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# What's in a Name?

## *"Yahweh" in Exodus 3 and the Wider Biblical Context*



### Names and Their Meanings

What's in a name? As a title, the question sounds more suitable for a whimsical column in the *Reader's Digest* than for an essay in a scholarly volume. Discovery at an early age that my given name Gerald derives from a Germanic root meaning "spear-wielder" has not provided any deep clue to who I am or what I am to become. In this etymological sense, an appropriate response to the opening question would be "nowadays, not a heck of a lot."

Even nowadays names are not merely labels. What's in the papal name John Paul? In the time of Pius XII, only an unlikely collocation of two distinct papal names. But by October 1978 what was "in" John Paul is both a legacy and a vision. In this sense one might answer the opening question this way: What's in a name is its actual history and the future as foreshadowed or claimed by that history. If, then, in all seriousness one were to ask "What's in the name of Israel's God, Yahweh?" the answer might be made: What's in that name is its actual history and the future as claimed by that history. To say what is in that name, then, would call for telling the history of Israel; or, so far as Israel itself was concerned, it would call for telling the history of all things and the future of all things as claimed by that history. Looked at in this way, the biblical narrative taken as a whole could be read as an explication of what is in the name Yahweh.

Yet nowadays (for all our official distrust of etymological naming) we still betray the desire to have the name in its root sense correspond to or express and embody the person in her or his intrinsic identity, in a way that goes deeper than history, in a way that touches the springs out of which flow the energies and powers which help to shape history, be that history cosmic, national, local or only familial and individual. Precisely because our formal naming so seldom serves us here, we resort to nicknames. In such examples as "Tricky Dick" or "The Angel of Dien Bien Phu" it is not so much that a standing name subsequently acquires a meaning given it by the shape of events; but rather, that an intrinsic quality of personal energy, an inherent power of being and style of action, is named as that which helps to give shape to events. To be sure, this intrinsic quality and energy were first intuited from or in connection with the events. And yet, in bestowing such a nickname we mean (consciously or unconsciously) to identify something behind the events, something manifest in them. One may say that in the first type of name-meaning the history explains the meaning of the name, while in the second type the meaning of the name accounts for the history. Is it possible, now, for us to approach the name "Yahweh" in this second sense? Is it possible to say something about that name, not through the telling of the history in which that name is embedded, but through an entry into what the name means in itself, a meaning which is not derived from the history but from which the history itself is seen to be derived?

This form of the question seems to direct us back to an investigation of etymology and into the labyrinthine ways taken by scholarly research and debate concerning the original meaning (perhaps in pre-Israelite settings; among the Kenites or Canaanites or Amorites, or elsewhere) of "Yahweh." Such a history-of-religions and comparative philological approach has led to a variety of solutions. It may be that we are eventually convinced (as I happen to be) of the basic soundness of the view of Frank Moore Cross who understands the divine name as originating in an old sentence-name for the Canaanite High God El, so that biblical Yahweh Sebaoth is to be taken as meaning, originally, "(El who) creates the hosts."[1] But whichever etymological analysis is adopted, it is fair to say that that etymological and pre-Israelite sense is present or reflected only in part of the total biblical tradition, within a wider range of meaning which it has come to have for Israel. Indeed, one cannot rule out the possibility that through its use in Israel this divine name may have come to bear a

1. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 60–75.

distinctive meaning quite removed from its earlier pre-Israelite, and even early-Israelite, meaning. We seem then to be cast back upon the notion that the name Yahweh, insofar as it is more than a mere label (which the translators of the RSV would as soon have done away with), insofar as it has a meaning, has that meaning as a mosaic built up in the course of the history associated with it. But this means that it is the history which sheds light on the name, whereas the name in no way identifies the divine reality manifest in that history. Unlike the names of other ancient Near Eastern deities, then, the divine name Yahweh in itself is no datum for theology but a convenient peg around which to focus the theology derived from the narrative and other biblical traditions. Nor is the name in itself a dynamic point of departure for personal and social existence but a convenient symbol representing the tradition as a whole taken as such an impetus.

