

# THE DOUBLE EXCESS OF THE NAME

## Deconstructing the Metaphysics of *Exodus*

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Article abstract

Etienne Gilson called “metaphysics of the Exodus” the thought which affirms the identity of God and Being, a fundamental thesis of “Christian philosophy” since Augustine. It is indeed authorized by the word – “I am He who is” – addressed to Moses on Sinai, as it was transmitted through its Greek and Latin translations. Which seems to inscribe the God of Biblical Revelation in Western metaphysics understood as onto-theology. Such a “god” then exposes himself to the same fate – and the same decline – as that which affects the ontology inherited from the Greeks. However, this ontological understanding of the Word of the Bush has been challenged in various ways. Several authors, from Eckhart to Lacan, have seen in it a negative statement – “I am who I am” ... and do not ask for more –, that is to say an enigma. The dominant trend of Jewish tradition has understood it, on the contrary, as the affirmation of a being-with, the promise of a covenant: “I will be with you as He who will always be with you”. Should we discover here, as Ricoeur suggests, a “nonGreek understanding of Being” where biblical Revelation would exceed the onto-theological determination of metaphysics? Couldn't this statement have a more directly political meaning, that of a subversion of the self-affirmation of the Pharaoh's power? Perhaps the text of Exodus 3 attests there is another excess, more radical, when he superimposes to the promise of the Covenant the revelation of a singular Name: that of an Other I whose call would thwart the anonymous neutrality of Being.

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## THE DOUBLE EXCESS OF THE NAME Deconstructing the Metaphysics of *Exodus*

JACOB ROGOZINSKI

The ‘metaphysics of Exodus’ is the expression used by the eminent historian of philosophy Étienne Gilson. Under this designation, he names the thesis that has been drawn from *Exodus* 3:14, or, more precisely, from its translation into Greek. To Moses, who asks for his name, the one who assigns him his mission replies *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, an expression translated in the Septuagint as *egô eimi ho ôn*: “I am that I am” or “I am Being.” Thus, the text of Exodus seems to affirm the identity of God and Being, a fundamental thesis of what Gilson unhesitatingly called “Christian philosophy.” From Augustine’s *Confessions* to the *Summa Theologiae*, the same thesis underpins the mainstream of Christian theology, and is found among Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, and Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna. It culminates in Bonaventure’s astonishing assertion that “Being is the proper name of God.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, ‘Being’ is a noun, and the most common of them all, if Hegel is to be believed. But what right do we have to equate it with a *proper* noun? A formula like “I am that I am” or “I am He who is” can at best be qualified as an indirect noun, a *quasi-name*. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible reveals several other names for the God of Israel, such as the tetragrammaton YHWH, but also El, Elohim, and El-Shaddai. These are not so easily identified with the name of Being. Doesn’t the assertion that Being is God’s only or most proper name presuppose the erasure and forgetting of these other divine names? And is there not, in these other ways of naming him, a gesture that exceeds his reduction to Being? It is this excess of the Name – this double excess – that we are here to analyze.

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1. *Commentary on the Hexateuch*, quoted by Édouard WÉBER, “L’herméneutique christologique d’Exode 3,14 chez quelques maîtres parisiens du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in Alain DE LIBÉRA et Émilie ZUM BRUNN (éd.), *Celui qui est*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1986, p. 79.

## A God “beyond the Being”?

When we identify God with the Being, we need to know what meaning we attribute to the concept of Being. According to Heidegger, Western metaphysics is characterized precisely by its forgetfulness of Being (*Seinsverlassenheit*), where it confuses Being (*Sein*) with a being or entity (*Seiende*), ignoring the ontological difference that distinguishes them while relating them to each other. When it aims at Being, metaphysics never reaches beyond beings, either beings in totality (which qualifies it as ontology), or the supreme being it calls ‘God’ (which determines it as theology). Metaphysics thus defines itself as ontotheology, assigning theology to the subordinate position of a particular, albeit eminent, science, that which takes as its object the being called “God.” It is worth noting, however, that Heidegger, with his customary brutal casualness, takes no account of thinkers like Porphyry and Thomas Aquinas, who defined God as Being (*einai, esse*), explicitly distinguishing it from being (*on, ens*). In fact, whether God is identified with Being as such, or with a being conceived as the most eminent instance, God has always been reduced to a mode of being. We are dealing with two competing variants of the same fundamental thesis.

