for demonstrating how these difficulties have been tackled. Those who are not already convinced of the importance of Exodus 3:14 may wish to postpone their reading of Part I until such a time as they are, and they may rest assured that they can do so without detriment to their appreciation of the most important content of Part II. To them I would only recommend reading the summary at the end of Part I for the background against which the contents of Part II may best be appreciated.

Part II contains my reason for writing this paper. It is comprised of my own analysis of the relevant biblical text, the identification of the Divine name in Exodus 3:14, a comprehensive explanation of the meaning of this name, an analysis and interpretation of the remainder of the verse in the light of this meaning and the translation of the verse that my interpretation implies.

In what follows I designate the distinction between the first and second part of Exodus 3:14 as 3:14a and 3:14b respectively. From the start of the verse to the end of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is 3:14a and 3:14b is the remainder of the verse.¹ I also refer to the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the absolute *ehyeh* because it is a first person singular of the verb occurring without a predicate.

Throughout this paper I refer to God in the masculine. This is not an attribution of gender to God. Rather it is a reflection of the religious language with which I am most familiar and that feels most natural to me.

PART I

Exodus 3:14 in Early Jewish and Christian Translations

The great majority of those who have translated Exodus 3:14 have agreed on at least one point, which is that the Hebrew word *ehyeh*, which features three times in this verse and is the cause of all the perplexity that attends upon it, derives from the verb root *hayah* meaning ‘to be’. This single point of agreement is also where the consensus all but ends. It is often said that every translation is an interpretation and in the case of a cryptic combination of words that each have more than one meaning and possible translation this is all the more true, as the following will demonstrate.

Among the most important of the early translations of the Hebrew Bible, the earliest Jewish translation was undertaken in the third century BCE with the writing of the Greek Septuagint. This was followed in the first to second centuries CE by the Greek versions of the Jewish Aquila and Theodotion and in the early fifth century CE by the Latin Vulgate of the Christian Jerome.

The Septuagint translates *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a into Greek as *ego eimi ho on*, which translates into English as “*I am the one who is*”, and it translates the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b as “*ho on*”, “*the one who is*”.² This earliest of all translations of the Hebrew thus associates the revelation of Exodus 3:14 with the concept of absolute existence. It is especially noteworthy by virtue of being, to this day, one of the very few translations to interpret *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as God’s Self-identification to Moses. It is also the first of many to recognise the absolute *ehyeh* as the Divine name in the verse. However, the Septuagint translation of the verse cannot be an exact rendering of the Hebrew because neither the form of words nor the actual words of the Greek translation allow for that possibility.

The versions of Aquila and Theodotion have *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b rendered into Greek as *esomai hos esomai* and *esomai* respectively, which in turn translate as “*I will be who I will be*” and “*I will be*”.³ There could have been several reasons why they chose to translate the words of Exodus 3:14 in this way but among them would certainly have been a desire to produce a translation that would be more true to the Hebrew original than the Septuagint. For this reason they would have

wanted to restore the *idem-per-idem* form of *ehyeh-asher-ehyeh* and so that is what they did. However, had the translators' only purpose been to restore the *idem-per-idem* form, then the most obvious revision of *ego eimi ho on* would have been *ego eimi ho ego eimi*, which would at least have preserved the only literal translation of *ehyeh* that does feature in the Septuagint version of the verse (*ego eimi*). Instead, they chose to replace the words *ego eimi* with *esomai*, which is to replace the words “*I am*” with “*I will be*”, and, in keeping with the apparent intention of the Hebrew text, they translated all three occurrences of *ehyeh* in this way. With this translation Aquila and Theodotion gave an entirely different meaning to Exodus 3:14 and brought to it most notably the connotation of temporal existence in place of the absolute existence connoted by the Septuagint version of the verse. As for the meaning their translations convey, there is no suggestion that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is God's Self-identification to Moses as it is in the Septuagint and no clear indication that the absolute *ehyeh* is understood to be the Divine name in the verse.

The Vulgate of Jerome was clearly influenced by the Septuagint because it corresponds closely to it in its Latin translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and *ehyeh* as “*ego sum qui sum*” and “*qui est*” respectively, which in turn translate into English as “*I am who am*” and “*He who is*”.⁴ Like the Septuagint, this translation clearly connotes the concept of absolute existence. Also like the Septuagint, it interprets *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as God's Self-identification to Moses and it identifies the absolute *ehyeh* as the name in the verse, one that continues to be recognised as a Divine name in Christianity to this day (see *Exodus 3:14 in Christianity*). However, also like the Septuagint, both the form of words in 3:14a and the actual words of 3:14a and 3:14b rule them out as a true translation of the Hebrew.

From the above it will already be clear that this verse has long presented a considerable challenge to translators and interpreters alike. However, if we set aside the implausible suggestions that God is being evasive, deliberately obscure or even dismissive in His response to Moses, then it can be seen that over the course of the centuries following the writing of the Septuagint the debate over the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 came to a focus on just one question. Does the word *ehyeh* as it occurs in this verse refer to God in the sense of His absolute and eternal existence or does it refer to Him in relation to His actions in space and time and so to temporal existence?

In one guise or another this is the question that has dominated interpretations of the verse down to the present day.

What follows is the story of Exodus 3:14 in Judaism as it has unfolded over the course of the last two thousand years and as related by a representative sample of the most important and influential Jewish translators and interpreters of that epoch. Its main purpose is to inform the reader of the religious, theological and philosophical context within which Part II of this paper can best be appreciated. It is not intended to be either comprehensive or detailed but only to represent the full range and depth of Jewish interpretations of the verse and to highlight the reasons why none of the interpretations thus far have been convincing. It is comprised of a review of Jewish translations and interpretations of Exodus 3:14 presented under six headings: Jewish Bible Translations, The Talmud and Midrash, Medieval Jewish Thought, Kabbalah, Modern Jewish Philosophy and Contemporary Jewish Interpretation.

EXODUS 3:14 IN JUDAISM

Exodus 3:14 in Jewish Bible Translations

On account of the universally experienced perplexity in regard to the meaning of the four enigmatic words of Exodus 3:14, and on account of the varied and often diametrically opposed approaches to their interpretation, it will come as no surprise to learn that Jewish Bible translations of the verse have varied greatly ever since it was first translated in the Septuagint some 2,300 years ago.

The early Greek translations - most notably the Septuagint, Aquila, and Theodotion - have already been considered in *Early Translations* above. Amongst the Aramaic Targums, both Onkelos and Neofiti retain the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a in their translations.^{5 6} Onkelos also retains the Hebrew *ehyeh* of 3:14b, while Neofiti renders it in a highly periphrastic manner as the Aramaic equivalent of, “*The one who said and the world came into existence from the beginning; and is to say again: Be, and it will be*”. Neofiti’s rendering of this *ehyeh* clearly articulates his

understanding of its root meaning as ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’ and he finds the most fitting context for this meaning in the Creation narrative of Genesis Ch.1, in relation to which see the *Diagram* in Part II of this website. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan gives periphrastic renderings of both parts of the verse, with *ehyeh asher ehyeh* rendered in similar terms to Neofiti’s rendering of the absolute *ehyeh* alone as, “*He who said and the world was, (who) said and everything was*”, which also reveals this translators understanding of the root meaning of *ehyeh* as ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’. Pseudo-Jonathan goes on to render the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as “*I am who I am and who will be*”, thus seeming to understand it as indicating the immutability of God and hence along the same lines as the second interpretation in Midrash Rabbah 3:6, for which see *Talmud and Midrash* below.⁷ Lastly the Syriac Peshitta, like Onkelos, retains the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a and *ehyeh* of 3:14b.

The earliest and best-known translation of the Bible into Arabic was undertaken in the 10th century by Saadia Gaon. Saadia’s translation (*Tafsir*) is recorded in the London Polyglot of 1657 as its Arabic component, which I am unable to read, but it is there accompanied by a corresponding paraphrase in Latin. The Latin paraphrase of Saadia’s version of Exodus 3:14 reads in its entirety as follows: “*Dixit ei, Aeternus, qui non praeterit*”, which translates as, “*He said to him, The Eternal, who does not pass away*”.⁸ Moses Mendelssohn gives a slightly more expanded rendering of Saadia’s words in his comments on Exodus 3:14, where he states that, “*Saadia Gaon writes that the explanation is, “who is not past and will not pass away, because He is the first and the last”*”.⁹ From the two it is evident that Saadia’s brief rendering of the verse is a very loose paraphrase of the entire verse in which there is no apparent distinction being made between the declarations of 3:14a and 3:14b and that it is framed in terms of the eternity of God.

It was Mendelssohn who in the 18th century undertook the first Jewish translation of the Bible into High German. His rendering of Exodus 3:14 is also highly periphrastic and like Saadia’s reflects a philosophical approach to exegesis. Indeed his version of the verse was evidently influenced by Saadia’s, because it reads in English as follows: “*God spoke to Moses: “I am the being that is eternal”. He said further: “Say to the children of Israel, ‘The eternal being, which calls itself, I-am-eternal, has sent me to you*”, the merits of which I will consider under *Modern Jewish Philosophy* below.¹⁰

Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible was heavily criticised by the Jewish orthodoxy of his day and again in the early 20th century by the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, who went on to produce a German translation of their own. Buber and Rosenzweig rejected all philosophical interpretations of Exodus 3:14, maintaining instead that the verse is simply a statement of God's abiding presence with and providence towards Israel. The English translation of their German translation of Exodus 3:14 reads as follows: "*God said to Moshe: I will be there howsoever I will be there. And He said: Thus shall you say to the Sons of Israel: I-Will-Be-There sends me to you*", the merits of which I will consider under *Modern Jewish Philosophy* below.¹¹

Jewish translations of the Bible into English began to appear in the late 18th century but up until the 20th century were mostly based on the Christian *King James Version* and so translated Exodus 3:14 as it is translated in the *King James Version*. The first enduringly important Jewish translation into English was the 1917 *Jewish Publication Society Bible*, which also retains the KJV translation of the verse and reads, "*And God said unto Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM'; and He said: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I AM hath sent me unto you'*". "*I AM THAT I AM*" has remained a commonplace translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* despite the fact that it has no discernible meaning. In stark contrast to this is the *New Jewish Publication Society* translation of the Bible, published in 1985, which has opted for the convention first employed in Targum Onkelos. Like Onkelos it retains the Hebrew of the four enigmatic words of Exodus 3:14, thus bringing us full circle and in so doing eloquently reflecting the continuing lack of consensus in relation to the meaning of these words.¹² Also published in the 1980's was Everett Fox's *Schocken Bible*, a literal translation based on Buber-Rosenzweig's German version in which Exodus 3:14 is translated as in their version.¹³

Two final highly noteworthy examples of Jewish Bible translation into English reflect two strongly contrasting approaches to the rendering of the text but with a very similar result. The first is the *ArtScroll Tanakh*, a non-literal translation especially popular amongst more traditional and Orthodox Jews. Its rendering of the verse corresponds to the interpretation of Rashi and to the translations of Aquila and Theodotion and reads as follows: "*Hashem answered Moses, 'I Shall Be As I Shall Be.'*" *And He said, 'So you shall say to the Children of Israel, 'I Shall Be has sent me*

to you”.¹⁴ “*Ha-Shem*” is Hebrew for “*The Name*”. It is a surrogate employed by Orthodox Jews in place of the Divine name YHWH and it is adopted in the Artscroll translation of this verse despite the fact that the name YHWH does not feature in the Hebrew original, which in my opinion is highly unsatisfactory. The second of the two translations is William Propp’s in his 1998 translation of the Book of Exodus in *The Anchor Bible* series. His is a very elegant literal translation that occupies a current high point in the scholarly rendering of the text. Like the *ArtScroll* version, his translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and *ehyeh* is based upon those of Aquila and Theodotion and so his translation of Exodus 3:14 reads as follows: “*Then Deity said to Moses, “I will be who I will be”. And He said, “Thus you will say to Israel’s Sons: “I-will-be” has sent me to you”*”.¹⁵ I will consider Propp’s translation in more detail under *Contemporary Jewish Interpretation* below.

From the above it will be clear that, at least on the evidence of Jewish Bible translations produced during the last 2,300 years, there has been no enduring or even widespread consensus within Judaism as to how the four enigmatic words of Exodus 3:14 should be translated and no consensus at all on their meaning. The fact that this remains the case down to the present day will be further demonstrated by what follows in the remainder of Part I.

Exodus 3:14 in the Talmud and Midrash

Outside of the Targums, the earliest recorded Jewish interpretations of Exodus 3:14 are in the Talmud and Midrash. These two sources between them span many centuries of Jewish religious thought, extending from the late Second Temple period to the early Middle Ages. The importance especially of the Babylonian Talmud in Judaism cannot be overstated and so whatever interpretations it contains must be very carefully considered. However, even irrespective of their importance to Judaism, these two bodies of literature between them contain the distillation of many centuries of devoted and meticulous rabbinic thought and so are deserving of careful consideration in their own right.

Beginning with the Talmud, the most striking feature of the presence of Exodus 3:14 therein is its almost total absence. Irrespective of the meaning of this

verse, it is at least a very prominent feature of the first encounter between God and Moses and we would therefore expect it to have been the subject of many a rabbinic interpretation and it surely was. However, as far as I am aware the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a are cited on only three occasions in the Babylonian Talmud and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b only once.¹⁶

The only full interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in the Talmud is in Berakoth 9b² where it is framed in the context of Israel's servitude in Egypt and Babylon and is interpreted as an assurance by God that He will be with Israel in all of its troubles. The only Talmudic citation of the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b also features in this interpretation, where it is understood simply in terms of God's compassion towards Israel. Apart from it being the only full interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in the Talmud, Berakoth 9b² is also highly noteworthy because it is the interpretation subsequently espoused by Rashi, the most respected and influential of all Talmudic commentators and one of the most respected and influential figures in Judaism. The extract from Berakoth 9b² reads as follows in the *Soncino Talmud*:

I am that I am: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Go and say to Israel: I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the (other) kingdoms. He said to Him: Lord of the universe, sufficient is the evil in the time thereof! Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Go and tell them: I AM has sent me unto you.

The declaration *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is thus interpreted as a statement of God's abiding presence with Israel, while the *ehyeh* of 3:14b is interpreted as a shortened version of that declaration and as a gesture of God's compassion towards Israel in response to Moses' appeal on their behalf.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. First is the implication that God commanded Moses to "Go and say to Israel" the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* before commanding him to say to them only the *ehyeh* of 3:14b. According to the Bible, however, Moses was not commanded to say the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* at all. He was commanded to say to the Israelites only that *ehyeh* had sent him to them and so this interpretation would appear to be based upon a misunderstanding of the biblical text. My second objection is that if God had simply

wanted to inform Moses that He is always with Israel in their troubles, then He could have done so by speaking just a few additional words and in so doing could have saved many generations of debate and incomprehension. I find it highly implausible that the response God made to the foremost question put to Him by Moses would require so simple an addition in order to render its intended meaning clear and yet it was spoken by Him in such a way as to make it very obscure. My third objection is that the Bible does not record Moses as having said anything to God between the declarations of 3:14a and 3:14b but this interpretation requires us to believe that he did. My fourth and final objection is that the meaning of Exodus 3:14 as presented in Berakoth 9b is very unremarkable by biblical standards and yet the biblical account informs us that the words of this verse were highly significant to Moses and to the Israelites in servitude and to this day they continue to intrigue and fascinate almost everyone who gives them careful consideration and so for this reason also I find the interpretation of Berakoth 9b highly implausible.

The other two Talmudic citations of Exodus 3:14 are in Shebu'oth 35a⁵ and Baba Bathra 73a³, both of which present a very different understanding of the verse to that of Berakoth 9b². Both of them make reference only to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and both identify it as a Divine name. However they make no further comment upon it and so there is no explanation for how or why it was so understood. Shebu'oth 35a identifies *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as one of the Divine names that may not be erased, this in the context of written oaths where such names could conceivably feature and so be disposed of when the oath had been discharged. Baba Bathra 73a implies that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is a Divine name by listing it alongside two other Divine names, *Yah* and *YHWH Tzevaot*, all three of which are inscribed on wooden clubs with the power to curb a powerful wave, which presumably symbolises Christianity. These two interpretations are the first of many in Judaism to have identified *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name. The problem with such an identification is as already noted, that if there is a Divine name in Exodus 3:14, then a plain reading of the biblical text informs us that it must be the *ehyeh* of 3:14b.

Moving on to the Midrash, I will consider only the largest and most important collection of midrashic literature - the Midrash Rabbah – in which seven rabbinic interpretations of Exodus 3:14 are recorded. Six of these are in Exodus Rabbah 3:6 and one in Leviticus Rabbah 11:5. Several of these interpretations have been adopted

and adapted by later exegetes and so have had a lasting impact on the interpretation of the verse. For this reason I will briefly consider each of the seven in turn. All translations are taken from the *Soncino Midrash Rabbah*.¹⁷

The first of the six interpretations relates only to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a. It interprets this phrase as a declaration by God that, depending upon the work that He is then performing, He is to be known by one of four biblical (as opposed to rabbinic) Divine names, “*hence ehyeh asher ehyeh in virtue of My deeds*”. I have no idea how or why this interpreter discovered this seemingly arbitrary meaning in the words of Exodus 3:14, but its continuing influence can be seen in Tigay’s interpretation of the verse in the 2004 edition of the *Jewish study Bible*.