But for all its value in the context of a history-of-religions investigation, this kind of etymological approach is not the only one possible; indeed, it may draw our attention away from that etymological approach which is presented before our eyes in the biblical tradition and which, I maintain, is the proper datum for investigation into what the name Yahweh meant for mature Israelite religion. I refer of course to the narrative in Exodus 3. Here we are told, explicitly, what the name of Yahweh intrinsically means, in such a way that we are to understand, not the name from the history, but the history from the name. It is the divine reality identified not just *by*, but *in* the name Yahweh which shapes the story, not only in Exodus but throughout the Bible. But in order to appreciate this we must recognize just what is going on at the crucial point in Exodus 3. What we have here is what has been called "popular etymology." The practice, a form of punning which often turns on sound-similarity, is well known in the Bible; it occurs throughout the Old Testament and even in the New Testament (e.g., "Peter" in Matt 16:18). All too often in modern times, specific instances of such popular etymology have received only the amount of attention needed to point out their inaccuracy from a historical and linguistic point of view. Yet so far as a proper understanding of the biblical narrative is concerned, it is as irrelevant as it is correct to observe that "Babel" in Genesis 11 does not come from a root meaning "to confound"; or to observe that the name "Moses" in Exodus 2 is not formed from a root meaning "to draw out." But I have overstated my point. It *is* relevant to make this observation. But the relevance lies precisely in freeing us—freeing our literary and our religious imagination—from our preoccupation with historical etymology so that we may then attend to the literary etymology, that is, the one required for an understanding of

the narrative in its own terms in the text before us. What I am suggesting is that the primary context for our understanding of the meaning of the divine name Yahweh in the Bible is not the history of the religion of Israel and of the ancient Near East generally, but the practice within the Bible of popular etymology. By analogy, the proper context for the understanding of Rachel's naming of Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher and Joseph (Genesis 30) is not the general Semitic onomasticon of the second millenium BCE, but rather the literary etymologies as given within the context of plot and structure in the Rachel narrative in Genesis 29–35.

Before I proceed to explore Exodus 3 from this point of view, one other methodological statement is in order. This is that, in order to convey what I consider to be the requisite frame of reference for our understanding of the divine name, I propose to work with the biblical tradition in its mature—that is to say its final—form. This approach obviously is liable to the charge of treating the materials one-dimensionally or anachronistically, through disregard of the complex and lengthy process of formation of the text. I acknowledge this. Yet in taking this approach, I am seeking to do justice to the fact that the faith of Israel, in its drive toward verbal and literary expression, displayed a restlessness with every preliminary form (as recovered by historical-critical investigation) until it came to rest in the form of the text as we have it. I do not deny the value of historical-critical analysis of the text as a means to answer certain specific historical questions. Indeed, part of this value lies in its enabling us to distinguish between the history of Israel and the history of the growth of the text, and the present text as a final mythic construct. But until we address ourselves to that construct as such, we have not really arrived at the mature and proper datum for theological—and even for history-of-religions—reflection.



## The Name "Yahweh" and Its Meaning for Israel

The giving or etymologizing of the name Yahweh in Exodus 3 is to be interpreted not just in the context of the scene at the burning bush but in the larger context of the Israelites' plight in Egypt. Yet even to start here is to begin *in medias res*. As the narrative now opens, the plight of the Israelites is to be read against the backdrop, not just of the patriarchal narratives, but of the first creation story. In Egypt, the children of Israel find themselves flourishing in such a way as to exemplify the divine mandate at creation (compare Exod 1:7 with Gen 1:28). This is surprising, in view of the negative connotations which Egypt carries in most of the Old

Testament. Yet we are to suppose that the people flourish, not in spite of Egypt, but because of Egypt's hospitality. (This is clear from the preceding narrative and from the reversal announced in Exod 1:8.) A brief review of the Genesis traditions from a theological point of view will help us to place this initial Egyptian situation, and therefore the giving of the name in Exodus 3, in a sufficiently wide context.