It is this thesis that needs to be challenged: by assigning Being to God, as pre-determined by metaphysics, are we not inflicting an unbearable violence on him? Do we not run the risk of obscuring the manifestation of the *God-phenomenon*? Do we not forbid ourselves to understand God as he gives himself to those who believe in him? Wouldn’t the Being ultimately be a *conceptual idol* whose assimilation to God would define the major illusion of metaphysics? This is the path explored by Jean-Luc Marion. According to him, the idol differs from the icon in terms of the origin of the gaze from which it proceeds: whereas the idol is characterized by the human, all-too-human origin of the gaze that is refracted onto it, the icon reveals “the gaze of the invisible [which] is aimed at man.” Thus, “the conceptual idol has a site, metaphysics, a function, theo-logy in onto-theo-logy, and a definition, *causa sui*.”<sup>2</sup> Yet Marion convincingly shows that this idolatry is redoubled, beyond or below its metaphysical determination, in the Heideggerian approach to the question of the Being, and in particular in its reduction of God to a being. In order to remove the question of God from this idolatrous gesture, he calls for a revival of the “gigantomachy between Being and Good,” to liberate another access to God, a ‘God without Being’. This *meontological* approach can trace its roots back to Plato’s *Republic*, to the hyperbole of *epekeina tês ousias*, of the Good “beyond Being.” It was interpreted from a Christian perspective by Pseudo-Dionysius, who identified God with the Good, i.e., with love. Marion

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2. Jean-Luc MARION, *Dieu sans l'être*, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p. 56.

takes advantage of this to assert that “what makes ‘God’ God consists, more radically than Being, in loving.”<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, this is a departure from the biblical statement that God names himself as “I am that I am.” However, it is possible to interpret Exodus 3:14 differently, challenging the traditional interpretation. In the manner of Meister Eckhart, for example: “When someone who wishes to remain hidden and unnamed is asked at night: ‘Who are you?’, he answers: ‘I am who I am’...”<sup>4</sup> A bold interpretation, but one that does not seem to fit the context of this statement. It takes place at the dramatic moment when Moses receives the mission to liberate the enslaved Hebrews. He feared that he would be unable to tell his people the name of the God who had sent him, and it is hard to imagine that God who had called him would simply reply: ‘I am who I am, and ask no more.’ Nor is it conceivable that, in response to Moses’ anguished question, God would respond as if in a philosophy class, asserting his identity with the Being. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that the Greek translation of the statement – a fundamental reference point for the so-called metaphysics of Exodus – is not faithful to the Hebrew expression, not only because the present infinitive of the verb ‘to be’ does not correspond to the verbal mode of *ehyeh*, which is a kind of future tense, but also because, by translating this sentence as “I am Being,” we conceal the doubling of the formula in the first person. Of course, any translation is both a risk and an opportunity: it offers a text the hospitality of another language, giving rise to a new stratum of meanings; but it can also alter and obscure the original meaning, as happened to the statement in Exodus 3:14. The least bad translation of this untranslatable sentence could be: “I will be who I will be” or “I will be as I will be.” Which raises a series of questions. Understood in this way, how does this statement escape the conceptual idolatry of the Being? And if it does not belong to the realm of Being, can it be traced back to that of the Good? Does the break with ontotheology in Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart open up a more authentic access to the question of God? Or is it simply a variant of the same misunderstanding on the Word of Sinai? To answer these daunting questions, we must take into account the narrative context of the statement *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. Of course, no text can be explained solely by its context, but ignoring it here has serious consequences. It transforms into an abstract, unhistorical thesis a statement that is part of a singular history. By confirming Moses in the mission assigned to him, this word makes possible the emancipation of the enslaved Hebrews. If we follow this thread, we can discover the three main features that characterize the Word of the Burning Bush and set it apart from

