GOD WHO MAY BE:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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As a first step towards a phenomenology of religious transfiguration, we will focus on the epiphany of the Burning Bush in Exodus 3:14. Our aim is to identify and address the hidden crux of this enigma: the extraordinary phenomenon of a deity transfiguring itself as an angel which appears and disappears in a fire that burns without burning out, that ignites without consuming, that names itself, paradoxically, as that which cannot be named, and that presents itself in the moment as that which is still to come.

In what follows, we discuss two main traditions of interpretation under the headings, ontological and eschatological, before offering a third or median option which we call onto-eschatological. Our ultimate suggestion is that we might do better to reinterpret the God of Exodus 3 neither as “I who am” nor as “I who am not” but rather as “I am who may be”—that is, as the possibility to be, which obviates the extremes of being and non-being. ἐγώ ἐσμαι ἐγώ that might thus be read as signature of the God of the possible, a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future. That, in a word, is our wager.

I. The Ontological Reading

a. Augustine

From the outset the Greeks rendered Exodus 3:14 in terms of the verb "to be", or εἰμί. Inheriting the Hellenic formula ἐγώ ἐσμαι ἐγώ—I am the one who is—Augustine and the Latins claimed there was no fundamental difference between this ἐγώ ἐσμαι ἐγώ and the case of metaphysics. The Exotic formula was considered by early and medieval Christian theologians to be

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the highest way of saying vere esse, ipsum esse, that is, Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing. While the human soul is split apart into memory (it was), attention (it is) and expectation (it will be), God suffers no such distincio animi. The God revealed in Exodus is what He is in Himself, one and the same: his own essentia—mipsum esse existing beyond all time, all history, all movement.

Already in the Confessions (XIII, 31, 46), Augustine turns the verbal "is" of God into a substantive formula. And this move becomes more explicit when Augustine comments directly on Exodus 3:14 (which he renders as Qui est, misit me ad vos)—"Because he is Is, that is to say God is Being itself, ipsum esse, in its most absolute and full sense. 'Esset tibi nomen ipsum esse', he says to God (Exarr. Ps. 101, 10)." Consolidating this quasi-Parmenidean reading, Augustine makes an important distinction between what God is "for us" (huius nomen misericordiae) and what He is "in himself" (huius nomen substantiae) in the Exodic revelation. While the former more historically anthropomorphically conceived is conveyed by the formula "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", the latter—safeguarding the absolute, inaccessible and transcendent character of God—is expressed by the ego sum qui sum. It is this latter sense that Augustine has in mind in the De Trinitate when he identifies the God of Exodus with the Greek-Platonic notion of substance (ousia) understood as an a-temporal, a-historic, immutable essence: "He is no doubt substantia, or if one prefers, he is the ousia which the Greeks called ousia... ousia comes from esse. And who is 'more than He who said to his servant Moses: 'ego sum qui sum'... This is why there is only one substance or immutable essence which is God and to which being itself (ipse esse) properly belongs" (De Trinitate, V, 2, 3). Augustine concludes from this that anything that changes or is capable of "becoming something which he was not already" cannot be said to possess being itself. We can say of God therefore that "He is" precisely because he is that which does not change and cannot change.

b. Aquinas

Aquinas developed the Augustinian view that the qui est of Exodus is the principal name of God and the highest formulation of being. The revelation of Exodus, he affirmed, designates "true being, that is being that is eternal, immutable, simple self-sufficient, and the cause and principle of every creature". For Aquinas, as for Augustine, the esse of God is nothing other than his essentia, and as such exists eternally in the present without past or future: that is, without movement, change, desire or possibility—Deus est actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate (Summa Theologiae, I, 3, a 4, c). With Aquinas and the scholastics, the God of Exodus is thus unequivocally enthroned as the most fully-hedged "act of Being." In both his Commentary on the Sentences and De Substantiis Separatis, the Exodus verse is invoked by Thomas to corroborate speculative thought about the most ultimate mode of Being. For Being says more of God than either the Good or the One. The proper name of God revealed in Exodus 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence. Eise is the essentia of God. This obtains for Aquinas in matter how much the divine essence surpasses the limits of rational speculation, approaching God only in an analogical way in the proofs for his existence. Aquinas concludes, after all, that while we can prove that God exists we cannot know what he is. But these reservations notwithstanding, Aquinas has no hesitation in saying that Exodus 3:14 as confirmation of his proofs in the Summa (Ad 3). This is how he justifies his conviction that the Exodic formula provides us with the ultimate name for God: "The reason for this name is that, in its reference, it exceeds every form, because it signifies being itself (ipse esse). Moreover, the less determined the names the better they pertain to God, by virtue of their common and absolute character. Every other name in fact connotes a restrictive modality. Now 'He who is' does not define any particular modality of being; but it envelops all indeterminate modes. Nevertheless, the sacred Tetragrammaton preserves better still the incommunicability and singularity of God" (Summa Theologiae, q 13, a 11).