The second interpretation in *Exodus Rabbah* identifies all three occurrences of *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14 as together denoting the immutability of God. It reads, “*God said to Moses: ‘Tell them that I am now what I always was and always will be’; for this reason is the word ehyeh written three times*”. The most obvious objection to this interpretation is the same as that brought against the interpretation of Berakoth 9b, which is that Moses was not commanded to say *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to the Israelites and so the message he was to convey cannot be contained in a threefold utterance of *ehyeh*. This interpreter does not clearly discern a Divine name in the verse, but in the eighteenth century Moses Mendelssohn refers to this interpretation in his own exegesis of Exodus 3:14 and there he does explicitly identify all three occurrence of *ehyeh* as together comprising a Divine name. Mendelssohn also finds in this midrash a notably different meaning to the one most apparent, regarding it as a statement of the eternity of God as opposed to His immutability.

The third interpretation is a fuller version of Berakoth 9b in which the interpretations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and the absolute *ehyeh* are almost exactly as they are in Berakoth 9b. The most notable difference between them is that although God is again depicted as having first instructed Moses to say *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to the Israelites before responding to Moses’ appeal with the command to say only *ehyeh* to them, it then adds that the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* had only ever been intended for Moses’ ears. This emended version of Berakoth 9b improves upon its predecessor by virtue of its acknowledgment of the plain reading of the biblical text but the way in which it is written still does not correspond to that plain reading. There also remain

the other problems noted above, namely the absent question between the two declarations, the implausibility of such a simple addition to the declaration not having been spoken by God in the first place and the implausibility of such an unremarkable meaning being expressed in what are apparently very remarkable words.

The fourth of the six interpretations in *Exodus Rabbah* is along similar lines to the third and does not require further comment.

The fifth interpretation of Exodus 3:14 reads as follows in the *Soncino Midrash Rabbah*: “*I am that I am to individuals, but as for the mass, I rule over them even against their desire and will, even though they break their teeth*”. There is no explanation for how or why the interpreter so understood it, but I would suggest that the reference to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a designation of God’s disposition towards individuals must refer to God having intended these words only for Moses and may even be regarded as a discreet acknowledgement of that. The word *ehyeh* on the other hand was to be addressed to the Israelites, and so the second part of this interpretation presumably means that the absolute *ehyeh* designates a contrasting disposition, namely that of God’s uncompromising rule over the Israelites collectively. What is most interesting about this interpretation is that if there is a Divine name in this verse, then this interpretation would appear to be suggesting that there is one name that designates God’s disposition towards individuals and another that designates His disposition towards the masses, which would mean that there are two Divine names in the verse with different meanings, although the meaning being attributed to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is not at all clear. However, as already pointed out, the biblical text does not support the identification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name and so this interpretation cannot be correct.

The sixth and final interpretation in *Exodus Rabbah* relates only to *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and interprets it as a declaration that God will manifest in His creation howsoever he pleases. This interpretation is reflected in that subsequently adopted by Buber-Rosenzweig and has become a fairly common interpretation of the verse.

Finally to *Leviticus Rabbah* 11:5, which follows the Talmud in its identification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name, but curiously suggests that it is only a temporary name. The interpretation is that Moses had shown a lack of directness in his request for God's name and that God responds in like manner as

follows: “*This is My name for the time being: ehyeh asher ehyeh*”. The greatest objection I have to this interpretation is as already noted, that Moses was not commanded to say *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to the Israelites and so it is obviously not the Divine name in this verse. Two other obvious objections are first that this rabbi does not explain, and I cannot imagine, what a temporary name could signify in the designation of an unchanging and eternal God, and second is the suggestion that God could be prompted to behave petulantly, which is nonsense.

For those who do not know, in Judaism the Talmud is designated as the Oral Law and the Torah as the Written Law. Orthodox and more traditional Jews believe that the Oral Law was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai at the same time as he was given the Torah, and that the Oral Law was passed down by him through many generations of sages before being written down and ultimately sealed in the Talmud. The Talmud has from the time of its closure been invested with enormous authority in Judaism and continues to be the sole basis of Jewish law (*halakhah*) to the present day. Such is the Talmud’s authority that the mere suggestion that it contains an erroneous reading of the biblical text - such as the identification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name - would not even be contemplated by many Jews today despite the clear biblical evidence that such is the case. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that despite the obvious irreconcilability of the words of Exodus 3:13-14 with the Talmudic identification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name, the tradition of misidentifying it as such was nonetheless preserved in post-Talmudic rabbinic writings and in Judaism generally and continues to the present day.

However, the story of Exodus 3:14 in the Talmud does not quite end there. There is one other passage that, although making no mention of the words of Exodus 3:14, does I believe shed light on how the four enigmatic words of this verse were understood and celebrated in Mosaic times, and does so in a way that is perfectly compatible with the biblical text and that powerfully reflects their importance to Moses and to Jewish religious observance. I will consider that passage in an endnote later in Part I of this paper (endnote 40).

Exodus 3:14 in Medieval Jewish Thought

Many Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages grappled with the enigma of Exodus 3:14 and reached many different conclusions on its meaning. Most of these can be readily distinguished in relation to the single point identified above, namely the absolute and eternal versus the temporal connotations of the word *ehyeh* as it occurs in this verse. So, for example, Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Sforno and Joseph Albo interpreted *ehyeh* in terms of the absolute and eternal existence of God, while Rashi, Ramban and Judah Halevi interpreted it in relation to His actions in history and so to temporal existence. Saadia's interpretation of Exodus 3:14 has already been considered in *Jewish Bible Translations* above and as noted there is in terms of the eternality of God. Joseph Albo interpreted the verse along similar lines to Maimonides,¹⁸ while Ramban's interpretation includes features of Rashi's, Halevi's and Maimonides' and was to substantially influence Sforno's some two centuries later.¹⁹ In what follows I will consider only the interpretations of the latter four, thus analysing two from either side of the exegetical divide, and will conclude by looking briefly at the contributions of two 12th century exegetes who were also Hebrew grammarians for the light their analyses shed upon the verse.

Foremost on the absolute and eternal side of the exegetical divide is one of the most remarkable figures in Jewish history, the 12th century philosopher Moses Maimonides. His interpretation of Exodus 3:14 is the subject of Chapter Sixty-Three of Part I of his *Guide* where it is addressed in the context of his efforts to reconcile the numerous biblical Divine names with the perfect unity of God. Maimonides contended that all of the Divine names in the Bible refer to God's actions, with the exception of YHWH which he identified as the only proper name of God. However, he did not account for all of the Divine names in this way. The two exceptions were *Yah*, to which he ascribed the meaning of eternal existence, and *ehyeh asher ehyeh*.

Maimonides was of course aware of the Talmudic identification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name but he evidently also shared the widespread incomprehension as to its meaning, and so the challenge he had before him was of how to reconcile this unexplained but rabbinically-established name with his own passionately-held conception of the perfect unity of God. It evidently did not suit his purpose to emphasise the presence of a name in Exodus 3:14 because he did not do

so. Indeed he scarcely refers to a name at all, describing *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in such terms only once, only in passing and only without any further comment or explanation as to how it could be so understood. However, he did find a place for *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in his philosophical scheme of things but did so only by treating Exodus 3:14 as a means to an exegetical end rather than an exegetical end in itself, just as others had done before and others would do again.

Briefly stated, Maimonides identified *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name but he expands on it only in terms of it being the “*explanation*” of the name YHWH and as the “*idea expressed by the name*” YHWH. In relation to this he contends that *ehyeh* derives from the verb root *hayah* and connotes the idea of “*existence*”. He interprets the question Moses asks God in Exodus 3:13 as Moses anticipating that the Israelites would not believe in the existence of God and so he asks God how he can demonstrate His existence to them. Maimonides thus interpreted *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as God’s instruction to Moses as follows: “*Then God taught Moses how to teach them, and how to establish amongst them the belief in the existence of Himself, namely by saying, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*”.²⁰ The closest he comes to a translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is: “*He is the existing Being which is the existing Being*”, which is evidently influenced by the Septuagint translation (see *Early Jewish and Christian Translations*). Maimonides develops his interpretation along the lines that God then taught Moses the “*intelligible proofs*” by which His existence could be confirmed, which proofs are presented in Part II of the *Guide* and are comprised of twenty-six principles of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics in addition to a philosophical treatise of Maimonides’ own. The declaration *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is interpreted as a summary statement of these philosophical proofs.

There are numerous problems with Maimonides’ interpretation, of which I will mention only three. First is that his translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* reflects neither the vocabulary nor the grammar of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and so it cannot be a true translation of it. Specifically, Maimonides translates *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in the third person instead of the grammatically-correct first person, thus making of it a declaration that Moses was to say to the Israelites although he was in fact instructed by God to say only *ehyeh* to them. Second is that he does not address the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b at all, never mind identifying it as the name in the verse. Third is that his interpretation requires us to believe that Moses presented the Elders of Israel with

an extensive treatise on Aristotelian thought and in so doing proved to them the existence of God, which I reject by reason of extreme implausibility.

The sixteenth century Italian biblical commentator Obadiah Sforno also took a rational approach to the interpretation of Exodus 3:14. He interpreted the question of Exodus 3:13 just as Ramban (aka. Nahmanides) had done before him, which was not so much as a request for God's name as for an identification of the Divine attribute by which Moses would deliver the Israelites from servitude. He therefore understood the question of 3:13 to mean, "*By what function emanating from Him, by which He can be called by name, did He send you to deliver us?*"²¹ Like Maimonides he found his answer to this question in Exodus 3:14 and did so in an interpretation that combines elements of Maimonides and Ramban. Having first proposed that a name reveals the essential nature of the one named, Sforno then interprets *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in similar terms to Maimonides with, "*He whose existence is constant and consistent, and whose essence is His existence*". Also like Maimonides, Sforno does not make any comment on the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b let alone identify it as a name. He proceeds to identify justice and righteousness as the Divine attributes that would deliver Israel from servitude, just as Ramban had identified mercy and justice in that role, and like both Ramban and Rashi before him he finds the expression of these attributes in God's contrasting actions towards Israel and Egypt.

My objection to Sforno's interpretation is simply that his understanding of Exodus 3:13 is completely unsupported by the biblical text and is in my opinion completely incorrect. Hence whatever response the above question elicits can only be incorrect. Moreover, by failing to mention the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b, Sforno, like Maimonides, demonstrates his misunderstanding of the verse as a whole and so his interpretation can only be incorrect.

Foremost of the exegetes on the temporal side of the exegetical divide is Rashi, who is generally regarded as the leading Talmudic commentator in Judaism and the foremost rabbinic commentator on the Bible. These credentials bear ample testimony not only to his prodigious energy and intellectual brilliance but also to his traditional approach to interpretation. On account of the latter, the great majority of Rashi's biblical interpretations are derived from traditional rabbinic sources and it is therefore not surprising that his interpretation of Exodus 3:14 is taken entirely from

Berakoth 9b² and its corresponding interpretation in Exodus Rabbah 3:6.²² Such was his dedication to tradition that Rashi did not add anything to these interpretations. However, an important clarification did eventually come in the 17th century from Samuel Edels (aka. Maharsha). He emphasised that God did not change His mind in response to an appeal by Moses and he confirmed the obvious implication of the biblical text, which is that the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* were addressed only to Moses.²³

The interpretation of Berakoth 9b thus underwent a series of refinements over a period of more than a thousand years and over that course of time reached a point where several of its more obvious problems had been resolved. However, there remain the outstanding problems of the unrecorded question that we must believe Moses asked between the declarations of 3:14a and 3:14b, and the question of why a simple addition to the obviously cryptic words of this verse was not communicated by God in the first place if its meaning really is so simple, and the unlikelihood of such an unremarkable meaning being communicated by God in such enigmatic terms on the occasion of this most memorable and striking encounter. Despite these drawbacks it remains the interpretation accepted by the majority of religiously educated Jews on account of its origin in the Talmud and its espousal by Rashi.

In Herczeg's elucidation of Rashi's interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in the *Sapirstein Edition Rashi* he identifies both *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as Divine names, proposing the latter as a shortened version of the former. In the *Schottenstein Edition Talmud Zlotowitz* recognises only the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a Divine name.²⁴ Neither of them attribute their identification of these names to any particular Talmudic commentator and so, because I am unaware of Rashi having identified either declaration as a name, I do not know to whom I should attribute Herczeg's and Zlotowitz's comments. I think they are unlikely to be their own because both are Orthodox Jews and thus deeply committed to the transmission of traditional Jewish interpretations of the Torah, but I am unaware of any traditional source that identifies *ehyeh* as a divine name and so I don't know where they're from.

Judah Halevi presents his interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in *The Book of the Kuzari* in the context of his discourse on Divine names. Like Maimonides he identified YHWH as the proper name of God and proposed that the name *Yah* has a

similar meaning to YHWH. In contrast to Maimonides he correctly identified the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the Divine name in this verse but like Maimonides he understood the word *ehyeh* to be derived from the root *hayah* and to convey the meaning of ‘to exist’. However, by way of explaining the name *ehyeh*, he contended that its effect was only to create “*the tendency to prevent the human mind from pondering over an incomprehensible but real entity*” and in so doing he eschewed a philosophical interpretation of the verse.

Halevi paraphrases God’s words in Exodus 3:14 as follows: “*What have they to ask concerning things they are unable to grasp? Say to them ehyeh, which means: ehyeh asher ehyeh, the existing one, existing for you whenever you seek me. Let them search for no stronger proof of my presence among them, and name Me accordingly. Moses therefore answered “Ehyeh has sent me to you”*”.²⁵ Halevi thus appears to have understood *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as the explanation of the meaning of the name *ehyeh* and to mean, “*the existing one, existing for you whenever you seek me*”. The name *ehyeh* is thus understood to be a statement of God’s existence and availability to Israel but also to be a declaration by God that this assurance would have to be confirmation enough for the Israelites that He is with them, which strikes me as being very optimistic. However, despite the fact that Halevi’s interpretation has Moses correctly saying the *ehyeh* of 3:14b to the Israelites, it nonetheless exhibits the same error as many others have done. His interpretation implies not only that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* contains the meaning of the message Moses was to convey, but also that it was to be spoken to them as part of that message, which as noted above has since been refuted by no less an authority than Maharsha.

Finally to the contributions of two 12th century exegetes who were also Hebrew grammarians: Abraham Ibn Ezra and Rashbam. First to Abraham Ibn Ezra who often consulted his good friend Judah Halevi on matters of exegesis and grammar. These exegetical discussions evidently included the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 because not only do they both correctly identify *ehyeh* as the Divine name in this verse but also they both find the meaning of this name in *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and identify *Yah* as a related name. However, Ibn Ezra was bolder than Halevi in certain very important respects and most especially in regard to his grammatical analysis of the verse.

Briefly stated, Ibn Ezra identified the first *ehyeh* of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name and proposed that the *asher ehyeh* fragment of this declaration explains the meaning of the first *ehyeh*. He further stated that *ehyeh* and YHWH are both proper names of God and even that they have the same meaning, the only difference between them being that *ehyeh* is in the first person while YHWH is in the third.²⁶ Ibn Ezra thereby implicitly identified *ehyeh* as the name YHWH when employed by God in naming Himself. He did not separately mention the *ehyeh* of 3:14b but the similarity of his interpretation to Halevi's strongly suggests that he did regard the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the Divine name and so presumably identical in meaning to the first *ehyeh* of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*.

The second of the two grammarians, Rashbam, went one step further again in that he did specifically identify the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the first person form of the third person name YHWH, and so he explicitly identified it as the name YHWH when used by God in naming Himself,²⁷ which exegetical development brings us fittingly to the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in Kabbalah.

Exodus 3:14 in Kabbalah

It was in Kabbalah - the esoteric and mystical tradition of Judaism - that the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b came to assume particular importance in Jewish thought. Kabbalistic writing is often obscure and confusing, even to those familiar with it, and so it is not possible here to give a comprehensive account of the significance of the absolute *ehyeh* within this tradition. However, an impression of its significance can be obtained from the following quotations taken from the *Zohar*.

First consider an apocryphal exchange between a rabbinic teacher of the 2nd century CE, Rabbi Eleazar, and his father, Rabbi Simeon, in which the former asks the latter to explain the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Rabbi Simeon answered thus: "*Eleazar, my son, the companions have explained it. Behold, everything is bound together in one thing, and the mystery of the thing is Ehyeh. It includes everything...the sum of all, hidden and not revealed*".²⁸ This interpretation certainly appears to be heading in the right direction relative to the ones we have already considered, in that it appears to be linking the name *Ehyeh* to God before He created.

However, it is too obscurely written to be able to credit it with any conclusive meaning and it thereby exhibits a problem commonly encountered in Kabbalistic writings. Take, for example, another quotation from the *Zohar*, in which *ehyeh* is described as “*a sacred name engraved in its extremities*”, where “*its extremities*” is the beginning of Creation.²⁹ This statement is clearly associating the name *Ehyeh* with the beginning of created existence, but again there is too little of it to be able to credit it with any conclusive meaning.