3. Jean-Luc MARION, *Dieu sans l'être*, p. 111.

4. Quoted by Ysabel DE ANDIA, “La théologie négative de Maître Eckhart”, in Benoît BEYER DE RYKE (dir.), *Maître Eckhart et Jan van Ruusbroec (Problèmes d'histoire des religions, vol. XIV)*, Bruxelles, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2004, p. 52-70 (63).

the metaphysical tradition: its first-person enunciation, its relational dimension, and the singular nominative it initiates.

### **“I will be with you”**

Whether as an infinitive or a present participle, the different versions of “being” are characterized by their neutrality in relation to grammatical persons. The Being is neither I, nor you, nor even he: neither one nor the other, *ne-uter*, in other words *neutral*. This is not the case with the call addressed to Moses, for the God who utters it expresses himself in the first person, by saying *I*. In response to Moses’ question about his name, he replies, as it were, “I am he who says *I am*.” The enigmatic doubling of the *ehyeh* emphasizes this fundamental aspect of Moses’ God: it emphasizes his power to say “I.” “I am the Being,” “I am the Good”: none of the thinkers of metaphysics dared to assign such statements to the supreme principle<sup>5</sup>, nor could they, for these principles are neutral and so forever deprived of the power to say I. This is what differentiates them from the God of Moses, a God who always presents himself in the first person, thus attesting to the fact that he is a singular I who evades impersonal neutrality of the Being and the Good. The excess of this saying ‘I’ is precisely what opens up the space for a possible encounter, a closeness between men and this God, a God capable of saying I like me, like all of us, because he shares this power with all humans. We know, however, that first-person statements characterize the god’s self-presentation in many other religions, as shown, for example, by the beginning of Euripides’ *Bacchae*: “I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus,” or the admirable *Hymn to Shiva* by the Hindu philosopher Shankara: “I am eternal ecstasy and limitless consciousness, I am Shiva.”

If we want to grasp the exceptional nature of the Word of Sinai, we need to turn to another tradition, one that is closely related to Christian theology, yet different: the Jewish tradition, the interpretation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* put forward by the Talmud, followed by medieval commentators such as Rashi. It does not tear it out of the text into which it is inserted, but places it in continuity with the occurrences of *ehyeh* that precede it, and in particular with the passage where God reassures Moses by promising that, when he faces Pharaoh, “I will be with you.” It is this promise of support in times of trial that he reaffirms, opening it up to the entire people of the enslaved, and extending this promise to the future history of this people. According to the Talmud (*Berakhot* 9b), the statement should be understood as follows: “go and say to the sons of Israel: I am with you in this trial, and I will be with you in the bondage of kingdoms,” i.e. those trials to which their descendants will be

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5. With the exception of Kant to whom it happens to write in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “in the pure thought of myself, I am the Being itself (*Ich bin das wesen selbst*).” But this assertion does not relate to the Being, rather on the emptiness of the pure I.

subjected. Even more than the sharing of the 'I,' the affirmation of the 'with' insists on the closeness between God and his people. Whereas the ontological interpretation froze the subject of the Word in an unchanging present, that of the infinitive form of the verb "to be," this other interpretation inscribes it in the time of the promise. By repeating itself, it opens onto the horizon of the future, that of an ever-renewed fidelity. This promise takes on a more concrete meaning if we see it as a foreshadowing of the Covenant that the God of Moses was soon to make with the Hebrews, delivered from servitude. Because he reveals himself as the 'with,' he affirms his relational character, that of a god who is God only insofar as men can address him.