Without the encounter of Greek metaphysics with biblical religious thought, philosophers "would have never reached the idea that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God's very essence". Or as Etienne Gilson remarked in The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, "Exodus lays down the principle from which Christian philosophy will be suspended... There is but one God and this God is Being, that is the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy." With this scholastic verdict, the traditional notion of faith seeking understanding reaches its logical culmination. The confutation of Yahweh with the supreme Being of the philosophers is sealed. And this conjunction of God and Being was to survive for at least fifteen hundred years—from Bonaventure and Aquinas to Gilson and the neo-Scholastics. Thus did the God of Exodus secure ontological tenure in the God of metaphysics. And this tenure has come to be known, after Heidegger, as "ontological"; a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (Sein)—albeit the highest, first and most indeterminate of all beings.

Ontotheology, we might say, sought to have its cake and eat it: to equate God with a modality of being while safeguarding His ultimately indefinable and transcendent nature. Unlike the negative theology of Dionysius and the Christian neo-Platonists, however, most scholastics identified God with Being by means of proofs and analogies, seeking some sort of balance between Being's universality and indeterminacy on the one hand, and God's density as a quasi-subject or person (which holds God from descent into infinite dispersion) on the other. It is, some argue, a short step from such ontological equation to Hegel's notion of a "concrete universal"; or Schelling's famous equation of the divine "I am" with the self-identification of the transcendental Ego. Indeed, Schelling will go so far as to claim that the "I AM" is "one and the same thing with our immediate self-consciousness." This unification of divine and human consciousness finds modern echoes
not only in German idealism and romanticism (Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, Coleridge), but also in a contemporary strand of new age mysticism.

II. The Eschatological Reading

There is a powerful counter-tradition which resists ontological approaches to God. This second tradition of interpretation—which I call eschatological—is arguably more attuned to the original biblical context of meaning. Here the emphasis is on the ethical and dynamic character of God. The very framing of the Exodonic self-revelation in terms of a response to Moses’ question—who shall I say sent me?—opens the phrase toward the "mark of becoming." This reading points to the fact that Exodus 3:14 falls within the framework of a solicitation, that is, assumes the task of summoning us towards an eschatological horizon. Such an understanding of the Exodonic Name contrasts sharply with the more essentialist conceptions of divine Being in medieval and post-medieval metaphysics.

a) The God Who Promises—The Ethical Mandate

It is important to recall here that Moses responds to the call of the burning bush—"Moses! Moses!"—with the reply "Here I am." The self-revelation of God that precedes and follows Moses’ reply is less predicable than appellative. Above all else, it is a call and a promise: "This is the name I shall bear forever, by which future generations will call me" (Exodus 3:15). We should be chary, therefore, of hypothesizing the "name" and try to relocate it where it properly belongs, namely, within the orbit of a dynamic mandate. Amplifying the meaning of 'shemah 'asir 'shemah in this manner allows for a plurality of interpretations of the verb "to be" used by God in his address to Moses. And this means reading the formula in terms of function rather than substance, in terms of narrative rather than syllogism, in terms of relation rather than abstraction. God’s "I shall be" appears to need Moses’ response "Here I am" in order to enter history and blaze the path towards the Kingdom.