One way of giving expression to our sense of the vigorous this-worldly realism of the Old Testament traditions is to say that the world created by Israel's God is a world of efficacious creatures, each enjoying its own existence "after its own kind," and enjoying the power to participate in transmitting and conveying such existence to others of its own kind. In the biblical traditions these powers are spoken of in the concrete imagery of fruitfulness, blessing, multiplication and so on. But for our purposes I think we may generalize this imagery and speak of fruitfulness or blessing as the power of a creature, in its actuality, to exist and to communicate existence in the form peculiar to its kind.

Further, the "host" or multitude of creatures exists in the form of what we may call "structures of actuality." By actuality here I mean, simply, creatures in their concrete actual existence as created and as enjoying existential power. ("Actuality" here may be contrasted with such "potentiality" as may be said to be the case between the divine utterance "let there be X" and the narrative observation "and there was X.") By structures here I mean, simply, the discrimination or separation of these efficacious creatures into coherent orders of actuality. ("Structure" here may be contrasted with such formlessness or *tohu* as was the case prior to creative activity in Gen 1:2.) These orders or structures of actuality are reciprocally efficacious and supportive and are pronounced to be good. Generalizing one step further, we may express the vigorous this-worldly realism of Old Testament religion in these terms: Within the limits of the respective orders or structures of existence, the actual is the ground of the possible.

As considered up to this point, the created order may be said to be a comprehensive world of structures of actuality comprising individual creatures who receive their existence from the creator and from others of their kind, and who with the help of God (e.g., Gen 4:1) impart that existence to others of their kind. But of course the created world does not display this dynamism unambiguously. In actual experience, the structures of actuality take the form of a tangled skein of good and evil, of blessing and curse, of fruitfulness and sterility, tending toward life and toward death. The calamity of creation is evident in the fact that creaturely existential powers are efficacious for life and for death. The story of

creation therefore careens perilously along a critical path whose twists and turns are chartered representatively, and with ever-increasing fatefulness, in the portrayals of the so-called primeval history on through Genesis 11.

The patriarchal narratives, then, portray the rise and the first stages of formation of a new structure of actuality in the emergent community identified by the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This new structure is envisaged as arising in response to the impasse portrayed in the primeval history, and as an actual agency for the restoration of the primal intent and form of creation. This envisagement is attested in the preoccupation throughout the patriarchal narratives with blessing and the habitation of a land. Though on the one hand the repeated reversal of barrenness by the restoration of fertility is brought about through divine initiative and power (e.g., Gen 15:2; 30:2), yet on the other hand human participation is also emphasized: in the form of the faithful obedience which is a *sine qua non* of the developing structure, and in the form of the efficacious part played by the various patriarchal blessings, culminating in the epochal blessings uttered by Jacob in Genesis 48 and 49. If, now, we wish to reflect on the significance of all this for our question concerning the name of Israel's God, we may begin by observing that the dynamic growth of this new structure of actuality, identified by the names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is matched by a concurrent dynamic development in one of the epithets of the God under whose divine aegis this structure emerges and begins to take shape: He is first "the God of Abraham" (Gen 26:23); then "the God of Abraham . . . and the God of Isaac" (Gen 28:13); and later "the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). The God so named is the divine power disclosed through this new structure of actuality as it emerges in history. Insofar as the history is the clue to the character of the God, the history is the clue to the meaning of the name.

Now, this new actual structure must make its way, must pursue its critical path, amidst the ambiguities of the wider structures which make up the world. In the last long section of the patriarchal narratives, this new community finds itself threatened by the negative efficacy of the famine in the land; and in the face of that threat, it finds itself greeted with the positive efficacy of the hospitality extended by Egypt. Thus, taken as a whole, the actual structure of the world is ambiguous; but taken in its several substructures, the negativity of one part is counter-balanced by the positivity of another. Israel's escape from famine into Egypt and ensuing prosperity (Exod 1:7) attests the continuing positive character of Egypt as a local structure of actuality. In the terms of our generalization above, Egypt is the benign ground of the possibility of Israel's continued existence. Hence

the existential powers which the Israelites and Egypt enjoy under God are fruitful powers, and the life thereby made possible seeks its own intrinsic worth without the need for narrative elaboration.