Referring to a verse from the prophet Isaiah, "You are my witnesses, declares YHWH, and I am God" (*Isaiah* 43:12), a rabbinic commentary interprets it as follows: "It means: if you are my witnesses, I am God, and if you are not my witnesses, I am not God."<sup>6</sup> This means that the God-phenomenon depends entirely on the men who believe in it, for their belief lifts it out of the nothingness of non-manifestation. The metaphysical determination of divinity as *causa sui* does not suit such a God, and we misunderstand him when we define him as absolute, as if he could free himself from any relationship with men, and above all from the performative relationship between the one who calls and the one who is called. The "with" does not go hand in hand with the "beyond." A god who is with those who invoke him cannot be *meta ta physika*. He is not beyond, entrenched in a distant transcendence, but close to his faithful believers, in alliance with them, sharing their breath, their immanent life.

### The Erasure of the Name

Philosophers who comment on the *Exodus* usually stop at verse 3:14, as if the question posed by Moses had been answered there. This is not the case, and the following verse gives another answer, more in line with the question "What is his name?" Indeed, for the first time in this account, God reveals his proper name: "You shall say to the sons of Israel: YHWH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever" (3:15). The enigma of the quasi-name would have been no more than the prelude to a true noun, that of a name, idiomatic, untranslatable like any proper noun. It teaches us that it is impossible to spell out the Name. For it is revealed in the Hebrew Bible only incompletely in the form of a tetragrammaton (the four consonants YHWH) as if it had been partially erased. We know that, since ancient times, it has been forbidden to pronounce the proper name of Israel's god. In fact, it was not really unpronounceable, since, as the Talmud

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6. *Sifré Dévarim*, quoted in André LACOCQUE and Paul RICOEUR, *Penser la Bible*, Paris, Seuil, 1998, p. 337 note.

reports, it was uttered on a solemn occasion, when the high priest performed the Yom Kippur ritual once a year in the Holy of Holies. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the proper way to vocalize it was lost, so that the Name became strictly unpronounceable. Historians of religion associate this prohibition on pronouncing the divine name with the commandment prohibiting its illegitimate use ("you shall not invoke the name of YHWH for falsehood"), which was probably aimed at its invocation in deceptive oaths or magical rites. This hypothesis may seem plausible, but the erasure of the Name is also an indication of resistance to any imposition of meaning: unpronounceable, the Name no longer means anything, other than the idiomatic naming of a divine and singular "I." This enables it to resist annexation by metaphysical interpretations. Because it is unspeakable and meaningless, the divine Name cannot be reduced to a simple equivalent of the name of the Being, nor of any other principle such as the One or the Good.

However unpronounceable, however crossed-out it may be, it is nonetheless a proper name, the operator of a singular nomination that designates a phenomenon that is itself singular. That the God-phenomenon is not anonymous is intolerable to the metaphysical tradition, a tradition that arose precisely when Greek philosophers abandoned the proper names of the their gods – e.g., Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus – to speak impersonally of the god (*ho theos*), identifying him with anonymous principles such as the One, the Good or the Being. This erasure of the Name, this becoming-anonymous of God, also affected Jewish tradition as soon as it encountered Greek philosophy and submitted to its authority, as soon as Jerusalem allowed itself to be enslaved by Athens. Thus, Philo of Alexandria in his *Life of Moses* (I-75), translates the Word of Sinai as "I am He who is," and comments on this mistranslation by having God say: "No name can adequately suit me, to whom alone belongs Being." But a God-Being without a proper name is a 'god' that no one can invoke by name. The attribution of a proper name to the God of Israel radically differentiates him from the metaphysical tradition that keeps his fundamental principles anonymous. We can see in this naming a second excess of the divine Name, which redoubles and radicalizes its first excess, the affirmation of its power to say I. Yet the revelation of this Name, despite the erasure that affects it, profoundly transforms man's relationship to the divine. When Greek philosophers since Xenophanes and Plato tried to found a *theologia*, a rational discourse on the divine that would eliminate the "lies" of the poets and their anthropomorphic illusions, they presented it as an entity to which it is useless to address prayers. And how can we pray to, bless or curse a "god" whom no one can address by name? Anonymous, impassive, unchanging, the pseudo-god of the philosophers remains blind to man's distress and deaf to his prayers. This is what sets him apart from the one who hears the complaints of the oppressed and decides to free them from their servitude.