One consequence of the infiltration of this transfiguring God into the history of Greek and Latin metaphysics, was to inject the latter with a specifically ethical charge. Smoke from the burning bush blurred the clear blue sky of Graeco-Roman assurance. Nobody slept quite so well at night anymore, or breathed quite so easily during the day. There was a whiff of anxiety and expectation in the air now. Dogmatic definitions of God began to fretter and come undone. And even those neo-Platonists who recognized the unknowable nature of God found it difficult to handle the urgency of this eschatological summons. God, it seemed, was undergoing an identity crisis. (Though not a gender one yet; He was still called He for a long while after.) And while it was all very well to agree with the likes of the Pseudo-Dionysius that the accompaniment of every affirmation with a negation points, apophatically, to a God beyond the proper names of being, one was still left facing the quandary: if God is devoid of all historical being is He not then also deprived of the power to act and call and love—a God so distant as to be distant? So whether it was a question of the metaphysical God of essence or hyper-essence, it was hard to square either with a burning bush God resolved to retrieve the past and inaugurate a new beginning.

One exegetical commentator, André LaCroque, suggests that Moses’ question to God may in part be an attempt to acquire this unknown name of divine power, particularly when we remember his competition with the Egyptian magicians. Moses’ request, on this reading, is for just such a Name of Power; and God’s response to his request may be read accordingly as a refusal of this request. The very circularity and indeterminacy of the nameless—'shemah 'asir 'shemah—confounds the attempt to glean magical power from it. What God resists is not being addressed by Moses as such—He is invoked on countless occasions in the personal form of "Thou" throughout the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 99:6). No, what he resists is being reduced to the status of an idol. In short, God is repudiating any name that would seek to appropriate Him here and now as some thaumaturgical presence. Instead, God keeps Himself open for a future, allowing for a more radical translation of his nameless name as "I am as I shall show myself." In this respect, the linguistic root hqy 'asir 'hqyh is to be understood. LaCroque argues, less as a mere copula than as a token of agency: more like "to be with, to become, to show oneself... to befall, to happen" (cadero, virente)." The God revealed in Exodus is more, however, than a demystification of pagan tendencies to invoke Divine Names as mythical powers. It also marks a step beyond the capricious deity inherited by the Hebrews themselves from certain ancestral narratives recorded in Genesis—in particular the "sacrificial" account of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah in Genesis 22 or the burnt sacrifices performed by Abraham in Genesis 15. Exodus 3:14 may be read thus not only as a biblical critique of other mystery-rite religious but as a self-critique of such traces in biblical religion itself.

According to the eschatological view, the Greek rendition of Exodus as—ego twn ho on I am the one who is—is too much of the original dynamism of the Hebrew expression, and conceals too much to Hellenistic ontology. And so doing it misses its mark. The burning bush epiphany is to be understood less as an ontological substance in opposition to non-being, than as a self-generating event. In this announcement, an agent is designated whose "work is actualized in Israel’s exodus from Egypt"—namely, the self-revealing agency of the "Thou in dialogue with the divine I".

In such light, Moses’ question in Exodus 3:14 may be reinterpreted as a radical challenge to the One who has revealed himself as the God of his ancestors to proclaim a new program of action by becoming different from what he used to be and has been until now. The fact that Moses returns to Egypt and delivers a message of emancipation to his people signals the
inauguration of an utterly novel mode of divine relation. The One who was experienced by them as the God of their Fathers, now discloses himself as the God of their sons and daughters.

So the Exodid name, we may now surmise, is both an I that is identical with itself in its past and a Thou that goes forth into the future. It reveals God as he is, at the same time as it commits God, and his emissary Moses, to an action of salvation. This is why the Name is both theophanic and performative. It serves as the pre-name and sur-name of that which cannot be objectively named. And it is this excess or surplus that saves God from being reduced to a mere signified—transcendental or otherwise. The transfiguring God of the burning bush remains a trace which explodes the present towards the future, a trait which cannot be bordered or possessed.

God does not reveal himself, therefore, as an essence in se but as an I-Self for us. And the most appropriate mode of human response to this exodic revelation is precisely that: commitment to a response. Such commitment shows Yhwh as God-the-agent, whose co-correspondents, from Moses to the esoteric prophets and Jesus, see themselves as implicated in the revelation as receivers of a gift—a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions. That is why Moses is called to be as “God for Aaron” and “for the Pharaoh” (Exodus 4:16 and 7:1). Moses and the prophets are implicated in the revelation showing us how Yhwh acts concretely through his human emissaries. With the revelation of his Name, “God tells of himself something like ‘with you Moses—and with Israel throughout history—I stand or fall’”. Exodus 3 is the proclamation that God has invested the whole of Himself in his emissary’s history.