But then there arises a new king over Egypt who does not know Joseph; and the brief narrative resolution dissolves into dissonance. What has happened? The Egyptian power has changed its character. Once life-supporting, that power has become life-threatening. Israel faces a life-and-death crisis, which I would define in the form of a generalized question: When the actual situation becomes deathly oppressive, is the actual the limit of the possible? Does the character and do the resources of the actual present strictly define and determine what the future shall be?

Of course, there is more to the actual situation than Egypt. There is the Israelite community with its own existential powers. And there is Moses who occupies a dialectical position in the situation, being in-formed to some extent by both structures, the Egyptian and the Israelite. The first few episodes in the exodus story portray the mounting struggle between Israel and Egypt, and Moses' preliminary attempts to inject his own power of action into the struggle. But in spite of Israel's initial display of existential vigor (significantly enough displayed in the form of success in childbirth), and in spite of Moses' intervention, the conclusion of these first episodes finds Moses in flight to the wilderness and Israel reduced to that mode of action and power depicted in Exod 2:23–24—crying out in lament. It is not too much to say that, under the pressure of Egypt, Israel's "structure of actuality" has been given the shape or has taken the shape of a structure of lamentation as a mode of being. But the implication and tendency of that structure and mode of being is that, if the actual is the sole ground and limit of the possible, then in the face of what Egypt has become, Israel's future holds only death.

What, now, is the significance of Moses' flight to the wilderness? Considered merely in its material topographical aspect, the wilderness is that "outlaw" region beyond the reach of Egypt's organized power where Moses may find fugitive asylum. In this aspect it is as actual a locus as is Egypt, though of a different character. But as an image and a motif, the wilderness in the Old Testament is much more than this— or should we perhaps say, much less. In Jer 4:23–26, for instance, it stands as the opposite of created actuality. (See also Deut 32:10 with its *tohu*, and Deut 32:13–14.) Relevant to our discussion, the wilderness is a *tohu*—a formless waste. It stands over against city and sown land in some sense as Gen 1:2 stands over against the whole created actuality. The wilderness, we might say, is the realm of the non-actual or the realm of the suspension of

the actual. Is then the actual the limit of the possible? Yes, so long as Egypt, the Israelites, and Moses remain locked in struggle in Egypt. But Moses' flight from Egypt into the wilderness—a flight from the rigid determinations of that oppressive actuality—sets the stage for a different answer to that question. It is of the utmost significance, in my view, that that answer, in the form of the divine name and its explication, comes to Moses in the wilderness.

We are ready, now at last, to turn to the question of the meaning of the name Yahweh as disclosed in Exodus 3. The passage opens with the theophany at the burning bush, in which God preliminarily identifies himself to Moses: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Having identified himself in terms of the history in and by which he has become known, he now announces his intention of acting in such a way as to "live up" to that name, to be faithful to that name, in delivering and bringing up his people whose cry has come up to him (3:7–8). This is followed by the announcement that he will effect this deliverance in and through Moses, who is to go and bring forth this people (3:9–10).

But Moses has already tried to intervene on behalf of the Israelites. He knows the actual situation: He knows himself, he knows the Israelites, and he knows the power of Egypt (you can't fight city hall). So he counters with a doubting question: "Who am I . . . ?" Now this question may be considered as a dodge, or as a rhetorical question needing no answer except the obvious one: Moses does not have what it takes to carry out such a mission. But it may also be construed as a genuine doubt, a pinpoint opening in the settledness of his self-knowledge; it may betoken the first beginnings of an existential question.[2] More likely his response contains elements both of dodging resistance and of doubt-filled opening out toward what is being proposed to him, as settled actuality and budding possibility vie within him. Into the opening made by Moses' question comes God's answer: "I will be with you" (*'ehyeh 'immak*). It appears that Moses' question is answered by way of God's implicit re-definition of who Moses is. Who he is can no longer be defined merely in terms of who he had hitherto taken himself to be, or in terms merely of the actual situation from which he is in flight. By virtue of God's answer, who Moses is can henceforth be measured adequately only by including a reference to this God henceforth present with him.