However, the feature of Kabbalistic thought that sheds most light upon the importance of the name *ehyeh* within this tradition is its identification with the concept of *Keter Elyon* (Supreme Crown), which kabbalists describe as “*the supreme mystery of En-Sof*” and the “*eternal will*”.³⁰ *Keter Elyon* (or just *Keter*) is the first of what kabbalists call the *Sefirot*, which are understood to be stages in the creative emanation of *En-Sof*. *En-Sof* translates as “*Without End*” and designates the infinite essence that is God. What is most relevant to this paper is that the progression of the *Sefirot* is understood to correlate to the progressive manifestation of the names of God, and that the first *Sefirot* (*Keter Elyon*) has *Ehyeh* as its correlative Divine name.³¹ *Ehyeh* is therefore identified in Kabbalah as the first and foremost of God’s names.

The best example I know of a Kabbalistic interpretation of Exodus 3:14 is that of Menahem Recanati, the 14th century kabbalist and halakhic authority. Like Ibn Ezra and Rashbam before him, Recanati identified *Ehyeh* as the first person form of the third person name YHWH. However he went one very important step further by explicitly identifying *Ehyeh* as the holiest of God’s names, this on account of it being the name that God gives to Himself and with which He designates Himself in the first person.³² Recanati understood this name to denote pure existence - which is identical to the Divine essence - and to contain within it the mystery of existence. He considered the name YHWH to be less holy and to also denote pure existence but to do so in the third person because it is God’s creations who address this name to their Creator. This is the closest any interpretation in Part I of this paper comes to what I believe to be the true meaning of the name *Ehyeh*, which I will explain in Part II of this article.

These few citations may not make a great deal of sense to many readers of this paper because they do require some acquaintance with ontological speculation for their appreciation, but they should at least be sufficient to give an impression of the importance and prominence of the absolute *ehyeh* within this tradition and especially of the ontological proximity to God that kabbalists have assigned to it. Of most relevance to this paper, however, is that *ehyeh* is not only identified as a Divine name in Kabbalah but as the most holy of Divine names.

Exodus 3:14 in Modern Jewish Philosophy

In his article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Marvin Fox identifies two main tendencies towards the interpretation of Divine names in modern Jewish philosophy. These are the primarily metaphysical tendency on the one hand and the primarily religious and personalistic tendency on the other.³³ In relation to the interpretation of Exodus 3:14 these two tendencies correspond to the absolute and eternal interpretations on the one hand and the temporal interpretations on the other that have been identified throughout this paper.

On the absolute and eternal side of the divide are such figures as Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen. Based mostly on his understanding of an interpretation in *Exodus Rabbah* 3:6 (see *Talmud and Midrash* above), Mendelssohn summarises his interpretation of the verse as follows: “*I am He who was, is, and shall be, and who practices lordship and providence over all*”.³⁴ He describes all three occurrences of *ehyeh* as together comprising, “*a single name, which embraces past, present, and future alike*”, and thus indicates the eternity of God. This feature of his interpretation is clearly reflected in his Bible translation, which reads as follows: “*God spoke to Moses: ‘I am the being that is eternal’. He said further: ‘Say to the children of Israel, ‘The eternal being, which calls itself, I-am-eternal, has sent me to you’*”.³⁵ Mendelssohn further interprets the tri-partite name (*ehyeh-ehyeh-ehyeh*) as somehow indicating “*the necessity of existence*” and “*the continuous and abiding character of providence*”, the former in relation to the existence of God and the latter to His actions. However, his Bible translation also demonstrates his specific albeit imprecise identification of the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the name by which God is known to Himself because he translates it as “*I am eternal*”.

My principal objection to Mendelssohn's interpretation is that the threefold *ehyeh* can no more be a name than can *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, and so, with this fundamental understanding so far astray, the rest of his interpretation cannot but be incorrect. Moreover, his translations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and *ehyeh* bear no relation to the Hebrew of these words and so cannot be correct for this reason also.

Hermann Cohen, by contrast, identified only *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name, thus apparently accepting and trying to work within the constraints of tradition, but he interpreted it in terms of the eternality and immutability of God and thus not in accordance with the predominantly temporal interpretations of Jewish tradition.³⁶

Foremost on the temporal side of the exegetical divide are the philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Their interpretation of Exodus 3:14 is recorded piecemeal in *Scripture and Translation* (S&T) and more cohesively by Buber in *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, upon which two sources the following analysis is based.^{37 38}

Buber and Rosenzweig's interest in Exodus 3:14 was substantially due to the significance it had for their Bible translation, constituting as it did the stated basis for their rendering of the Divine name YHWH, which Buber described as "*The greatest reality of the Bible*" (S&T, p.170). They were averse to the philosophical interpretation of Exodus 3:14, which Rosenzweig described as "*Platonizing*" (S&T, p.190), and instead interpreted it in terms of God's constant presence with and providence towards the people that are Israel and thus along the lines of Berakoth 9b. In support of their interpretation they contend that the meaning conveyed by the verb root *hayah* is that of "*being-there*", as opposed to "*being*" in the existential sense, and attempt to bolster their interpretation with the contention that the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:12 and 4:12 likewise convey the meaning of "*being-there*" (*Moses*, p.52).

Specifically in relation to *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, they interpret the first *ehyeh* of this phrase as an assurance by God that He will always be with those chosen by Him (i.e. Israel) and to simply mean, "*I shall be-there*". They contend that the *asher ehyeh* of this phrase should be interpreted in accordance with their understanding of other biblical idem-per-idem forms and thus to mean, "*as the one I shall always be-there as*" or "*just as I shall on this or that occasion want to appear*" (S&T, p.195), which is along the lines of the sixth interpretation in Exodus Rabbah 3:6. The whole

declaration was thus translated into the German equivalent of, “*I will be-there howsoever I will be-there.*”

The etymology Buber presents in support of their rendering of the name YHWH would not be accepted by any contemporary biblical scholar (see e.g. *Moses*, p.50). Nor would their contention that the word *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14, 3:12 and 4:12 conveys the meaning of “*being-there*”. It is also the case that they gave too much thought to Exodus 3:14 only for its bearing upon their rendering of the name YHWH and as a consequence addressed it primarily as a means to an exegetical end rather than an exegetical end in itself, just as Maimonides had done seven centuries before, which approach can only lead to a misunderstanding of the verse as a whole. Moreover, the same objection applies to their interpretation as has applied to so many others before and since, which is that it simply does not measure up to the occasion. In this case, the Israelites were very unlikely to have been impressed by a total stranger delivering to them an assurance of God’s presence with and providence towards them while their longstanding parlous circumstances suggested precisely the opposite, and that is in the very unlikely event that they could have been persuaded that the name YHWH conveys such a meaning. Taking account of both linguistic and contextual considerations, therefore, their interpretation of the verse as a whole is evidently incorrect. However, these were not the last of Buber’s exegetical comments upon this verse. There remained the thus far wholly unaddressed issue of the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b.

In *Scripture and Translation*, Buber and Rosenzweig did not specifically comment upon the *ehyeh* of 3:14b, which is a very striking omission for thinkers of their calibre and clearly indicates their desire to avoid this difficult and controversial subject. Although their malaise in relation to the meaning of the *ehyeh* of 3:14b is not discernable in *Scripture and Translation*, it does become quite evident in Buber’s later work, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*.

The most telling statement Buber makes in *Scripture and Translation* is that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* “*reveals in the first person what the name (YHWH) conceals in the third*” (p.193). In this statement, Buber does not specifically identify either *ehyeh* of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as the first person form of YHWH but there is no other way to understand it and so it can be safely concluded that this is how he understood it.

Buber further clarifies his understanding in *Moses* (p.53) where he states in relation to the word *ehyeh* that, “*the direct word ehyeh explains the indirect name (YHWH)*”. When this statement is considered in the context of the above quotation it confirms that he did recognise the *ehyeh* of 3:14b both as a Divine name and as the first person equivalent of the third person name YHWH. However, he was obviously very reluctant to recognise it as such because he pointedly states, “*That Ehyeh is not a name; the God can never be named so. Only on this one occasion, in the sole moment of transmitting his work, is Moses allowed to take God’s self-comprehension in his mouth as a name*”.

So Buber did, reluctantly, identify the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a Divine name and even described it as God’s “*self-comprehension*”, which unambiguously philosophical interpretation confirms that his understanding of the verse was not quite as un-philosophical as he had maintained. Furthermore, his contention that the word *ehyeh* was only to have been used as a Divine name on the single occasion of Moses addressing it to the enslaved Israelites in Egypt indicates that he thought of *ehyeh* as a very special Divine name, the utterance of which should be severely restricted even to the point of it not being uttered at all. A restriction on its use is certainly suggested by the biblical text, as we shall see below, but not to the point of a complete prohibition. The emphasis in the Bible is rather on YHWH being the name that is to be used by humanity and only by implication that *ehyeh* is not to be so used.

However, in taking this position Buber was only taking necessary account of one very remarkable fact in relation to *ehyeh* as a Divine name, which is that there is only one other possible occurrence of this name in the entire Bible. I say possible because I am not convinced that the *ehyeh* of Hos.1:9 is intended to be so understood, but Buber believed that it is and even gave it a place in the narrative of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. If we set this debate to one side, and so exclude from consideration Hos.1:9, then there is no doubt at all that Exodus 3:14 features the only occurrence of the word *ehyeh* as a Divine name in the entire Bible. This single occurrence stands in marked contrast to the name YHWH, which occurs some 6,828 times.³⁹ Nor is *ehyeh* identified as a Divine name in any other Jewish writings up until the Middle Ages and then only prominently so in Kabbalistic texts. Therefore, if the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b is a Divine name, then its occurrence as such would inform us that there is a Divine name in the Bible, one that was revealed to Moses on the

occasion of his first encounter with God and his commissioning as prophet to Israel, and that this name has been all but unrecognised in Judaism ever since the words of Exodus 3:14 were first penned, and even to the modest extent that it has been recognised has been all but lost to Jewish consciousness down to the present day. I think you will agree that this would be truly extraordinary if it is indeed the case.⁴⁰

Buber's closing comments on the verse are interesting to note and germane to a later part of this paper. He suggests that if *ehyeh asher ehyeh* is theology, then it is "*that archaic theology which, in the form of a historical narrative, stands at the threshold of every genuine historical religion*", which would make it the theology of the genuinely historic architect of Judaism; Moses (*Moses*, p.55).

Exodus 3:14 in Contemporary Jewish Interpretation

And finally to three recent interpretations of Exodus 3:14 that between them reflect the contemporary state of Jewish scholarship and exegesis on the subject.

First to Nahum Sarna who in his commentary in the *JPS Torah* presents three possible literal translations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. These are, "*I Am That I Am*", "*I Am Who I Am*" and "*I Will Be What I Will Be*".⁴¹ He contends that the declaration *ehyeh asher ehyeh* "*clearly evokes*" the name YHWH and that it informs us of the earliest recorded understanding of this name, which is as a verbal form deriving from the verb root *hayah*. He further proposes that *hayah* expresses either "*the quality of absolute Being, the eternal, unchanging, dynamic presence*" or that it conveys the meaning of "*causing to be*". However, as pointed out by Propp, the latter interpretation would require a linguistic reconstruction of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and so is not a tenable interpretation of the text.⁴²

Concentrating, therefore, only on the former meaning Sarna proposes for *hayah* – "*the quality of absolute being, the eternal, unchanging, dynamic presence*" – his interpretation is best understood in the context of his corresponding comments in *Exploring Exodus*.⁴³ There he indirectly proposes that the meaning connoted by *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14 is "*Being in the sense of the reality of God's active, dynamic presence*" and not "*Being as opposed to non-being, not being as an abstract, philosophical notion*". In the former of these quotations Sarna appears to be

acknowledging and affirming the interpretation of Buber and Rosenzweig, while in the latter he appears to be rejecting a strictly philosophical interpretation of the verse. However, it should be noted that this is at odds with his mention of “*absolute being*” in the quotation taken from the *JPS Torah* above and while on balance his interpretation is on the temporal as opposed to the absolute side of the exegetical divide, he is apparently trying to reconcile the two in his description of the quality of God’s “*being*” as both “*active*” and “*dynamic*” on the one hand and “*absolute*” on the other.

In *Exploring Exodus* Sarna does not choose between the three possible literal translations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* proposed by him in the *JPS Torah*. He instead contends that whichever way the declaration is translated its meaning is the same, which would in turn imply that whichever way it is translated does not matter, which is in my opinion false. Setting this to one side, the meaning he proposes for *ehyeh asher ehyeh* can best be considered as falling into two parts. The first is that “*the Divine Personality can be known only to the extent that God chooses to reveal His self*” and the second is that the Divine personality “*can be truly characterised only in terms of itself, and not by analogy with something else*”.

In relation to the first part – that, “*the Divine Personality can be known only to the extent that God chooses to reveal His self*” - Sarna makes no explicit linguistic connection between the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and the meaning he attributes to them. However, from this part of his interpretation we can deduce that his understanding of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* corresponds in translation to “*I Am Who I Am*” or “*I Will Be What I Will Be*”, both of which are proposed by him in the *JPS Torah*. We can deduce this because the first part of his interpretation implies that God is being evasive or secretive in His response to Moses’ enquiry of Exodus 3:13 and that He is only revealing to Moses His inaccessibility to human thought, which is along the lines of Halevi’s interpretation. I find this suggestion highly implausible because it is very hard to believe that Moses would have been at all impressed by such an elementary understanding of God and very hard to imagine how it could have encouraged him to undertake the monumental task that he was being commanded to undertake.

In relation to the second part of his interpretation - that the Divine personality “*can be truly characterised only in terms of itself, and not by analogy with something*

else” - Sarna appears to be interpreting the twofold occurrence of *ehyeh* in *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a twofold occurrence of the Divine name *ehyeh* and as God’s way of informing Moses that His Person can be designated only in terms that are uniquely attributable to Himself. He is, therefore, apparently recognising both occurrences of *ehyeh* in this declaration as identical in meaning, just as did Maimonides, and although I consider both he and Maimonides to be incorrect in their interpretations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* I am nonetheless convinced that this is a very important insight into how this declaration should be interpreted and will be returning to it later.

In his *JPS Torah* commentary Sarna does not explicitly identify a name in Exodus 3:14, only inferring the presence of one by identifying *ehyeh* as “*the corresponding first person singular*” of YHWH, which is along the same lines as Rashbam. However he does explicitly identify a name in *Exploring Exodus* and does so in similar terms to Ibn Ezra. That identification reads as follows: “*This explains why God uses the first person – Ehyeh – instead of the regular third-person form of this verbal name – YHVH*”, thereby correctly identifying *Ehyeh* as a “*verbal name*”. However I believe Sarna is mistaken in the *JPS Torah* when he explains why God would designate Himself with the first person singular form *ehyeh* instead of the third person form YHWH. His explanation is that name-giving in the ancient world was believed to confer power over the one named and so to insure Himself against any such external influence God must have a Self-given name and so He employs the name YHWH in its first person singular form *ehyeh*. With all due respect to Sarna, I would suggest that God designating Himself in the first person singular has nothing at all to do with pagan superstitions because no such nonsense could prompt God to respond in a Self-protective way, as his explanation implies. Indeed there is nothing at all that could prompt God to respond in a Self-protective way. On the contrary, the explanation must be that God is absolutely unlike all that is not Him and so He cannot perfectly articulate how He is known to Himself by reference to anything else. He can therefore only perfectly designate Himself in the first person singular as opposed to the third.

Sarna’s explanation also implies that the name *ehyeh* is only incidental in the exchange between God and Moses rather than being its focal point and that the importance of *ehyeh* relates entirely to its implications for the meaning of the name YHWH. Indeed he is essentially proposing that the revelatory content in the exchange

between God and Moses at the Burning Bush does not relate at all to *ehyeh* as a Divine name but instead to the meaning of the word *ehyeh* as communicated in the Divine name YHWH and that the focal point of their exchange is therefore the name YHWH rather than *ehyeh*. I strongly disagree with this contention for reasons that will later become clear.

What Sarna does not do in either of his interpretations is suggest how the *ehyeh* of 3:14b should be translated and although his interpretation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* implies that it should be translated as ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’, he does not take a position on which of these it is. Nor for all of their superficial appeal does he explain how *ehyeh asher ehyeh* can be understood to communicate the meanings that he proposes for it, instead simply stating those meanings as facts. Nor does the meaning he proposes for *ehyeh* in this verse bear any linguistic relation to the meanings he attributes to *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Nor does he explain precisely how the *ehyeh* of 3:14b relates to the declaration *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Nor does he explain how the average Israelite could have been persuaded that the name YHWH bears any relation to the word *ehyeh* and hence how YHWH conveys any of the meanings that he proposes for either *ehyeh asher ehyeh* or *ehyeh*. Nor does he anywhere appear to take account of the fact that the declaration *ehyeh asher ehyeh* was only intended for Moses’ ears and so presumably was its meaning. Nor does he explain how either *ehyeh asher ehyeh* or *ehyeh* can be reasonably understood to constitute a name at all and his proposal that *ehyeh* is the first person form of YHWH does no more than transfer that challenge to the name YHWH, which gets us nowhere. And finally, even if he could supply explanations where needed for the above, he would still need to explain how such rudimentary understandings of God as those communicated in the meanings he proposes for *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and the absolute *ehyeh* could have so impressed and inspired Moses and the Israelites that they would be prompted by them to undertake and endure all that they are said to have undertaken and endured. There are, therefore, a number of very important questions left unanswered in Sarna’s interpretation, which for all of its merits falls far short of being philosophically or theologically persuasive.