b) The God Who Comes—Historical Mandate

We may say, consequently, that the Exodid act of divine self-disclosure signals an inextricable communion between God and humans, a radically new sense—as Levitas points out—of fraternity, responsibility and commitment to a shared history of “becoming”, beginning with the emancipation from bondage in Egypt. God may henceforth be recognized as someone who becomes with us, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him. God’s relation with mortals is, in other words, less one of conceptuality than of covenant. From which it follows that most philosophical reflections on God are in need of revision. And certainly, the orthodox ontological categories of omnipotence, omniscience and self-causality, originally forged sub specie ateritatis, could do with a radical rethink sub specie historicae. Faced with the burning bush one doesn’t merely speculate; one runs, or if one holds one’s ground, one praises, dances, acts.

The eschatological wager reaches here its most dramatic stakes. Once the “unaccomplished form of the verb”—chayeh—is taken in its full implications, one realizes that God is what he will be when he becomes his Kingdom and his Kingdom comes on earth. At the eschaton, God promises to be God (cf. Isaiah 11:9; Psalm 110:1; Zechariah 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:24–28). Meanwhile, God is in the process of establishing his lordship on earth and the chayeh ‘aser chayeh may be rendered accordingly as “I will be what I will be; I will become what I will become”. In addition therefore to the unaccomplished form of the verb we find an “unnatural taut drama” signaled by the relative pronoun aser (what/who) “for its content essentially depends on the quality of history that Moses and his people will pour into it”.

Thus does the Exodid Name come to supplement Elohim as the name for the living God. For if Elohim—a name derived from a common noun—is the transcendent God who sat in heaven (Psalm 47), created earth and demanded sacrifice (e.g., of Isaac), Yhwh is mere a name-of-invocation which makes the living God more accessible to human relation and history (i.e., more personal and more eschatological). With the revelation of Exodus, “God ceases to be the Unnameable, the inaccessible, the one a se et per se. He ceases to be impossible—if he ever was.” Yhwh is now revealed as affected and vulnerable, showing himself henceforth as one who wrestles with himself (Hosea), laments (Jeremiah), regrets (Samuel), seduces and forgives (Psalms). Here we witness a God who persuades rather than coerces, invites rather than imposes, asks rather than impels. This God of Mosaic manifestation cannot be God without relating to his other—humanity. And seldom has this wager been so dramatically expressed as in the following Midrash on Isaiah 43:12: “If you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.”

The existential implications of this inauguration of a personal God are revolutionary. For what we are witnessing here is a radical alteration of the metaphysical use of the copula. What is crucial for Greek thought is to be, since divine being is ultimately timeless and permanent, ontological rather than ethical. (Just think of Aristotle’s God.) For the Hebrews, by contrast, what is most important is to become, to be able. Thus while the Hellenists will translate Exodus 3.14 as “I am the Being who is eternal”, a non-Hellenic Jew like Maimonides encourages us to conceive of Yhwh as an agent with an active purpose, a God who does rather than a being who is (Guide to the Perplexed 1.54–58).

The unnameable name is, in short, God’s way of transfiguring—that is, of appearing-disappearing—in a bush that never burns away. The Exodid revelation is an ingenuous wordplay which heralds an eschatological transcendence—a transcendence with the wherewithal to resist the lures of logoscentric immanence.

III: The God Who May Be—A Via Tertia

In conclusion we will briefly trace a hermeneutic retrieval (Wiederholung) of the Exodid Name which seeks to chart an itinerary beyond the polar opposition between ontology and theology. My wager is here that is at the chiasmus where ‘chayeh meets ensai a revolutionary exchange operates—with
Eckhart's commentary on the verb sum also reinterprets the traditional being of God. "Being-as-couple" becomes being in "solitude and separation".

Qui sum, God here absolves himself from all predication, announcing both the ontological difference between Being and beings and the theological difference between divine and human. Here is a sum whose very burning-bush indeterminacy, in Breton's words, "expresses the purificatory fire of a certain iconoclasm".