### The Invoked of the Invocation

Yet from the depths of the abyss, a cry must rise up to him. “The sons of Israel groan from their servitude, they cry out for help, and from their servitude their cry rises to God. God hears their complaint. God remembers his Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, with Jacob. God sees the sons of Israel, God knows” (*Exodus* 2:23-25). This complaint, which reaches God and causes him to remember, is an invocation. There are other forms of invocation, such as prayer, praise and blessing (“Blessed art thou, YHWH...”), but also cursing and blasphemy. Not all invocations take verbal form: they can be made through ritual gestures such as sacrifice, dance, asceticism or the study of sacred texts, through the trace of writing or simply by a cry. Each time, an invocation is addressed by a singular self to another singular self, to a friend, lover or God, because the invoker desires, expects and hopes that the invoked will respond. And each time, the invocation is supported by a singular mark that allows the invoked to recognize him/herself as the recipient of this invocation: a proper name. Naming is already calling, i.e. invoking. It is the invocation that binds the nomination to the promise of a with, and this enables us to determine the God-phenomenon more precisely: he is *the invoked of an invocation*.

What, then, differentiates this mode of invocation from those that manifest themselves in friendship, love, erotic enjoyment, allegiance to a leader, a human sovereign, or even in the hallucinatory appeal to the fantasies that haunt a delirium? Formally, there is nothing to distinguish them, apart from a single trait: of all those invoked, the God is the one who, in one way or another, answers the call. This, at least, is what the Torah and the Gospels affirm: “wherever you call upon my name, I will come to you and bless you” (*Exodus* 20:24) – “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst” (*Matthew* 18:20). These statements may seem extravagant to the people of our time, the time of silence and the withdrawal of all gods. If they surprise us so much, it is because we have lost the power to invoke. We have become incapable of grasping the performative power of invocation. We no longer understand that those who invoke their God *in truth* make it happen in their belief, otherwise there would be nothing divine about the phenomenon. Moreover, if his followers cease to believe in him, the God-phenomenon immediately ceases to manifest itself to them and disappears into the nothingness of non-manifestation. If it remains, it is like a museum piece, an object of study for the history of religions, the dead letters of an empty name, an extinguished form from which the radiance of the divine has withdrawn.



What can we conclude from this analysis? First and foremost, we now know what distinguishes the manifestation of the God-phenomenon from the concealing counter-phenomenon of the metaphysical idol. What differentiates them is not the “saturated” or “unsaturated” character of their manifestation, nor the provenance of the aim that reveals them as either idol or icon. Indeed, we have already identified the fundamental traits of the metaphysical idol: its neutrality, its absoluteness, its anonymity and also its impassiveness, its inability to be affected by a call, which prevents it from responding to those who invoke it. This corresponds to the Torah’s description of idols: “They have ears, but do not hear. They have mouths, but do not speak” (Psalm 115:4-5). Now, these traits characterize Being in all its modes, whether or not it is distinguished from beings; but they also characterize the Good, which cannot be invoked for want of an invocable proper name and the power to say “I” that enables it to respond to the call; and the same must be said of the One, the Other, Life and all the other principles of philosophy. Those who, like Marion, rely on Pseudo-Dionysius to identify the Platonic Good with the loving God of the Gospels, are operating a *coup de force*: for there can be no love without an “I love you,” without an invocation by the beloved who invokes his or her beloved by name – and perhaps receives this response: “Yes, I love you, I will be with you.” Yet Plato’s intelligible Good, like Plotinus’ One, has no proper name and cannot respond to “I love you” with another “I love you.” By identifying the Good with the God of love, a double violence is exerted, both on the Good and on the God of the Bible, since one imposes on them determinations that do not suit them. The so-called “gigantomachy” between the Being and the Good is merely an internal dispute within metaphysics, and does not concern the God-phenomenon. To put it another way, there can be no radical escape from Athens.