Considering next the interpretation of Jeffrey Tigay, who in his comments on Exodus 3:13-15 in the *Jewish Study Bible* states that there is a Divine name in Exodus 3:14 but he doesn’t identify which part of the verse it is.⁴⁴ He proffers “*I Will Be What I Will Be*” for the translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and interprets its meaning to be,

“*My nature will become evident from My actions*”, which is similar to the first of the six interpretations in Exodus Rabbah 3:6. He proposes *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as the explanation of the meaning of the name YHWH, as did Maimonides, and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a shortened form of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, as did Halevi, and as the first person singular imperfect form of the verb root *hayah*, as have several other exegetes considered above, and to mean “*I Will Be*”, as was first proposed by Aquila and Theodotion. He understands YHWH to be the corresponding third-person form of *hayah*, as did Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, and to mean “*He Will Be*”. His interpretation thus draws from a wide variety of sources and from diverse approaches to the interpretation of the verse, as one would expect of a study Bible.

However, as pointed out below in the *Textual Analysis of Exodus 3:13-15*, the contention that God would designate Himself with an absolute future tense of the verb ‘to be’ is highly problematic from a theological standpoint and in my opinion cannot be correct. Besides this it is very difficult to believe that the Israelites would have been impressed by the assurance that God would become known to them by His actions. If that were the case, then His actions on their behalf prior to Moses’ arrival would certainly not have inspired them to believe that He was on their side and yet they accepted Moses’ mission to them before God had done anything else for them. On the basis of these two objections alone I am ruling out Tigay’s comments from further consideration because to analyse them further would only lead to a repetition of the objections I have already made to the various interpretations he has drawn from.

And finally to the interpretation of William Propp, who has followed Aquila and Theodotion in his translation of the verse. He translates *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as “*I will be who I will be*” and the absolute *ehyeh* as “*I-will-be*” and he characterizes the response God makes to Moses in Exodus 3:14 as being, among other things, “*redundant*”.⁴⁵ He explores the many ways in which *ehyeh asher ehyeh* can be translated and what it might mean but he settles on the view that this phrase is no more than an idem-per-idem semantic device intended to present God as “*simply being cagey*”. The implication of this is that in Exodus 3:14 God is explicitly concealing knowledge of Himself from Moses rather than revealing anything to him, which in the context of the Burning Bush narrative is highly implausible. As for the *ehyeh* of 3:14b, he notes the possibility that this could be a Divine name and that God

could therefore be revealing two names in Exodus 3:14-15 but he rejects this possibility because of his uncertainty that *ehyeh* is the first person equivalent of YHWH and because *ehyeh* does not definitely occur elsewhere in the Bible as a Divine name (see the penultimate paragraph of *Modern Jewish Philosophy* above). Propp eventually settles on the proposition that the *ehyeh* of 3:14b is “nonsense” and that YHWH is here displaying “*anthropopathic petulance*”, which is reminiscent of the interpretation of Leviticus Rabbah 11:5.

What Propp does not explain is how he reconciles his understanding of these four enigmatic words with the impact they apparently made on Moses and the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. He even gives the impression that this question has not occurred to him, which would puzzle me considering the time and energy he has evidently devoted to this text. On the other hand it must be recognised that Propp takes an unapologetically anthropological approach to the interpretation of the biblical text and as far as I am aware makes no claim to any philosophical or theological expertise in relation to it. So it is perhaps not surprising that he takes such a sceptical approach to these four words which are so strikingly unique and enigmatic that they could easily appear to him to have no sensible place in an otherwise plainly written text. Moreover his interpretation also serves us well by speaking eloquently of the profound and continuing disagreement and incomprehension in relation to the meaning of Exodus 3:14 even amongst the most respected religious thinkers and biblical scholars in Judaism.

I would suggest that none of above interpretations come even close to explaining how the four enigmatic words of Exodus 3:14 would be capable of so advancing or enlarging the average persons understanding of God that they would be inspired by them to rise up defenceless under imminent threat from a massively powerful oppressor, as did Moses and the Israelites in Egypt, and so they are all very unlikely to be correct.

PART I SUMMARY

In the first part of this paper we have confirmed that Exodus 3:14 has long presented a very considerable challenge to translators and interpreters alike ever since the writing of the Septuagint some 2,300 years ago. We have encountered many approaches to the translation of this verse and considered examples of its translation in several languages. In their renderings of the verse some interpreters have retained the original or transliterated Hebrew of the four famously enigmatic words it contains. Others have translated them literally, while others again have rendered them periphrastically in order to express a particular understanding of their meaning.

We have seen interpretations of Exodus 3:14 that have ranged from the exclusively religious of the Talmud and Midrash to the highly philosophical of Maimonides, from the exclusively rabbinic of Rashi to the inclusively synthetic of Sarna and Tigay, from the esotericism of Kabbalah to the scepticism of Propp. Two broad approaches to its interpretation have been identified as having dominated the many efforts that have been made, with the religious and personalistic on the one hand and the metaphysical and philosophical on the other. Proponents of the former have discovered meanings of a temporal kind in *ehyeh asher ehyeh* and *ehyeh* while proponents of the latter have discovered in them statements of the absolute and eternal existence of God. Neither side has been able to convincingly support their respective positions and so neither side has won universal acceptance within Judaism. To this day these four words continue to be interpreted in strikingly different ways ranging from the absolute existence of God to absolutely nothing at all.

We have also seen a widespread awareness that there is a Divine name in this verse but that there is no universal agreement on what that name is and far less on what it means. The name has been variously identified as *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a, the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b and even all three occurrences of *ehyeh* taken together despite the fact that it is only the *ehyeh* of 3:14b that finds support in a plain reading of the biblical text. We have also seen many interpretations of Exodus 3:14 that have been based on an incorrect understanding of the biblical text, specifically those that identify *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as the words that Moses was to say to the Israelites instead of the obviously correct *ehyeh* of 3:14b and that this traditionally and uncritically

perpetuated error has led to the ongoing and widespread misidentification of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as a Divine name.

What we have not seen are interpretations that have measured up to the magnitude and significance of the revelation at the Burning Bush while at the same time making narrative and theological sense of the verse in its biblical context and corresponding linguistically to one of the universally accepted literal translations of the Hebrew text. It is therefore the case that more than two thousand years after the first translation of Exodus 3:14 was made, we are now no closer than we ever were to having either a confident or even commonly agreed understanding of what it is that God is communicating to Moses in this verse.

However, what is most relevant to the second part of this paper is that we have seen ample support for the contention that the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b is a Divine name and even that it is a very special Divine name. We have also encountered a widespread opinion amongst Jewish thinkers, grammarians and kabbalists that *ehyeh* is the first person equivalent of the third person name YHWH and that *ehyeh* has the same meaning as YHWH. Plainly stated, therefore, we have seen ample evidence that the *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b has been long recognised in Judaism as the Personal name of God and YHWH as His proper name, where ‘Personal’ indicates the name by which God is known to Himself and ‘proper’ indicates the name most appropriately employed by His subjects in their addresses to Him and remembrances of Him.

Part II

Introduction

In what follows I will show that the words spoken by God in Exodus 3:14 are fully comprehensible and that they are arguably the most important words in all monotheistic faith. I will show this first through a detailed analysis of the relevant biblical text and then through a systematic and comprehensive explanation of the meaning of just one word. That word is the Hebrew *ehyeh*, the word identified by Recanati as the holiest of God’s names and which I will shortly demonstrate to be the name by which God is known to Himself. It is therefore my purpose in what follows

to identify and to explain the meaning of what can be most accurately designated the Personal name of God and to fully interpret Exodus 3:14 in the light of that meaning. As far as I am aware there is no other systematic and comprehensive rational explanation of the meaning of this name and this verse than the one that follows.

The translation of the biblical text is taken from Propp, but with three changes.⁴⁶ The first is that while Propp has translated *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a and *ehyeh* of 3:14b, I have left them untranslated. I have done this not only because I disagree with Propp's translation, but also because the words that I employ are universally accepted as the transliterated form of the original Hebrew and so are the most universally acceptable starting point in any analysis of this verse. The second change is that I have replaced the Yahweh of Propp's translation with the Tetragrammaton YHWH. I have made this change only because there is still a debate over how the Tetragrammaton should be vowelised and I do not want this issue to needlessly distract from the point of this paper. The third change is that the bold-type emphasis in the quoted text is my own.

Textual Analysis of Exodus 3:13-15

Propp's translation of Exodus 3:13-15 reads as follows, with the changes noted above:

13. But Moses said to the Deity, "Suppose I come to Israel's Sons and say to them, 'Your father's deity has sent me to you', and they say to me, 'What is his name?' – what should I say to them?"
14. **Then Deity said to Moses, "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*".** And he said, "**Thus you will say to Israel's Sons: '*ehyeh has sent me to you*'.**
15. **And Deity further said to Moses, "Thus you will say to Israel's Sons: '**YHWH** your fathers' deity, Abraham's deity, Isaac's deity and Jacob's deity – he **has sent me to you**'; this is my name to eternity, and this my designation age (by) age."**

Although there has been much debate over the meaning of the question of Exodus 3:13, it makes perfect sense to me.⁴⁷ To begin with, Moses was quite understandably anticipating what the Israelites would say to him when he told them that their God had

sent him to them. The first thing he anticipated them asking for was the name of their God, YHWH, which if Moses had not known would have proved that he was not sent by Him. It would, therefore, have been a perfectly reasonable and practical question for the Israelites to ask. As for Moses' question of Exodus 3:13, "*What should I say to them?*", we need only keep in mind one certainty to understand what Moses was asking for in these words. That certainty is that Moses already knew of the existence of a Divine name in Israelite tradition when he asked this question of God. We know this for certain because Moses refers to a Divine name in Israelite tradition immediately before he asks the question of God. It is very unlikely that he could have been aware of the existence of a Divine name without being aware of what it was and so I believe that we can say with certainty that Moses knew the name YHWH before he asked his question of Exodus 3:13. Moreover, we are told that as a young man Moses regarded the Hebrews in his midst as his kinsfolk (Exodus 2:11). It is very unlikely that he would not have known the most important feature of his kinsfolk's religion - the proper name of their God - and so our certainty that Moses knew the name YHWH before he asked the question of Exodus 3:13 is confirmed. Furthermore, his father-in-law in Midian was a priest (Exodus 2:16) and as such would surely have known the names of the most prominent regional deities amongst whom YHWH would have been counted, which thus adds further to the certainty that Moses would have known the name YHWH before he asked the question of Exodus 3:13. Bearing in mind these three points the question of Exodus 3:13 can perhaps best be understood as Moses saying to God "*I know that You have a proper name, and I even know what that name is, but I still want direction from You as to how I should respond to the Israelites if they ask me for Your name*".

In response to his question Moses received what was no doubt more than he had expected when he asked the question of God, just as the Israelites received more than they could have expected when they asked Moses for the name of their God. Neither Moses nor the Israelites could have expected to receive two names in response to their respective questions but that is what they did receive.

For his part Moses received two answers to his question of Exodus 3:13, or two parts of the one answer, one of them in Exodus 3:14 and one in Exodus 3:15. He was told that when the Israelites ask him for the name of the God who sent him to them, he was first to say that *ehyeh* had sent him to them (3:14b) and he was then to

say that YHWH had sent him to them (3:15). Both words are clearly intended to be understood as answers to the same question because the sentence structure in the two verses is identical, they have a shared vocabulary and there is only one question being answered. Irrespective of the widespread opinion that these verses are attributable to the Elhoistic source,⁴⁸ the entire passage is written with great care and deliberation and is clearly intended to be read and understood precisely as we find it.

Considered in this way, and as the bold-type text makes clear, the most important difference between the two answers Moses receives to his question is that in the position where Exodus 3:14b has the word *ehyeh*, Exodus 3:15 has the name YHWH. Both are identified as sending Moses to the Israelites and because there is only one God doing the sending both must be names of the God of Israel. Moreover the word *ehyeh* is a first person singular of the verb, which means that as a name it can only be one by which God knows Himself; a Personal name. Therefore *Ehyeh* must be the Personal name of God and YHWH His proper name. It will be recalled that this conclusion is supported by the interpretations of Recanati, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Sarna and Buber among others.

Next we must endeavour to translate the name *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b from a study of the biblical text and to do this I will first consider the theological dimensions of the verse in its context and then the linguistic questions that attend upon it. I will turn my attention to the words of Exodus 3:14a later in Part II of this paper.

In a footnote to Exodus 3:14b in the 1985 *JPS Tanakh* the two possible literal translations of *ehyeh* are identified.⁴⁹ These are, by universal scholarly consent, “I am” and “I will be”. Translating the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b as ‘I am’ does present considerable interpretational difficulty but so too does translating it as ‘I will be’. The crucial difference between the two is that whereas the words ‘I am’ standing alone can be reasonably understood to be God’s self-designation, the absolute declaration ‘I will be’ cannot. This is because in Judaism God is understood to be eternally immutable and so He is understood to be in the present as He always was in the past and as He always will be in the future. If God were to designate Himself in absolute terms that refer to the future (‘I will be’), that would imply that He is not yet God, or that He is God but is in a state of becoming somehow other than He now is, both of which are absurd and unacceptable to the Mosaic monotheist (i.e. one who adheres to the

Monotheism of Moses, most notably Jews). For a second opinion on this point see De Vaux who is cited in the linguistic analysis later in this page where he is quoted as saying the following: “*It seems difficult to allow that, in Ex. 3.14(b), ehyeh should be translated by a future. In all the parallel texts which have been cited (i.e. Exodus 3:13, 4:12, 4:15), ‘I shall be’ is determined by an addition. One can say: ‘I shall be this or that, I shall be with... like...for...’, but one cannot say absolutely ‘I shall be’ in the first person, as this would suggest that the speaker does not yet exist*”.

When articulated by God the absolute statement ‘I will be’ must be determined by an addition in order to render it theologically meaningful, such as the oft-suggested ‘I will be with you’. However, this addition could very easily have been rendered in the original Hebrew if that was the meaning intended and an example of precisely this is to be found in Exodus 3:12 where God assures Moses of His presence with Him and does so clearly if not entirely unambiguously. However, whether in Exodus 3:12 the *ehyeh* is translated as ‘I will be’ or ‘I am’ the meaning of the declaration is clear and essentially the same. So why would God repeat this assurance two verses later in response to an entirely different question and in the most baffling words in the Bible? That does not make any sense and so it cannot be true. Moreover, it is very hard to imagine why God would have been anything less than clear in His communication to Moses at such an important moment in the history of Israel. I therefore consider ‘I will be’ with any addition to be an unacceptable translation of the name *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, whatever interpretative difficulty attends upon the only other candidate translation, ‘I am’.

Therefore this analysis clearly indicates that the translation of the name *Ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14b is ‘I am’. However, not everyone will accept this while there are outstanding linguistic considerations to be addressed and so let us move on to those.

The linguistic analysis of Exodus 3:14 is moderately complex for the non-linguist but there are in the final analysis only three linguistic facts that the reader need bear in mind. The first is that the only acceptable translations of the Hebrew *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14 are ‘I am’ and ‘I will be’, upon which point there is no credible debate. The second is that although it has been claimed that the present tense of the verb ‘to be’ is never expressed by the imperfect of the verb root *hayah* (e.g. *ehyeh*), this is simply false. The third is that although some have suggested that the verb

hayah does not convey the meaning of ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’, this too is false. The first of these three points is commonly acknowledged and so requires no further attention. The latter two, however, do require some attention.

Starting with the second of the three points – i.e. the tense conveyed by the imperfect of the verb *hayah* – I will begin by quoting what *Propp* has to say on this subject in Exodus 1-18 (p.204). This is very easily done because *Propp* has remarkably little to say on this very important subject, stating only in a single short sentence that: “*The imperfect of hyh always refers to the future.*”⁵⁰ The only support he proffers for this contention are two citations, one of them a paper written by Raymond Abba in 1961 entitled “*The Divine Name Yahweh*” and the other an essay written by Roland de Vaux in 1970 entitled “*The Revelation of the Divine name YHWH*”. Because these two authors are *Propp*’s chosen authorities in support of his contention, and as such are presumably considered by him to be sufficiently authoritative for that purpose, I will analyse only what these two have to say on the subject in order to demonstrate his error.

Dealing first with Abba, his statement on the subject reads as follows (bold type my own): “*Others, taking the impf. Qal in the sense of a present tense, translate ehyeh as “I am” and Yahweh as “He is” – i.e. “the Self-existent one”. Against this view two objections may be raised. First, in biblical Hebrew the present tense of this verb is never expressed by the imperfect but always by the perfect tense; the imperfect expresses the future. And second the verb hayah never means pure existence; rather it has the sense of “happening”, “becoming”, “being in a certain place or state”, “being present”*”.⁵¹ Just concentrating on the bold type for now, I suggest that you consult your Bible and consider the following comprehensive list of biblical verses in which the first person singular Qal perfect expresses the present tense meaning “*I am*”. They are Job 19:15, Psalms 31:13, Jeremiah 31:9, Lamentations 1:11, Micah 7:1 and perhaps Job 11:4. Now consider the following comprehensive list of biblical verses in which the first person singular Qal imperfect of *hayah* (i.e. *ehyeh*) expresses the present tense meaning “*I am*”. They are Ruth 2:13, Job 7:20; 12:4; 17:6 and of course Exodus 3:14.⁵² You will notice that the present tense meaning of “*I am*” is expressed almost equally in biblical Hebrew by the perfect and the imperfect of *hayah* and so Abba’s statement to the contrary, in bold type

above, is false. Hence Propp's contention that "*The imperfect of hyh always refers to the future*" is likewise false.