And what, finally, of the who? Here again, Eckhart may be seen as stressing the dynamism of the self-revealing God. "The repetition which says twice 'I am who I am' is the purity of affirmation which excludes all negation...it indicates a certain reflexive conversion in itself and on itself, a sanctuary or repose which holds in itself, what is more, it indicates a specific effervescence (or bubbling over) or birth of self: this being, in fact, conceals a fervor which expands within itself and onto itself in a sort of bubbling, light within light, it penetrates everything..." By means of such hyperbole, Eckhart's rendering of the Exodic verse actually destabilizes and reworks traditional metaphysics. Behind their ostensible orthodoxy, the ontological proposition esse est Deus and the theological proposition Deus est esse mutually deconstruct each other. But this bilateral deconstruction does not ignore the fundamental co-implication of being and God in flesh. On the contrary, it shows that God's self-nomination cannot dispense with the deuter through being, lest it become so unknowable as to pass us by unseen and unheard. There's more to God than being. Granted. But to pass beyond you have to pass through it.

Thus the ontological commentaries on the ego sum qui sum found in Eckhart, may be seen—from an eschatological viewpoint—to carry a presentiment of God as pure gift and passage. Pure gift in the sense, noted by Derrida, of self-giving beyond the economic condition of return. "Being", as the Meister put it, "is so superior in rank and purity and so much God's own that no one can give it but he—as he gives himself."

But God is also pure passage in the sense that while he always stays faithful to his promise, He never stays put. Eckhart's own best defense against the charges of ontotheology or mystical ontosynthesis is the reminder that he deemed the dialogue between God and being to be provisional rather than final. God passes through being just as we beings pass through God. But the primary verb is just that: passage, understood as transition and migration. Reinterpreted from an eschatological angle, God is the imperative of transit. "This is a God who disturbs, uproots, reiterates the call of Yahweh to Abraham to 'leave his house'; a God who shaves every edifice, even the venerable esse subsistens." Which is surely why Eckhart takes his leave of being only after he has rendered homage to its imprescribable necessity as passage. His famous formula—"I pray God to rid me of God"—may be read consequently as an echo of the imperative to transit. The move beyond ontology has as corollary the move beyond essentialist theology, surpassing the essence of God...
towards God’s ultimate promise. In this wise, the metaphysics of exodus (being-word-abys) becomes an exodus of metaphysics. A self-emptying movement of metaphysics beyond itself. The revelation of God as traversal.

Transfiguring through and beyond metaphysics, God reveals himself, in keeping with his promissory note in Exodus, as a God that neither is nor is not but may be. And here we might add the intellectual dexterity of Cusanus to the deconstructive daring of Eckhart. God, as Nicholas of Cusa puts it, is best considered neither as esse, nor as rei, but as possit. Transgressing the traditional scholastic capture of God as esse, Cusanus redesigns God as Possit (absolute possibility which includes all that is actual). “Existence (esse) presupposes possibility (possit),” writes Cusanus, “since it is not the case that anything exists unless there is possibility from which it exists.” “God alone,” he concludes, “is what he is able to be.” It is arguably this same hidden intellectual heritage which resurfaces, however obscurely, in Schelling’s definition of the God of Exodus 3:14 as the “possibility-to-be” (sein wird) or the “immediate can-be” (unmittelbar sein-kommodet); or again in Heidegger’s later understanding of the gift of being as a “loving-possibilitizig” (das Vermögennen der Mütter). This counter-tradition of readings calls, I believe, for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be. What I term an onto-escatological hermeneutics. Or more simply, a poetics of the possible. Let me conclude the above explorations with the following surmises: In the circular words, I-AM-WHO-MAY-BE, God transfigures and exceeds being. He/She reveals itself, surprisingly and dramatically, as possit. The Exodus 3:14 exchange between God and Moses might, I have been suggesting, be usefully reread not as the manifestation of some secret name or essence but as a pledge to remain constant to a promise. God, transfiguring himself in the guise of an angel, speaks through (pro-sou) a burning bush and seems to say something like this: I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice? The God who reveals himself on Mt. Horeb is and is not, neither is nor is not. It is a God who puns and tautologizes, flares up and withdraws, promising always to return, to become again, to come to be what he is not yet for us. This God is the coming God who may-be. The one who resists quietism as much as zealotry, who renounces both the ontology of essence and the voluntarist impatience to appropriate promised lands. This Exodus God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness—perhaps. Yes, perhaps if we remain faithful to the promise, one day, some day, we know not when, I-am-who-may-be may at last be. Be what? we ask. Be how? Be what is promised as it is promised. And what is that? we ask. A kingdom of justice and love: There and then, to the human “Here I am”, God may in turn respond, “Here I am.” But not yet.