This is not to say that we should take refuge in Jerusalem and abandon all philosophical questioning. It simply means that it is time to abandon allegorical readings of the Bible that impose alien meanings on it. It means, as Spinoza urged, “understanding Scripture through Scripture itself.” It means to stop reading the *Exodus* as a treatise on ontotheology or negative theology, and hear what the text is really about: the story of a collective emancipation that is both religious and political. This God who addresses a people delivered from Pharaoh’s tyranny does not present himself to them as He-who-is, nor as the Good beyond Being, nor as their Creator and Father, nor even as a God of love. He presents himself as the One who has made their deliverance possible and calls in return for their loyalty; and this assertion is addressed in the second person singular, as if to each of us: “I am YHWH, your God, the One who brought you out of Egypt, out of the House of Bondage.”

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## SUMMARY

Etienne Gilson called “metaphysics of the Exodus” the thought which affirms the identity of God and Being, a fundamental thesis of “Christian philosophy” since Augustine. It is indeed authorized by the word – “I am He who is” – addressed to Moses on Sinai, as it was transmitted through its Greek and Latin translations. Which seems to inscribe the God of Biblical Revelation in Western metaphysics understood as onto-theology. Such a “god” then exposes himself to the same fate – and the same decline – as that which affects the ontology inherited from the Greeks. However, this ontological understanding of the Word of the Bush has been challenged in various ways. Several authors, from Eckhart to Lacan, have seen in it a negative statement – “I am who I am” ... and do not ask for more – , that is to say an enigma. The dominant trend of Jewish tradition has understood it, on the contrary, as the affirmation of a being-with, the promise of a covenant: “I will be with you as He who will always be with you”. Should we discover here, as Ricœur suggests, a “nonGreek understanding of Being” where biblical Revelation would exceed the onto-theological determination of metaphysics? Couldn’t this statement have a more directly political meaning, that of a subversion of the self-affirmation of the Pharaoh’s power? Perhaps the text of Exodus 3 attests there is another excess, more radical, when he superimposes to the promise of the Covenant the revelation of a singular Name: that of an Other I whose call would thwart the anonymous neutrality of Being.

## SOMMAIRE

Étienne Gilson désignait comme la « métaphysique de l’Exode » la pensée qui affirme l’identité de Dieu et de l’Être, thèse fondamentale de la « philosophie chrétienne » depuis Augustin. Elle s’autorise en effet de la parole – « Je suis Celui qui est » – adressée à Moïse sur le Sinaï, telle qu’elle a été transmise à travers ses traductions grecque et latine. Ce qui semble inscrire le Dieu de la Révélation biblique dans la métaphysique occidentale entendue comme onto-théologie. Un tel « dieu » s’expose alors au même destin – et au même déclin – que celui qui affecte l’ontologie héritée des Grecs. Toutefois, cette compréhension ontologique de la Parole du Buisson a été contestée de diverses manières. Plusieurs auteurs, d’Eckhart à Lacan, y ont vu un énoncé négatif – « Je suis qui je suis » ... et n’en demande pas plus –, c’est-à-dire la réserve d’une énigme. Le courant dominant de la tradition juive l’a entendue au contraire comme l’affirmation d’un être-avec, la promesse d’une alliance: « Je serai avec toi comme Celui qui sera toujours avec toi ». Faut-il y repérer, comme le suggère Ricœur, une « entente non-grecque de l’être » où la Révélation biblique excèderait la détermination onto-théologique de la métaphysique? Ne pourrait-on donner à cet énoncé une signification plus directement politique, celle d’une subversion de l’auto-affirmation du pouvoir du Pharaon? Et peut-être le texte d’Exode 3 atteste-t-il d’un autre excès, plus radical, lorsqu’à la promesse d’alliance il surajoute la révélation d’un Nom singulier: celui d’un Autre Je dont l’appel saurait déjouer l’anonyme neutralité de l’Être.