Moving on to De Vaux's contribution to this debate, it reads as follows: "*The imperfect of hayah as a stative verb, 'to be', always has a future sense*";⁵³ and he supports this contention with reference to the translation of *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:12, 4:12 and 4:15. However, his comments on Exodus 3:14b just a few lines later are strikingly at odds with this contention, reading: "*it seems difficult to allow that, in Ex. 3.14(b), ehyeh should be translated by a future. In all the parallel texts which have been cited (i.e. Exodus 3:13, 4:12, 4:15), 'I shall be' is determined by an addition. One can say: 'I shall be this or that, I shall be with...like...for...' , but one cannot say absolutely 'I shall be' in the first person, as this would suggest that the speaker does not yet exist.... It would seem that this future is only an apparent one*".⁵⁴ So on the one hand De Vaux insists that the imperfect of *hayah* always has a future sense, which we have already established to be false, while on the other hand he acknowledges that the absolute *ehyeh* of 3:14b cannot be a future tense because to translate it as such is theological nonsense. However, he is determined to have the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14 translated as a future tense no matter what absurdity he must propose in order to have it that way and so he proposes an "*apparent*" future tense. And what is an "*apparent*" future tense? It is nonsense, plain and simple.

Moreover, in relation to the verses De Vaux cites in support of his contention I would make the following observation. Although the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:12 is commonly translated as 'I will be', this is a translational choice and is therefore based upon how the text is read and understood. I would suggest that the *ehyeh* of this verse would be more meaningfully translated as 'I am' when we bear in mind that the context of Exodus 3:12 is that of God assuring Moses of His presence with him and so in this verse the correct translation of *ehyeh* is at least debatable.

Moving on to the third of the three points identified above – i.e. that the verb *hayah* conveys the meaning of 'to exist' - I will begin by noting Abba's contention to the contrary in the extract of his paper quoted above, which reads as follows: "*the verb hayah never means pure existence; rather it has the sense of "happening", "becoming", "being in a certain place or state", "being present"*". He doesn't suggest any alternative word or phrase that might be used to convey the meaning of

‘to exist’ but Rosenzweig did and Propp appears to have followed Rosenzweig’s lead.^{55 56} Before I consider their alternative suggestion I will settle the immediate question under consideration. To this end, there is very good evidence from first to second century Jewish religious writings that the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14 was commonly understood to convey the meaning of ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’. That evidence is to be found in Targums Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan, for which see *Jewish Bible Translations* above. There is also the witness of the Septuagint translation of the verse in which *ehyeh* is clearly understood as ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’, for which see *Early Jewish and Christian Translations* above. Then there are the interpretations of Maimonides, Sforino, Halevi and Recanati among many others, all of whom understood *ehyeh* to connote the meaning of ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’, for which see *Medieval Jewish Thought* and *Kabbalah* above. And finally there is no other word or phrase in biblical Hebrew that does convey the meaning of ‘to exist’ and so if this meaning were to be conveyed in biblical Hebrew then there would be no alternative but to employ the obviously suitable *hayah*. I believe, therefore, that we can say with complete certainty that the verb root *hayah* does convey the meaning of ‘to be’ in the sense of ‘to exist’ and that Abba’s contention to the contrary is false.

As for Rosenzweig and Propp’s alternative suggestion referred to above, they are by their own admission guessing when they suggest that if the meaning of personal existence were to be conveyed in biblical Hebrew, then it would somehow be rendered using the personal pronouns *ani/anoki* (meaning ‘I’) and ‘*hu*’ (meaning ‘he’). Such conjecture has no doubt been prompted by the manner in which the ‘*ani hu*’ declarations of Second Isaiah are translated into Greek in the Septuagint. However, ‘*ani hu*’ is a non-verbal clause that translates literally as “I he” and may or may not be rendered in translation as “I (am) he”. It does not translate literally as ‘I am’ because the verb ‘to be’ does not feature therein and the third person masculine personal pronoun ‘*hu*’ (meaning ‘he’) does. Furthermore, there is no example in the Bible of a declaration that exclusively employs a combination of the first person pronoun *ani* (or *anoki*) and the third person pronoun *hu* to unequivocally convey the meaning of ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’. Hence their alternative suggestion falls.

From the above linguistic analysis we may say that there is no linguistic objection to either of the two possible translations of the name *Ehyeh* but there is also

no indication of which of them it is. By contrast, the theological and contextual considerations that I have written of above inform us with some confidence that the translation of the name *Ehyeh* is ‘I am’, which now at least has linguistic license. So we have made some progress in our enquiry. However, we have yet to translate the twofold *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a but that must be left until later in Part II of this paper. What next needs doing is to establish the meaning of the name *Ehyeh*.

To this end we are informed in Exodus 4:31 that the new name *Ehyeh* was enthusiastically received by the Israelites, which means they must have understood its meaning, which means that Moses must have explained it to them. We must assume that Moses came to understand the meaning of the name either immediately upon learning of it or a short time thereafter but certainly before he arrived in Egypt. He would surely not even have set out for Egypt without such an understanding because he would have known that he would need to explain the meaning of the previously unknown name and establish its relationship with the name YHWH before the Israelites would accept its legitimacy. But they did accept it, which informs us that Moses must have done this successfully and that he must have fully understood the meaning of the name *Ehyeh* to be able to persuasively communicate that meaning to a no-doubt sceptical audience. Without such an understanding of the meaning of the name the revelation of the name would have been pointless. However, we have no record of Moses’ explanation of the meaning of the name *Ehyeh* and so we must discover that by other means.

The remainder of this paper is an explanation of the meaning of Exodus 3:14, first the name in Exodus 3:14b and then the words of Exodus 3:14a.

Introduction to the Explanation and Diagram

The Explanation that follows is, like any other, a pathway of understanding. The form that this Explanation takes, however, is different to any other that I am aware of in the presentation of the concepts that constitute it. They are all plainly stated in their most simple and unambiguous form and are employed in this form throughout the Explanation without the distraction of any inessential text. These concepts constitute the steps on a pathway of understanding that takes the reader from

conceptual terrain with which they may be familiar and leads them into and through a realm of contemplative thought with which they will probably not be familiar. These steps are arranged in logical sequence in a series of deductive passages that lead ultimately to the concluding statement that is the focal point of this paper. The deductive passages are divided into seven numbered parts. This division does not indicate any discontinuity in the Explanation and is included only to facilitate a thorough critical analysis of it. The Explanation was written, and should be read, as a single, continuous whole.

Each of the seven parts of the Explanation is divided into passages within which each line stands alone as a discrete conceptual and contemplative step. The only exception to this rule is in the first two lines of the second passage of Part 1 where one particularly important premise is presented in two complementary forms with identical meanings. The purpose of this duplication is to emphasise the importance of this premise and to maximise its understanding because its importance in the Explanation and to monotheistic faith really cannot be overstated. Several of the passages are sub-divided into two or more sections, which arrangement reflects my experience of those sections as discrete contemplative steps within that passage.

In the Explanation I have taken as true a number of theological, cosmogonic, ontological and epistemological premises. These are the primary premises upon which the Explanation is based and upon which its validity stands. They feature most prominently in the earlier passages but are found in various places throughout. Each passage reaches an interim conclusion that is separated and in bold type and which may feature thereafter as a premise in its own right. A summary of the Explanation that is comprised mostly of these interim conclusions follows on the completed Explanation. The purpose of the Summary is to assist in understanding the Explanation and confirming its validity and to serve as a companion to the Diagram, which is described below.

The method I have employed in the Explanation is one that occurred to me only as I began this undertaking and as far as I am aware has no precedent in theological or philosophical enquiry. I could not then and cannot now think of a better way to convey the understandings that the Explanation contains. However, aside from it being the method best suited to my purpose, I believe it is also the format that

readers will find easiest to follow and most useful for confirming the validity of the Explanation.

The Diagram depicts my understanding of the creative activity of God. It is the schematic counterpart to the Explanation and provides the reader with the most readily grasped schematic representation of what is set out in detail in the Explanation. It places the Divine name *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14 in its Jewish context by employing the concepts intrinsic to Jewish thought and by reference to the Torah. I must emphasise that the Diagram is not a schematic representation of God but only my understanding of His activity as Creator.

The Explanation is certainly an appeal to faith because Mosaic monotheism (i.e. the monotheism of Moses) is assumed from the outset, but it is even more so an appeal to reason and to the reader's willingness to ponder and imagine ideas that they will not have pondered before.

**AN EXPLANATION OF THE MEANING OF THE NAME OF GOD
AS REVEALED IN EXODUS 3:14**

1

There is a God.

There is only one God.

God is the only creator.

The Creator must be before His creation can be.

Therefore,

God was before He created.

All that is not God is His Creation.⁵⁷

All-That-Is is God and His Creation.

God was before He created.

Therefore there was a condition of All-That-Is where there was only God.

Before He created, All-That-Is was God.

God is perfect.

Disunity is imperfect.

Therefore in God there is no disunity.

In God there is perfect unity.

God in Himself is perfect in unity.

Perfect unity is the condition of existence in which there are no differences by which
to be distinguished.

It is the condition of perfect oneness in all aspects of existence.

In perfect unity there is no distinction of one from another.

In perfect unity there is only one.⁵⁸

Perfect unity is the condition of existence in which there are no differences by which
to be distinguished.

Therefore in the condition of existence where All-That-Is was God, and He was
perfect in unity, the only conceivable object of perception would have been identical
to the mind that would perceive it.⁵⁹

In such a condition of existence there was neither subject to perceive nor object to be
perceived.

If there was neither subject to perceive nor object to be perceived, then there can have
been no activity of mind.

**Therefore in the condition of existence where All-That-Is was God, there can
have been no activity of mind.**

Awareness requires the activity of mind.

Therefore when All-That-Is was God, He was not aware.⁶⁰

For mind to be active there must be an object of perception for it to be active in
relation to.

When All-That-Is was God there was no such object of perception.

**Therefore for God to become aware there had to enter the realm of existence
something to constitute an object of perception for Him.**

God is aware.

Awareness in its entirety is of self and other.

Therefore God's awareness in its entirety is of Himself and other.

All that is not God is His Creation.

Therefore all that is other than God is His Creation.

Therefore God's awareness in its entirety is of Himself and His Creation.

To become aware of Himself required first that God become aware of other.
Therefore to become aware of Himself required first that God become aware of His
Creation.

Therefore God's own Creation is the other of which He first became aware.

That which is created must have a beginning.

**Therefore the first awareness in God was His first awareness of the
beginning of His Creation.⁶¹**

4

There is no such thing as non-existence.⁶²

There is only existence.

The realm of existence is comprised in its entirety of God and His creation.

**Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His first awareness of
the beginning of His Creation.**

In the first instant of His awareness God cannot have perceived His creation as an
entity absolutely distinct from Himself because the entirety of His first awareness was
of His creation and so He was not yet aware of Himself to distinguish His creation
from.

Moreover, while there is an absolute distinction between God and His creation there
cannot be any separation because there is nothing else in the realm of existence to
constitute such a separation.

Therefore in the first instant of His awareness God did not identify His creation as an
entity distinct from Himself and He did not perceive it as an entity separated from
Himself.

Therefore the first awareness in God of the beginning of His creation can only have
been His awareness of the condition of His creation in the beginning.

There was nothing else for Him to behold.

Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His first awareness of the condition of His creation in the beginning.

5

In the beginning Creation was without form.

Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His first awareness of that which had no form.

Awareness is the experience of existing.

Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His first experience of existing in relation only to that which had no form.

In that which had no form there was absolutely no formed thing to behold.

The experience of existing in relation only to that wherein there was absolutely no formed thing to behold can perhaps best be imagined by contemplating what it would be like to be exclusively aware of and looking out into perfectly dark and empty space.

The only way that I can conceive of articulating the experience of being exclusively aware of and looking out into perfectly dark and empty space is to simply say 'there is'.

Therefore I conclude that the articulation in God of His first awareness of the beginning of His creation was that 'There Is'.

If there is awareness that 'There Is', then there is one who is aware.

If there is one who is aware, then there is self.

If there is self, then there is 'I'.

If there is 'I', then 'I am'.

Therefore if 'There Is', then 'I am'.

'There Is, Therefore I AM'⁶³

Therefore 'I AM' was the response in the mind of God to His first awareness of the beginning of His creation.

'I AM' was also the articulation in God of His knowledge of His Self as distinct from all other.

The knowledge that God had of His Self as distinct from all other was His knowledge of Personal existence.

Therefore 'I AM' was the articulation in God of the knowledge He had of His Personal existence.

His Personal existence does not change.

Therefore 'I AM' is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence.

Personal identity is designated by means of a name.

The more knowledge of the one named that is articulated in their name, the more completely and specifically does it designate their personal identity.

Therefore the perfect name would be the articulation of the perfect knowledge of the one named.

The knowledge that God has of His Personal existence is perfect.

Therefore the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence is His perfect name.

'I AM' is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence.

Therefore I AM is the perfect name of God.

Thus is I AM the name of God.

Commentary on the Explanation of the Meaning of the Name

What follows is a commentary on the Explanation of the Meaning of the Name of God as Revealed in Exodus 3:14, which is in Part II of www.exodus-314.com. It is intended to be read alongside the Explanation as a companion to what can be a demanding read.

The Explanation begins with the assertions that there is a God and that there is only one God. I say that there is only one God because this understanding is what allows me to make perfect sense of everything in existence that has come to my awareness. If something makes perfect sense then as far as I am concerned it is true, in the absence of evidence to the contrary. If we were to assert that there is more than one God (or divine persons) then among the questions that must be asked is, why would they create at all? Was their own perfect company not sufficient for them without creating imperfect humans and other animals, and if not why not? And if their perfect divine company was sufficient for them, then how can they justify creating animals who would then suffer for no necessary reason? This does not make sense and so as far as I am concerned it is not true. Therefore, there is only one God. Because there is only one God, He must be the only creator and as the only creator He must have existed before there was a creation. Therefore, God was before He created.

To understand the place of suffering in the creation of one perfect God, please read my Explanation of the Purpose of Creation at www.exodus-314.com.

Having established that God was before He created, I next assert that all that is not God is His creation, or to put it another way, All-That-Is is God and His creation. Once again, I assert this because it is in the light of this understanding that everything in existence makes perfect sense to me, and, as I have already said, if it makes perfect sense then it is true. There was no other ‘stuff’ in existence that God did not create and that just happened to be by His side and that just happened to be perfectly suited to His creative purpose. To suggest that there was is to imply another, greater intelligence beyond God that created both God and the ‘stuff’ he used for creation, and so that greater intelligence would in turn be God, which is therefore pointless speculation. Because of this I conclude that before God created, He was All-That-is, the totality of existence besides Whom there was no other.

I next assert that God is perfect. Once again, I assert this because His perfection allows me to make perfect sense of everything in existence that has come to my awareness and if it makes perfect sense then it is true, and because there is nothing in existence that would imply His imperfection. By virtue of that perfection, He is perfect in unity. I define perfect unity as the condition of existence in which there are no differences by which to be distinguished. I believe that there can be no rational debate on this point. Even Christians acknowledge it, although their aversion to the concept of unity - connoting as it does the number one - causes them to speak instead of God being perfect in simplicity, which is the same thing. Therefore, in perfect unity there is only one, which means that God is the perfect One in every conceivable sense. There is in God no multiplicity of any kind.

I next restate my assertion that perfect unity is the condition of existence in which there are no differences by which to be distinguished. Because of that, and because before God created He was All-That-Is and perfect in unity, there was in that condition of existence nothing for His mind to be aware of. Therefore, when All-That-Is was God, He was not aware. You might wonder how this can be compatible with His being the creator of all that is not Him. I say that the beginning of his creating was not a decision and did not require a plan. It did not require the activity of mind. I say that it is in the very essence of God to create, so that the existence of God is impossible without creating. God and Creator are identical. God is Creator. For a schematic representation of this understanding, please see the Diagram in Part II of www.exodus-314.com.

I next consider how it was that God became aware and specifically in relation to what did He become aware. The answer is plain when we consider that before God created, He was All-That-Is, and that following creation All-That-Is was God and His creation. He can therefore only have become aware in relation to His creation. As I have already said, the beginning of God's creating was not an action of His mind. It is in the very essence of God to create and so He began to create before His mind became active. Once Creation began, God became aware in relation to it. For a schematic representation of this understanding, please see the Diagram in Part II of www.exodus-314.com.

I next consider the experience that God Had in relation to the beginning of His creation. I explain that it was in relation to the first instant of the existence of His creation that He became aware. At that time Creation was absolutely without form and because all that is not God is His creation, all that God was aware of at that time was that which had absolutely no form. I then imagine what the experience would be like of existing in relation only to that which had no form and specifically how God would articulate that experience. Since the totality of the first instant of His awareness was looking out into that which had no form, I conclude that God would articulate this experience by simply saying 'There Is'. Hence the first words in the mind of God as He looked out into the very beginning of His creation were 'There Is'. I then reason that if there is awareness that 'There Is' then God would immediately conclude that 'I AM'. For a schematic representation of this understanding, please see the Diagram in Part II of www.exodus-314.com.

I next consider precisely what the words 'I AM' are the articulation of, and I conclude that they were the articulation in God of the knowledge He had of His Personal existence. However, because His Personal existence does not change, I then conclude that the words 'I AM' are the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence. Thus far I had come to understand by myself. What had not occurred to me, and I believe never would have occurred to me had I never read Exodus 3:14, was that the words 'I AM' are a divine name. That is the subject of Part 7 of the Explanation of the Meaning of the Name and brings it to a conclusion. I should note at this point that there are only two universally accepted translations of the name Ehyeh of Exodus 3:14b. They are 'I am' and 'I will be', on which point I would recommend to you the Textual Analysis of Exodus 3:13-15 in Part II of www.exodus-314.com.

I hope that it is now clear just how important it is to understand the meaning of the name 'I AM', given that to identify it requires an understanding of God in Himself before He created and of Him in the first instant of His relation to His creation. There is no deeper an understanding of God than this. A final recommendation to anyone reading the Explanation of the Meaning of the Name is that they do so while also referring to the Diagram, which is also in Part II of www.exodus-314.com. It is intended to be both a stand-alone subject of contemplation and also a schematic companion to reading the Explanation of the Meaning of the Name.

A SUMMARY OF THE EXPLANATION

There is a God.

God Was before He created.

Before He created, All-That-Is was God.

God in Himself is perfect in unity.

In perfect unity there is only one.

In the condition of existence where All-That-Is was God, and He was perfect in unity, there can have been no activity of mind.

Therefore when All-That-Is was God, He was not aware.

To become aware of Himself required first that God become aware of other.

All that is other than God is His creation.

Therefore God's own Creation is the other of which He first became aware.

Therefore the first awareness in God was His first awareness of the beginning of His Creation.

Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His first awareness of the condition of His creation in the beginning.

Therefore the entirety of the first awareness in God was His experience of existing in relation only to that which had no form.

Therefore I conclude that the articulation in God of His first awareness of the beginning of His creation was that 'There Is'.

'There Is, Therefore I AM'

Therefore 'I AM' was the response in the mind of God to His first awareness of the beginning of His creation.

'I AM' was also the articulation in God of His knowledge of His Self as distinct from all other.

Therefore 'I AM' is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence.

Personal identity is designated by means of a name.

The more knowledge of the one named that is articulated in their name, the more completely and specifically does it designate their personal identity.

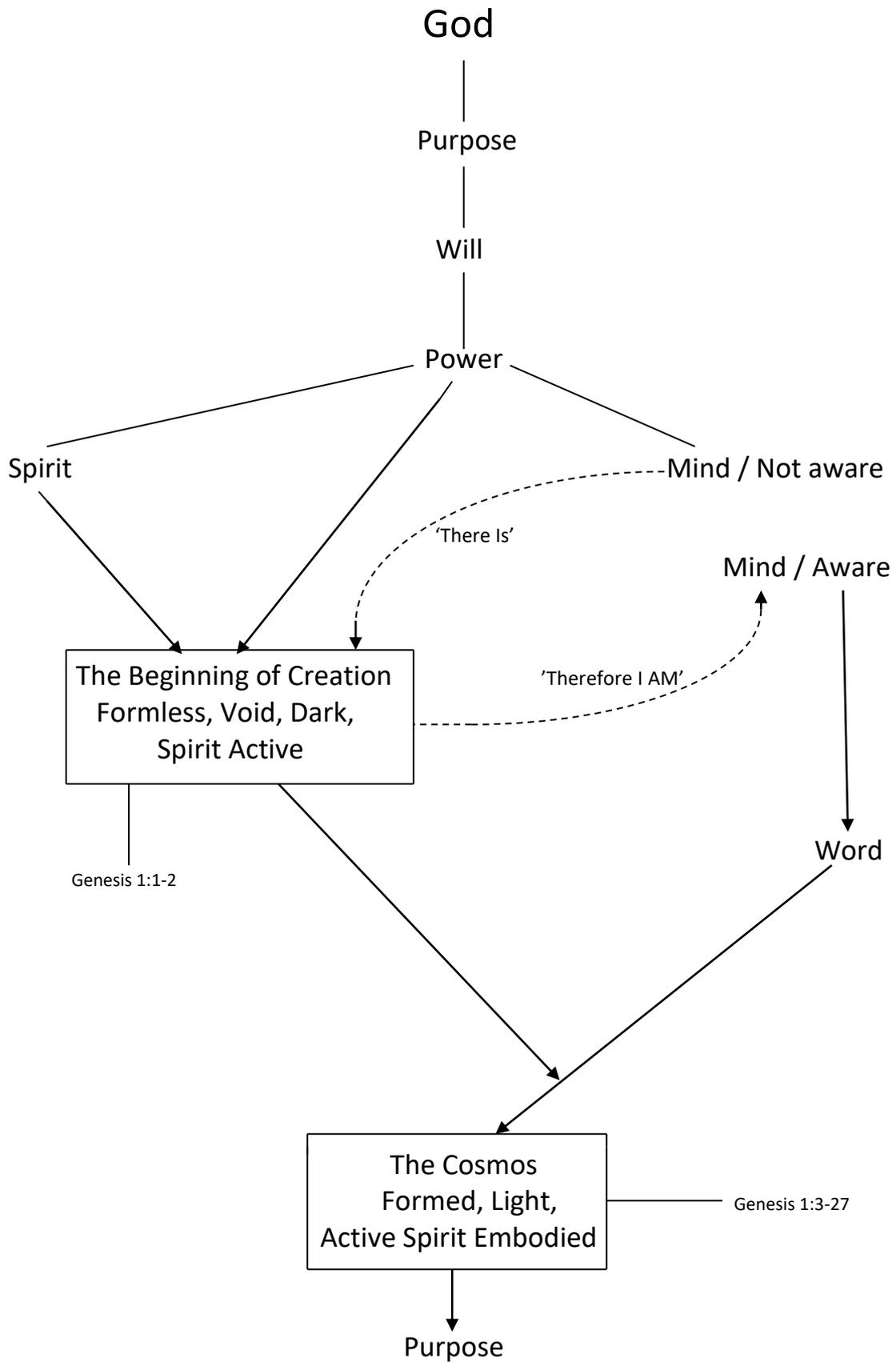
Therefore the articulation of the knowledge that God has of His Personal existence is His perfect name.

'I AM' is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence.

Therefore I AM is the perfect name of God.

Thus is I AM the name of God.

Diagram: The Creative Activity of God



Completing the Interpretation of Exodus 3:14

Here is what we know so far. In the *Textual Analysis of Exodus 3:13-15* in Part II of this paper I conclude that the Hebrew word *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b can be identified in its context as a Divine name, and because it is the first-person singular of the verb it can be identified as the name by which God is known to Himself; His Personal name. It is also the case that one of the only two universally accepted English translations of the Hebrew word *ehyeh* is ‘I am’. In the *Textual Analysis* I conclude that ‘I am’ is the only theologically acceptable translation of the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b and, as confirmation of this, the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* identifies I AM as the name of God. Therefore, the *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b is the Personal name of God and translates into English as I AM.

Having established this, all that remains in order to fully interpret the verse is to explain and translate the puzzling words of Exodus 3:14a; *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. This is certainly the greatest challenge in biblical interpretation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the greatest mystery in human history. What follows is my solution to it.

In Exodus 3:13 Moses asks God what he should say to the Israelites if they ask him for the name of the God who sent him to them. For the purpose of establishing how we would expect God to respond to this enquiry I would ask you to imagine yourself in an identical exchange but with you in the place of God. Imagine it is you who is sending Moses on a mission to the Israelites and that Moses is asking you what he should say to the Israelites if they ask him for the name of the one who sent him to them. The most natural and reasonable way to begin your response to his enquiry would be with a declaration of the name that you wanted Moses to relay to them. This would be most naturally and reasonably followed by your instruction to Moses that he was to inform the Israelites that the one who bears that name has sent him to them. Your response would therefore fall into two parts. The first part would be some form of self-identification employing the name that you wanted Moses to relay and the second would be your instruction to him that he was to respond to their question with that name. A self-identification is normally comprised of some form of self-address and a name and would normally take the form “*My name is x*” or “I am x”. We will assume that you are of sufficient renown to employ the latter form of words; “I am x”.

If we now combine the two parts of your response, then you would most naturally and reasonably respond to Moses' question with: "*I am x. Tell the Israelites that x has sent you to them*".

Now consider the exchange that took place between God and Moses in Exodus 3:13-15. Moses has asked God what he should say to the Israelites if they ask him for the name of the God who sent him to them. According to the above analysis we would most naturally and reasonably expect God to begin his response to Moses with a Self-identification that would employ the Divine name that he was to reveal to the Israelites. This would be naturally and reasonably followed by God's instruction to Moses that he was to inform the Israelites that the God who bears that name has sent him to them. We have already identified two forms of self-identification that God might employ – "*My name is x*" and "*I am x*" - but in the Hebrew Bible God identifies Himself according to the latter form of words with "*I am YHWH*". Therefore if God were to identify Himself to Moses using His Personal name *Ehyeh*, we would most naturally and reasonably expect His response to Moses' enquiry to be: "*I am Ehyeh. Tell the Israelites that Ehyeh has sent you to them*".

However, the Divine Self-identification "*I am YHWH*" is rendered in Hebrew with a non-verbal clause employing the personal pronoun *ani* or *anoki*, meaning 'I', and the name YHWH but without the verb 'to be'. Examples of this are "*ani YHWH*" of Exodus 6:2 and "*anoki YHWH*" of Isaiah 43:11, both of which translate literally as "*I YHWH*" but are usually translated as "*I am YHWH*". If, therefore, this form of Self-identification was employed by God in declaring His Personal name *Ehyeh*, we could reasonably expect that declaration to take a corresponding form, i.e. '*ani Ehyeh*' or '*anoki Ehyeh*', but that is not what we find in Exodus 3:14. Therefore if God did commence His response to Moses with a Self-identification that employed His Personal name *Ehyeh*, then the words *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* do not conform to the Hebrew construction that we would expect such a Divine Self-identification to take and so we still cannot account for the dual occurrence of *ehyeh* in *ehyeh asher ehyeh*.

However, with the assistance of the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* this puzzle can now be solved and its solution leads us to the recognition of what I believe to be the most profound and remarkable words ever written, words so

uniquely remarkable that I believe they can only be attributed to the historic architect of Judaism; the man we know as Moses.

The solution to the puzzle that is *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is to be found in two key insights into the words of Exodus 3:14. The first is that in response to Moses' enquiry of Exodus 3:13, God first identifies Himself using His Personal name *Ehyeh*, as explained in the *Textual Analysis of Exodus 3:13-15*. The second is that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is the Divine Self-identification when God identifies Himself using His Personal name *Ehyeh* instead of His proper name YHWH. The explanation for this is as follows:

A self-identification is normally comprised of some form of self-address and a name, such as "*I am x*" or "*my name is x*".

A self-address is a statement born of self-reflection, the purpose and effect of which is to bring to awareness knowledge of the one doing the reflecting.

Because God is perfect His Self-reflection is perfect.

Therefore the Divine Self-reflection brings to God's awareness the perfect knowledge that He has of His Personal existence.

Therefore on the occasion of God identifying Himself to Moses and revealing to him His Personal name *Ehyeh/I AM*, the Divine Self-reflection would have brought to God's awareness the perfect knowledge that He has of His Personal existence.

The following conclusion ends Part 6 of the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* in Part II of this paper: "*I AM*' is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence".

Therefore,

On the occasion of God identifying Himself to Moses using His Personal name *Ehyeh/I AM*, the Self-awareness occasioned by the Divine Self-reflection would also have been articulated as *Ehyeh/I AM*.

The Divine Self-address is, or at least incorporates, the articulation of the Self-awareness occasioned by the Divine Self-reflection.

Therefore the Divine Self-address is, or at least incorporates, the word/s *Ehyeh/I AM*.

Because *ehyeh* is a complete form of self-address in Hebrew, there is no place for the *asher* in the Divine Self-address of Exodus 3:14a.

Therefore *Ehyeh/I AM* is the Divine Self-address when God identifies Himself using His Personal name *Ehyeh/I AM* instead of His proper name YHWH.

As stated above, a self-identification is comprised of a self-address and a name and so the Divine Self-identification is comprised of the Divine Self-address and the Divine name. We have now established that the Divine Self-address is *Ehyeh/I AM* and that the Divine name is *Ehyeh/I AM*. We can therefore now confirm that the Divine Self-identification employing the Personal name of God *Ehyeh* ought to include the twofold declaration of the word *Ehyeh* that occurs in *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* and we can thus confirm that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is the Divine Self-identification when God identifies Himself using His Personal name *Ehyeh* instead of His proper name YHWH and so the second key insight is confirmed. Moreover we can confirm this even without translating the *asher* because it is inconceivable that there could be a second meaning being intentionally conveyed in the twofold *Ehyeh* of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*.

As to which of the two *Ehyeh* is the Self-address and which is the name, the answer is that they are identical and so they are both Self-address and name. However, if for any reason they are to be thought of as one or the other, for example in the writing of a paraphrase, then I would suggest thinking of the first *Ehyeh* as the Self-address and the second as the name because this is the word order of the most characteristic of biblical Divine Self-identifications, “*ani/anoki YHWH*”. How this might manifest in a paraphrase will be seen below.

As for the *asher*, it is described in the Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* as a “*sign of relation*” (BDB, p.81), which is its precise function in *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Its presence signals the existence of an unspecified relationship between the two *Ehyeh* of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Without the *asher* the two *Ehyeh* would appear to stand alone as merely independent declarations of the name *Ehyeh*. It is presumably for this reason that the *asher* is required between Self-address and name in *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* and for this reason that the Divine Self-identification *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* does not conform to the normal construction of self-identification that comprises only self-address and name.

Because it is generic, the *asher* has no exactly corresponding word in English (BDB, p.83) and so we must search instead for an English translation of the *asher* that fits the context. Having undertaken such a search I can identify only one translation that when emplaced in “I AM *asher* I AM” makes of it a recognisable Divine Self-identification. That translation is “is who”, yielding the words “I AM is who I AM”. However, this is a completely unattested translation of *asher* and, moreover, it does not preserve the purity of the idem-per-idem form of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. I therefore do not accept this as the translation we seek and conclude that the nuance of meaning in the *asher* of Exodus 3:14a is untranslatable into English.

Which brings me to the translation of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* and first to the literal translation. Because the *asher* is untranslatable it makes most sense to retain it in the literal English translation of Exodus 3:14 where it will mean the same to the Hebrew reader as to the Hebrew non-reader who knows the grammatical purpose that it serves. I would therefore propose that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* should read as follows in literal English translation: “I AM *asher* I AM”. Alternatively, if *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is to be represented in paraphrase, then the most simple and most accurate such paraphrase is “I am I AM”, which corresponds to the Divine Self-identification “I am YHWH” and which I believe precisely articulates the meaning of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*.

With these translations, and equipped with a comprehensive understanding of why it is that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* translates in this way and what it means, I believe the puzzle that was Exodus 3:14 has now been solved. The words that God addresses to Moses in Exodus 3:14-15 in response to Moses’ enquiry of Exodus 3:13 can now be confidently understood as being equivalent to the following simple statement: “*I am I AM. Tell the Israelites that I AM has sent you to them, and tell them also that they are henceforth to address Me and refer to Me by My proper name YHWH*”.

In summary, therefore, the words *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14a are God’s Self-identification to Moses, just as they are understood in the Septuagint, and the absolute *Ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b is the Personal name of God and translates into English as I AM. The two *Ehyeh* of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* are identical in meaning, as proposed by Maimonides and Sarna, but they have complementary functions within the Self-identification, as explained above.

And so to the final step on this exegetical journey, which is to write Exodus 3:14 in the three versions that I would propose.

First with *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* in a partial but literal translation:

Then God said to Moses, “I AM *asher* I AM”.

And He said, “Thus you shall say to the Sons of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’”.

Second with *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* translated in a paraphrase that corresponds to the Self-identification “I am YHWH”:

Then God said to Moses, “I am I AM”.

And He said, “Thus you shall say to the Sons of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’”.

And finally, in the interests of complete clarity, with *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* translated in a loose but universally recognisable paraphrase:

Then God said to Moses, “My name is I AM”.

And He said, “Thus you shall say to the Sons of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’”.

In Conclusion

The evidence of the textual, philosophical, theological and linguistic analysis presented in this paper is that there is a Divine name in Exodus 3:14, that this name is the Personal name of God, that it is the Hebrew word *Ehyeh* and that *Ehyeh* should be translated into English as I AM. The meaning of the name I AM as presented in this paper is most readily apprehended from the *Diagram* depicting the creative activity of God, is comprehensively explained in the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* and is concisely explained in the *Summary of the Explanation*. That meaning is that *Ehyeh* / I AM is the articulation in God of the knowledge He has of His Personal existence.

The words *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* are God's Self-identification to Moses, just as they are understood in the Septuagint (see *Early Jewish and Christian Translations*). They are not a name. They translate literally as "I AM *asher* I AM" and in paraphrase as "I am I AM" or "My name is I AM" as explained in *The Meaning of Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*.

It goes without saying that the extended *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* presented above would not have been readily understood by many of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and so it is unlikely that Moses presented any such explanation to them. However, it is entirely possible that he presented some such explanation to the Elders of Israel. As for the majority of the Israelites, he could certainly have drawn them a diagram, and a diagram can make a point very effectively and can do so in a way that almost everyone can understand.

If the meaning of the declaration *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* and of the name *Ehyeh* are as I have explained them to be, then I would propose that Exodus 3:14 can stand alone as confirmation of the peerless depth and authority of the prophecy of Moses. Indeed, I would go one step further and propose that it is specifically the declaration *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* that confirms this, because these are undoubtedly the deepest and most remarkable words ever written or conceived by humanity and they are undoubtedly unique in the human historical record. I must say that no matter how long I had spent in contemplation upon the name *Ehyeh/I AM*, which I arrived at unaided, I might still not have arrived at the astonishing and beautiful words that are *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. These are the only words in human history that I am willing to designate as revelation, to distinguish them from the phenomenon of inspiration which is commonplace by comparison, because although they are no deeper than the name *Ehyeh/I AM* in terms of what they tell us about God, they are nonetheless considerably more impressive. What is also amazing and baffling to me is that Moses succeeded in having these four words recorded in perpetuity in what has become the most widely read book in human history even though no one except himself and perhaps a few others around him understood what they meant until very recently. I cannot even imagine how he accomplished that.

Moreover, and in my opinion very fittingly, the Divine name *Ehyeh* - the Personal name of the God of Judaism - can stand alone as the definitive response to

and decisive refutation of the Christian idea of a triune God. This is so because the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* has among its most fundamental premises the Jewish understanding of God as One in His Person. It is therefore incompatible with the Christian understanding of God, which contends that God is three persons, and is moreover an implicit refutation of that understanding.⁶⁴

As regards the Talmudic identification of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* as a Divine name, this is evidently incorrect. It is not incorrect only because of what I have written. It is incorrect first and foremost because of what is written in Exodus 3:13-15 and it is there for everyone to read and confirm for themselves. It is extraordinary that such an important error has stood substantially unchallenged for so long but such is the power of tradition. I am aware that the meaning of these words has not been understood since long before the writing of the Talmud but that does not entirely excuse the perpetuation of what is an obviously incorrect reading of the biblical text. I believe that this traditionally perpetuated error cannot but be harmful simply because it relates to what are surely the most important and holy words in existence, being as they are the biblical proof-text of Mosaic (Jewish) monotheism. I therefore take issue with the rabbis on this point.

As regards the relationship between the names *Ehyeh* and YHWH, I would suggest that YHWH should not be regarded as the third person singular equivalent of *Ehyeh* because to understand it as such does not make good linguistic sense. The reason for this is that the Personal name of God is 'I AM', not 'He is'. I would instead suggest that the name YHWH should be regarded as the untranslatable and gender-free proper name of God and that it should be understood to bear the same meaning as *Ehyeh*, as was proposed by Ibn Ezra (see *Medieval Jewish Thought*). If understood in this way, then the use of the name YHWH in prayer and worship would have the effect of bringing powerfully to mind the meaning of the name *Ehyeh* but without such mindfulness requiring the utterance of the most holy of Divine names and the most holy word in existence; *Ehyeh*.

And finally to the question of whether or not the name *Ehyeh* should ever be uttered, this is of course something everyone must decide for themselves. I would only point out that Moses was commanded to tell the Israelites that they are always to refer to and address God by His proper name YHWH and by implication that they are

never to use His Personal name *Ehyeh*. The Bible therefore supports what many may feel intuitively, which is that the utterance of the name *Ehyeh* should at least be highly restricted. However, the Bible does not command us to forget about the name *Ehyeh* or to cease from contemplating its meaning. Had that been what was intended, then it would not have been written into perpetuity in the Book of Exodus. Moreover I believe that the meaning of *Ehyeh* as a Divine name is of immense importance to every person of faith and to all theological and philosophical enquiry. I am therefore certain that its meaning should be understood and contemplated and discussed and remembered even if the name itself is never uttered at all. As for myself, and outwith the sphere of the most meaningful enquiry, the name *Ehyeh* in any language will be ineffable, but I will speak of it respectfully as the Personal name of God.

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References and Endnotes

¹ The 1985 JPS Tanakh does not translate these words from the Hebrew and so the division of Exodus 3:14 can be readily displayed with reference to this text as follows: **3:14a** *And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh”* **3:14b** *He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you’”* Quoted from: Berlin A. and Zvi Brettler M. (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible, featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.111.

² Perkins L., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint, Electronic Edition*, which is available online at: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/>. The Greek *ho on* has also been translated as “*The Being*”, for which see: *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, with an English Translation*, (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1879), p.ff.73.

³ Propp W., *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, (NY: Doubleday, 1998), p.225.

⁴ For an English translation of *Vulgate Exodus 3:14* see the *Douay-Rheims Bible*, which is available online at: <http://drbo.org/index.htm>

⁵ Grossfeld B. (trans.), *Targum Onkelos to Exodus, Aramaic Bible Vol. 7*, (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), p.8. See also: Etheridge J., *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch*, (1862), which is available online at: <http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/>

⁶ McNamara M. and Maher M. (trans.), *Targums Neofiti 1 and Pseudo-Jonathan, Aramaic Bible Vol.2*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), p.19.

⁷ Ibid., p.168. See also: Etheridge J., *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch*, (1862), which is available online at:

<http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/>

⁸ Walton B. (ed.), *Biblia sacra polyglotta: complectentia textus originales, Hebraicum, cum Pentateucho Samaritano, Chaldaicum, Græcum; versionumque antiquarum, Samaritanæ, Græcæ LXXII interp., Chaldaicæ, Syriacæ, Arabicæ, Æthiopicæ, Persicæ, Vulg. Lat., quicquid comparari poterat*, (London: Thomas Roycroft, 1657), p.237.

⁹ Rosenzweig F., *The Eternal*, in: Buber M. and Rosenzweig F., *Scripture and Translation*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.103.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.102.

¹¹ Fox E. (trans.), *The Schocken Bible: Vol.1, The Five Books of Moses*, (NY: Schocken Books, 1997), p.273.

¹² The 1985 JPS Tanakh does not translate these words from the Hebrew and so the division of Exodus 3:14 can be readily displayed with reference to this text as follows:
3:14a *And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh”* **3:14b** *He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you’”* Quoted from: Berlin A. and Zvi Brettler M. (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible, featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.111.

¹³ Fox E., *The Schocken Bible*, p.273.

¹⁴ Quoted from Pelcovitz R. (trans.), *Sforno, Commentary on the Torah, Translation and explanatory notes*, (NY: Mesorah Publications, 2004), p.295.

¹⁵ Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.181.

¹⁶ Epstein I. (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud*, (London: Soncino Press, 1978). The *Soncino Talmud* translates all three citations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as “*I am that I am*” and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b in Berakoth 9b as “*I AM*”.

¹⁷ Freedman H. (ed.), *Midrash Rabbah*, (London: Soncino Press, 1983). The *Soncino Midrash Rabbah* translates all citations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as “*I am that I am*” and the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as “*I AM*”.

¹⁸ Munk E., *The Call of the Torah, Volume 2 - Shemos*, (NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd, 1994), p.41.

¹⁹ Chavel C. (trans), *Ramban (Nahmanides), Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, (NY: Shilo Publishing House, 1973), pp.36-39. Elements of Rashi’s, Halevi’s, and Maimonides’ interpretations are to be found in Ramban’s comments on Berakoth 9b, while his own interpretation on p.38 draws on Rashi’s and was substantially incorporated into Sforno’s interpretation.

²⁰ Maimonides M., *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part 1, Ch.63 (LXIII), trans. Friedlander M., (2nd edn., 1904). Available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/gfp/gfp073.htm>

²¹ Pelcovitz R. (trans.), *Sforno, Commentary on the Torah, Translation and explanatory notes*, (NY: Mesorah Publications, 2004), p.295.

²² Herczeg Y. (trans.), Rashi, *The Sapirstein Edition Commentary on Torah, Vol.2 - Shemos (Exodus)*, (NY: Mesorah Publications, 1999), p.25. Rashi's commentary on Exodus 3:14 is available online at:

http://www.chabad.org/library/Bible_cdo/aid/9864/showrashi/true

²³ Munk, *The call of the Torah*, p.42.

²⁴ Schorr Y. and Malinowitz C. (eds.), *The Scottenstein Edition Talmud Bavli, Tractate Berachos, Volume 1*, elucidated by G. Zlotowitz, (NY: Mesorah Publications, 1997), p.9b¹.

²⁵ Halevi J., *The Book of Kuzari*, trans. Hirschfeld H., (NY: Pardes Publishing House, 1946), Part IV, p.178. Hirschfeld's translation of *The Book of Kuzari* is available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/khz/khz04.htm>, p.202.

Halevi wrote *The Book of Kuzari* in Arabic, which I am unable to read, and so I am unable to say how he rendered the *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a and *ehyeh* of 3:14b in the original. In his translation of *The Kuzari* Hirschfeld rendered *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as "I am that I am" and retained the Hebrew transliteration of the absolute *ehyeh*. I can find no clear indication that Halevi intended *ehyeh asher ehyeh* to be read as "I am that I am" and so have taken the safest default position of rendering these words in Hebrew transliteration.

²⁶ Strickman N. and Silver A. (trans), *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Exodus (Shemot)*, (NY: Menorah, 1997), p.64. In a footnote to Ibn Ezra's comment on

Exodus 3:14 the authors explain his interpretation as follows: "*According to I.E., That I Am explains I Am. In other words, God's name is not I Am That I Am. His name is I Am, the meaning of which is, That I Am*". Ibn Ezra's comment on Exodus 3:15 describes the name YHWH in the following terms: "*Another name meaning the same as the first one. However, one name (EHYH) is in the first person and this name (YHWH) is in the third person*".

²⁷ Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.225.

²⁸ Tisby I., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts, Vol.1*, trans. Goldstein D., (NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.345.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.310.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.243-244.

³¹ Scholem G., *Kabbalah (J. mysticism), Details of the Doctrine of the Sefirot and their Symbolism*, in Wigoder J. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2004).

³² Munk, *The call of the Torah*, p.42.

³³ Fox M., *God, Names of*, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM Edition*.

³⁴ Rosenzweig F., “*The Eternal*”: *Mendelssohn and the name of God*, in: Buber M. and Rosenzweig F., *Scripture and Translation*, trans. L. Rosenwald, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.103.

³⁵ Rosenzweig, “*The Eternal*”, p.102.

³⁶ Fox M., *God, Names of*, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

³⁷ Buber M. and Rosenzweig F., *Scripture and Translation*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994)

³⁸ Buber M., *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, (NY: Harper and Row, 1946), p.48-55.

³⁹ Jenni E. and Westermann C., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark Biddle, (Peabody: Hendrikson’s Publishers Inc., 1997), p.523.

⁴⁰ On the Presence of Exodus 3:14 in Judaism

The suggestion that the name in Exodus 3:14b and the declaration in Exodus 3:14a have been all but absent from Jewish life ever since the day this verse was first penned is very hard to believe, especially if these words are as important as they appear to be. There is therefore a very important and very interesting question that must be asked in relation to this verse. If the words of Exodus 3:14 are not referred to elsewhere in the Bible, then where in Judaism are they? I think the most propitious approach to answering this question is to try to imagine how Moses might have

intended this verse to be remembered if it was of such great importance to him and his fellow Israelites. What follows is my answer to that question.

If the words of Exodus 3:14 are as religiously important as they appear to be, then Moses would surely have wanted them to be remembered by the Israelites in their place of greatest religious importance, and to be remembered during the event of greatest religious significance. In Moses' day the place of greatest religious importance was the Tabernacle, which was so important that it is the sole subject of the last fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus, along with the brief and fitting interlude of the incident of the Golden Calf. The religious event of greatest significance in Mosaic times was the daily sacrificial service that took place in the Tabernacle, the Tamid service, which is first referred to in Exodus 29:28. Here is an extract from the Soncino Talmud, Tractate Tamid 33b (Misnah 7:3), describing the ceremonial that took place when the High Priest officiated at the Tamid sacrifice in Second Temple times:

*“The deputy high priest stood on the horn of the altar with the flags in his hand, and two priests on the table of fat with two trumpets in their hands. They blew a **Tekia’ah Teru’ah Teki’ah**, and then went and stood by Ben Arza, one on his right and one on his left. When he bent down to make the libation, the deputy high priest waved the flags and Ben Arza struck the cymbals and the Levites chanted the psalm. When they came to a pause a **Teki’ah** was blown and the public prostrated themselves; at every pause there was a Teki’ah and at every Teki’ah a prostration. This was the order of the regular daily sacrifice for the service of the house of our God”.*

The *Teki’ah* is a sustained blast on the trumpet and the *Teru’ah* is a wavering blast (RH 33b). There is an obvious structural resemblance between the *Teki’ah Teru’ah Teki’ah* pattern of trumpet blasts and the words **Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh** of Exodus 3:14a, and likewise between the single *Teki’ah* trumpet blasts and the single **Ehyeh** of Exodus 3:14b. However, the sounding of a *Teki’ah* over the burnt offering is most obviously explained by Numbers 10:10 where the commandment to do so is given. Numbers 10:10 also appears to explain the purpose of the *Teki’ah*, which was to serve

as a “*reminder*” for the Israelites of when they were “*before YHWH*”, which presumably refers to when they were assembled before the Presence of YHWH. Prior to being given this commandment the Israelites had last been assembled before the Presence of YHWH during the very first Tamid service at the Tabernacle (Leviticus 9:23) on which occasion “*fire came forth from before YHWH and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces*” (Leviticus 9:24). So the combination of Num.10:10 and Lev.9:23-24 could between them account for the act of prostration in response to the sound of the single *Teki’ah* blasts during the Tamid service.

However, prior to the theophany of Leviticus 9:23-24 the Israelites had most notably been assembled before the Presence of God at Sinai, some nine months earlier. The giving of the 10 Commandments (more correctly, “*Ten Words*”) at Sinai is recorded in Exodus Chapter 20. It may only be a coincidence that the Chapter and verse in Numbers 10:10 bear a strong numerical relation to the number of Commandments given at this most remarkable of theophanies and to the Chapter in which it is described. On the other hand it may be an intentional link being made between the blowing of the trumpet over the sacrifice during the Tamid service and the sound of the *shofar* at Sinai, which the text appears to suggest was the sound of the voice of God as experienced by all of the Israelites except Moses (Exodus 19:13-20:18).

The sounding of the *Teki’ah* trumpet blasts during the Tamid service could therefore have been intended to serve the dual purpose of reminding the Israelites of the theophany during the first Tamid service at the Tabernacle, and of reminding them of the theophany at Sinai, which would seem to make perfectly good sense. But to fully explore the possibility of a link between the single *Teki’ah* blasts during the Tamid service and the name *Ehyeh* there is one other question we must ask. Is there any biblical evidence to suggest that prior to the commencement of the Tamid services the Israelites had prostrated themselves upon hearing the name *Ehyeh* pronounced?

There are only three occasions on which the Israelites are recorded as having collectively prostrated themselves in the interval between the revelation at the

Burning Bush and the first Tamid service (Leviticus Ch.9). These are described in Exodus 4:31, 12:27 and 33:10. Of these it is only Exodus 4:31 we need to consider in connection with the name *Ehyeh* because this verse describes the very moment when the Israelites first believed that Moses had been sent to them by God, and they had become convinced of this by the words and signs that God had given to Moses at the Burning Bush. The foremost word he was commanded to say to the Israelites was the name *Ehyeh*, and so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Israelites prostrated themselves on that occasion principally in response to hearing Moses pronounce the name *Ehyeh*.

It is therefore quite reasonable to suggest that the sounding of the single *Teki'ah* trumpet blasts during the Tamid service in the Tabernacle was intended to bring to mind both theophanies at Sinai and the first Tamid service, and to signify and remind the Israelites of the first and only public pronunciation of the name *Ehyeh*. That is, however, a speculative connection, and one that does not yet allow us to confidently associate Exodus 3:14 with the Tamid service, not until we have considered the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* pattern of trumpet blasts immediately preceding the single *Teki'ah* blasts and the possibility that they signify the words *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

All observant Jews will be familiar with the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* pattern of blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah and many will be aware of the reason for it being blown in this way, which is given in Tractate RH 16a and 32a. However, the reason for the pattern of blowing that is presented in Tractate RH is appropriate specifically to Rosh Hashanah, and so it cannot be assumed to have the same significance as the identical pattern of blowing that occurs during the Tamid service. There is no Gemara in Tamid Ch.7, and so there is no way of knowing how the sages of the Talmud would have understood the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* pattern of blasts during the Tamid service. However, we can make some headway in this enquiry by considering the following sequence of events.

Moses erected the Tabernacle on the first day of the first month (Nisan) of the second year after the Exodus (Exodus 40:1-2, 17-18). The Tabernacle and the priests were consecrated on the same day (Exodus 40:9-16) and the first Tamid service

occurred seven days later (Leviticus 9:1-6). The commandment to blow the trumpet over the sacrifice was apparently given after this first service took place, but certainly before the twentieth day of the second month of the same year (Numbers 10:10-12). Rosh Hashanah was first celebrated five months later, in the month of Tishri. Moses was surely responsible for establishing the liturgies for both the Tamid service and for Rosh Hashanah and so he would presumably have established the pattern of blowing the trumpet during the Tamid service and the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. The question, therefore, is this. Is it more likely that the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* pattern of trumpet blasts would have been first established for the daily Tamid service and subsequently adopted for the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, or that the pattern of blasts was first established for the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah and secondarily incorporated into the Tamid service seven months after that service had been established, assuming there is any link between the two at all?

My answer is that given the importance of the Tabernacle and the Tamid service to Moses and the Israelites and the fact that this service was established seven months before the first Rosh Hashanah and that they were both established by Moses, it is far more likely that the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* pattern of trumpet blasts was established specifically for the liturgy of the Tamid service and that the significance it has in this service is therefore specific to it. If this is the case, then a second question must be asked. What could this pattern of trumpet blasts have signified in the Tamid service at that time in Israel's history? They must surely have signified something because there are no meaningless features in the Tamid service, as Tractate Tamid amply testifies.

Numbers 10:3 might appear to supply an answer to this question, because it is there commanded that the *Teki'ah* blasts were to be sounded in order to assemble the Israelites before Moses at the Tent of Meeting. The Tent of Meeting is generally understood to be synonymous with the Tabernacle and so this might appear to suggest that this was the original intent of the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* blasts during the Tamid service. Against this possibility is Numbers 10:7, which actually rules it out entirely, because it is there commanded that a *Teru'ah* blast must not be sounded to gather the congregation. Moreover, it would make no sense to sound trumpet blasts in

order to gather the congregation when the Tamid service was already at its climax, and so this possibility can be conclusively ruled out.

On the other hand, if the words of Exodus 3:14a are as important as they appear to have been to Moses, and if they are as theologically and religiously meaningful as I am proposing in this paper and as so many have so long suspected, then I would suggest that it would be very appropriate to have these words remembered every day during the Tamid services and to have them so remembered in perpetuity. Moreover, because these words are apparently uniquely holy, it is also reasonable to suppose that they would not have been uttered at all after the Exodus from Egypt, not even by Aaron in the Tabernacle. It would therefore have been necessary to represent them symbolically if they were to be publicly remembered in the Tabernacle, for example in the form of trumpet blasts sounded by priests officiating at the Tamid service. I therefore consider it to be more than merely possible that the *Teki'ah Teru'ah Teki'ah* trumpet blasts sounded during the Tamid service represent the words *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. I think it is very likely.

Moreover, if we return briefly to the significance of the number 10, it is suggested in the Talmud (RH 32a) that the sets of 10 blowings of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah represent the 10 Commandments and the 10 utterances by which God created the cosmos. The latter is a reference to Genesis Ch.1 and specifically to the occurrence of the verb *amar* (to say) as applied to God during the creation narrative. However, the word *amar* is applied to God 11 times in Genesis Chapter 1 and it is also applied to Him 11 times during the account of the destruction – the narrative of the Flood in Genesis 6:1-9:17, which association would certainly be very appropriate if it were intentional. On the other hand the word *amar* is applied to God on 10 occasions in the narrative of the Fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:1-3:24) – specifically as employed by Him and in reference to Himself - and it is applied to God 10 times in His exchange with Moses at the Burning Bush - specifically as employed by Him and in reference to Himself. This association between humankind's first sinners on the one hand and the commissioning of Israel's redeemer on the other would again be very appropriate if it was intentional. I make the point of counting only those occurrences of *amar* that are specifically employed by God and in

reference to Himself because in the story of Adam and Eve both the serpent and Eve quote God as ‘saying’ something but it is not God to whom the word *amar* is directly applied on those occasions. Likewise, in His exchange with Moses at the Burning Bush God commands Moses to say (*amar*) certain things on His behalf, which thus become instances of Moses ‘saying’ (*amar*) something and not of God so doing. By this count the second *amar* in Exodus 3:15 and in 3:16 are excluded, because it is Moses who is to do the ‘saying’ on those occasions, but the *amar* of 3:17 is included, because although it is Moses who is to speak this occurrence of *amar* he is to do so as a direct quotation of God’s words and so it is spoken by God and in reference to Himself. ‘*amar*’ is also the final word of Exodus 20:1, and so is the word that immediately precedes the speaking by God of what are amongst the most influential words ever spoken; the “10 Words” with which He would seal His covenant with Israel.

Bearing in mind that the text of Exodus 19:13-20:18 appears to suggest that the sound of the *shofar* was the sound of the voice of God as experienced by the Israelites at Sinai, it would seem to be very appropriate to blow this instrument 10 times when acknowledging His Kingship over Israel, and when remembering humankind’s primal sin of succumbing to the temptation to do that which they know to be contrary to His will, and when remembering that God sent a redeemer to Israel when they were slaves in Egypt, and when remembering the occasion of that redeemer (Moses) being commissioned, and when remembering the Law that He gave through that redeemer to enable humankind’s redemption, and perhaps even when celebrating the memory of Him actually speaking directly to the Israelites at Sinai when He sealed His covenant with them. I am not suggesting that this is how the *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah should be understood, because that has long since been established in Jewish tradition. I am only suggesting that the way in which it is blown could reasonably bring all of these themes to mind. It is therefore entirely justifiable to suggest a connection between the *Teki’ah Teru’ah Teki’ah* pattern of trumpet blasts during the Tamid service and the words of Exodus 3:14 and to suggest a connection between the *Teki’ah Teru’ah Teki’ah* pattern of trumpet blasts in the Temple and the pattern of *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah. Of course all of the connections I have pointed out might be accidental but if they are then they would

collectively amount to what I would consider to be a very considerable and very striking coincidence.

Returning specifically to the subject of Exodus 3:14 and the Tamid service, I must say that looking at it as objectively as I can, it really does seem to me that all lines of enquiry in relation to the blowing of the trumpets during the Tamid service do lead eventually to Sinai, to Moses and to the revelation at the Burning Bush, and so I believe that a real link exists between the two.

There is much more that could be said on this subject but I think that no definite conclusion can be reached one way or the other because the records are insufficient to allow us to be so conclusive. In the final analysis I can only say that I feel sure Moses would have wanted these words to be remembered every day and by every Jew everywhere, and that he would have wanted them to be remembered splendidly, and I strongly suspect that he would have forbidden them being spoken aloud anywhere, and so to have them publicly remembered by the sounding of silver trumpets at the climax of the Tamid service would seem to be an ideal way to accomplish that remembrance. This would also explain why the words of Exodus 3:14 have been all but forgotten in contemporary Judaism because the Tamid service ceased when the Temple was destroyed on the 17th of Tammuz in the year 70 CE, and so the great majority of Jews have had little reason to wonder what the trumpet blasts in this service might signify.

⁴¹ *Exodus, The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, Commentary by Nahum Sarna, (NY: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p.17, n.13.

⁴² Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.225.

⁴³ Sarna N., *Exploring Exodus, The Origins of Biblical Israel*, (NY: Schocken Books Inc., 1996), p.52.

⁴⁴ Tigay J., *Exodus*, in Berlin A. and Zvi Brettler M. (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*, p.111.

⁴⁵ Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.224-226.

⁴⁶ Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.181.

⁴⁷ Consider, for example, the interpretations of Maimonides and Buber. The problem with the question, as Maimonides saw it, was stated as follows:

“Either the Israelites knew the name, or they had never heard it. If the name was known to them, they would perceive in it no argument in favour of the mission of Moses, his knowledge and their knowledge of the Divine name being the same. If, on the other hand, they had never heard it mentioned, and if the knowledge of it was to prove the mission of Moses, what evidence would they have that this was really the name of God?”(Maimonides, *Guide*, Part 1, Ch. 63/LXIII)

Maimonides solved this problem by interpreting the question of Exodus 3:13 as a request by Moses for proof of the existence of God and interpreted Exodus 3:14 as a summary statement of this proof. I have already analysed Maimonides’ interpretation under the heading *Medieval Jewish Thought* and I have there explained my reasons for rejecting it. Buber, by contrast, understood the question of 3:13 to mean, *“What finds expression in or lies concealed behind the name?”* He also finds the answer to this question in Exodus 3:14, although in entirely different terms to Maimonides and I have likewise explained my reasons for rejecting his interpretation under the heading *Modern Jewish Philosophy*.

The reason Maimonides and Buber misunderstood the question of Exodus 3:13 is that they were conforming it to their interpretations of Exodus 3:14-15 in

which the only name revealed was in Exodus 3:15 and in which Exodus 3:14 plays only a supporting role.

The answer to Maimonides' question in the above extract, by the way, is that Moses would have needed to understand the meaning of the name *Ehyeh* before he could approach the Israelites with it and with this meaning he could have brought to the Israelites a whole new understanding of God.

⁴⁸ See (e.g.) Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.181.

⁴⁹ Berlin A. and Zvi Brettler M., *The Jewish Study Bible*, p.111.

⁵⁰ Note that in Propp's version of this sentence there is a typographical error, with the root *hyh* written incorrectly as *hyy*. *hyh* is the unpointed third masculine singular Qal perfect, which when pointed is written *hayah* and is translated 'he was'. As well as being the third masculine singular Qal perfect of the verb, *hayah* is also known as the verb root of *hayah*. The verb root is the form under which it is listed in the lexicon in Hebrew script and so according to the Hebrew alphabet (ref. Strong's 1961; BDB 224a).

⁵¹ Abba R., *The Divine Name YHWH*, 1961, JBL 80, p.320-28. Quoted extract from p.324. Bold Type my own.

⁵² You may be struck by the scarcity of both the perfect and imperfect forms of *hayah* that translate as 'I am'. This is due to the fact that in biblical Hebrew the English word 'am' is most often implied rather than supplied.

⁵³ A stative verb is one that describes a condition or state of existence. All of the verses cited in the preceding paragraph employ *hayah* in this stative sense.

⁵⁴ De Vaux R., *The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH*, in: Durham J. and Porter J. (eds.), *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies*, (London: SCM Press, 1970), p.48-75. Quoted extract from p.66. Parentheses and bold type are my own.

⁵⁵ See (e.g.) Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, p.191.

⁵⁶ Propp, *Exodus 1-18, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, p.205.

⁵⁷ That is to say, God created all that is not Him and before He created there was only Him. I have made this point in two different ways and in successive lines because I particularly want to impress it upon all who are rationally contemplating God to any extent. There is no more fundamental and crucial an understanding of God than that before He created, He was All-That-Is, the totality of existence, The Perfect One besides Whom there was no other.

⁵⁸ For an authoritative statement of the Jewish understanding of the perfect unity of God see Maimonides' *Guide*, Ch.51 (LI) where he puts it as follows: "*Belief in unity cannot mean essentially anything but the belief in one single homogenous uncompounded essence; not in a plurality of ideas but in a single idea. Whichever way you look at it, and however you examine it, you must find it to be one, not dividing itself in any manner or for any reason into two ideas. No plurality must be discoverable in it either in fact or in thought*" (Quoted from: *Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, An Abridged Edition with Introduction and Commentary by Julius Guttmann, Translated from the Arabic by Chaim Rabin*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, p.67-68).

Pines translates the same passage as follows: “*For there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplication of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two notions; and you will not find therein any multiplicity either in the thing as it is outside of the mind or as it is in the mind*” (Pines S., Vol. I, University of Chicago press, 1963, p.113).

Alternatively, Friedlander’s translation of this passage is available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/gfp/gfp061.htm>, p.69.

⁵⁹ For an authoritative Jewish statement of this understanding, see: Maimonides M. *Guide*, Ch.53 (LIII), where he put it thus: “*if by wisdom we understand the consciousness of self... the subject and the object of that consciousness are undoubtedly identical [as regards God]: for according to our opinion He is not composed of an element that apprehends and another that does not apprehend*”. Available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/gfp/gfp063.htm>, p.74.

Pines translates the same extract as follows: “*For we wished to signify by “knowledge” the apprehension of one’s own essence. Now the essence that apprehends is undoubtedly the same as the essence that is apprehended. For in our opinion He is not composed of two things, the thing that apprehends and another thing that does not apprehend.*” (Pines, Vol. I, p.122).

⁶⁰ See *Diagram: The Creative Activity of God* in Part II of this website and endnote 61 to further clarify this point.

⁶¹ See *Diagram: The Creative Activity of God* in Part II of this website for an illustration of this point. The *beginning* of God’s creating was an act of will, not of mind. The *formation* of the perfectly formless beginning of Creation was an act of

mind, which became active in response to the perception in God of the beginning of His Creation. In the beginning, Creation was in the condition of perfectly formless potential (Genesis 1:1-2), anticipating the formative imprint of God's word (Genesis 1:3-27), which can only have been spoken after He had become aware, as illustrated in the *Diagram* and as explained in the following passages.

⁶² The concept of non-existence (aka. non-being) has attracted the attention of philosophers ever since Parmenides first addressed it some 2,500 years ago. According to Parmenides, all that can be said of non-existence is that it is not and that it cannot therefore constitute a valid subject of philosophical enquiry. To illustrate the issue under consideration there is only one example that any reader of this paper need consider and that is the irreconcilability of the Christian and Jewish understandings of God. The Christian idea of God is that He is three persons of one essence and the Jewish idea is that He is one Person of one essence. Both of these ideas are undeniably in the realm of existence but both cannot be true. For most readers of this site, I would expect that either one or the other of them is accepted as true and the other as false. It would be absurd to suggest that the one that is false is in the realm of non-existence. Try telling that to two billion Christians. Therefore ideas can be in the realm of existence and be content-rich but have no basis in reality.

However, the concept of non-existence is unique in that although it is in the realm of existence, it is absolutely devoid of conceptual content. Indeed, it is the only concept in the entire realm of existence that is absolutely devoid of content. If you think about non-existence and in so doing your mind comes to rest on any idea, that idea is in the realm of existence like the concept of non-existence itself. So the concept of non-existence is in the realm of existence but it has no basis in reality and is absolutely devoid of conceptual content.

The best way I can think of to illustrate the concept of non-existence is with the following exercise. Open the documents folder on your computer. Create a new folder and entitle it 'non-existence'. Now send the document to your desktop as a shortcut. Now delete the 'non-existence' folder in your documents and close down your documents. You are now left with a short-cut on your desktop entitled 'non-

existence’, which when you click on it does not open onto anything, not even a blank page. That is precisely what non-existence is, a concept entirely devoid of content. Therefore I believe it is just as Parmenides said nearly 2,500 years ago, that ‘non-existence’ cannot constitute a valid subject of philosophical enquiry and that all that can be said of it is that there is no such thing.

⁶³ See *Diagram: The Creative Activity of God* in Part II of this website for an illustration of this point.

⁶⁴ Many readers will be aware that Christianity professes belief in one God. Some readers may find this profession confusing and perhaps even misleading, suggesting as it does a belief in only one Personal God. It is important to understand that this is not what Christians believe and so I will briefly clarify their position.

The one God of Christian profession does not refer to one Personal God as it does in Judaism and Islam. The one God of Christian profession refers instead to the Divine essence, which Christian thinkers must acknowledge to be numerically one if they are to make any claim to monotheistic belief (See e.g. Aquinas, *Summa 1, 13, 8*, where he states, “*this name "God" is imposed to signify the Divine nature*”. In Christian thought, Divine ‘nature’ is synonymous with Divine ‘essence’. Available online at: <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FP/FP013.html#FPQ13OUTP1>). There are instead in Christianity three Divine persons, each of whom is necessarily professed to be identical to the same Divine essence because the Divine essence is necessarily acknowledged by Christian thinkers to be numerically one, perfectly simple and indivisible (see e.g. Aquinas, *Summa 1, 39, 1*, where he states, “*Thence it follows that in God essence is not really distinct from person*”. Available at: <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FP/FP039.html#FPQ39OUTP1>). Each of the three persons is thus necessarily professed to be God (see The Athanasian Creed, vs. 15-16, available online at: <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/Quicumque.html>), and, despite the obvious objection arising out of the indiscernibility of identicals, each of the three is also necessarily professed to be absolutely distinct from the other two.

Such a populous scheme of divinity should by any normal and universally acceptable standard of rational analysis yield a total count of three personal gods. However, Christian thinkers do not feel bound by any such rational standard and so they flatly deny the existence of three personal gods while at the same time insisting upon the existence of three distinct Divine persons each of whom is God. They do so because to do otherwise would be to confirm Christianity as a polytheistic and hence pagan religion and presumably because mule-headed denial of the obvious is the course they find most acceptable when faced with the distressingly insoluble incoherence of their own beliefs.

None of the three Divine persons (or gods) in the Christian trinity correspond to the Personal God of Jewish belief. They do not do so individually and they do not do so collectively. The Christian profession of belief in one God is in fact an intellectual acknowledgement of the rationally established existential condition of the Divine essence and is not at all a statement of belief in the existence of a Personal God, which I suspect few Christians are aware of as they recite by rote the opening words of their creeds.

If the reader is interested in the refutation of Christianity, then I would recommend to them my *Refutation of Christianity* published on www.exodus-314.com. Also, for an excellent and highly readable summary of the most important Christian beliefs and the unsuccessful Jewish attempts to refute them I would recommend Daniel Lasker's *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity In The Middle Ages*, published by The Litmann Library of Jewish Civilisation 2007.