2. For an exploration into the difference between *rhetorical* and *existential* questions in the sense here intended, see Janzen, "Metaphor and Reality," esp. 417–22.

But in what character is God with him? As the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob? From the preceding divine self-designation (3:6) Moses could conclude this—and indeed in a sense he does (3:13). But this dialogue which has thrown his own settled identity into question seems also to leave the old designation of God no longer entirely satisfactory. To be sure, Moses' response in verse 13 in part reflects a continuing desire to evade the call and mission. Yet the *form* of this response—a hypothetical agreement to go, followed by a hypothetical question—betrays also a continuing pin-point of openness to the mission at least in the mode of hypothetical imagination, and openness, as I have suggested, which has accepted the questionability of Moses' identity and which, almost as a reflex of that very dynamic, now presses the question of the identity of God: Is it, perhaps, no longer sufficient to speak merely of the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob? There is a sense in which this second question is simply an extension of the first: If who Moses is is to be defined henceforth with reference to the presence of God, then who Moses is depends to that degree on who this God is. Consonant with the character of Moses' second question as an extension of his first, God's answer to it begins in the same manner as his answer to the first: "I will be . . ." (*'ehyeh* . . .). What might we expect to follow? A clearly definitive answer in terms of some specific mode of divine power (e.g., "I will be with you as a dread warrior," in the manner of Jer 20:11; cf. Exod 15:3)? Or, perhaps, a lapidary reiteration of the first answer, "I will be with you," as a transcendent rebuff of the thrust of Moses' question? The answer comes: "I will be *who I will be*." The content of this answer will occupy us in a moment, but first another matter requires our attention: my earlier assertion that in this passage we have an instance of popular etymologizing (though either the term "popular" is inappropriate here, or this traditional practice here receives its apotheosis). The rhetorical development of Yahweh's response, while keeping strictly within the dialogical flow of the passage as a whole, takes the form of what we may call a painstaking three-step semantic equation. The three steps are signaled by the three-fold repetition of the narrative rubric (God said to Moses; and he said; God said also to Moses; Exod 3:14–15). This three-fold responsive movement achieves the semantic equation *'ehyeh 'ašer 'ehyeh = 'ehyeh = yahweh*. Whatever the name Yahweh may earlier have denoted or connoted in Israel or for other peoples, from now on it is to be understood in terms of this intrinsic self-definition. Henceforth, "Yahweh" names God, not with reference to this or that specific instance or structure or order of actuality (as the divine power manifest in it or responsible for

it), nor even with reference to the whole of actuality (as summed up in the epithet "maker of heaven and earth," Gen 14:22). From now on, "Yahweh" is that name which identifies Israel's God purely in intrinsic terms, as that divine power of existing which is defined or qualified or limited by no principle except the divine existential intention itself. What is so named is the primal reality whose power and efficacy constitutes, by its own intention, the living fount and origin and range of all that is or may be. It is as this living fount of all possibility that God may be envisioned as the creator of all finite and creatural actuality. There is the most intimate connection between the divine mystery expressed in this "I will be . . . ," and the world-creating efficacy of the utterance "let there be. . . ." The finite actualities in creation are grounded in the infinite potentiality and potency of the creator. If these finite actualities enjoy a derived but real existential power which they may transmit to others—so that actuality may beget itself—yet it is only by an idolatry that these actualities may be taken as posing the limit of the possible. The issue of idolatry in the Book of Exodus comes to explicit formulation in the Decalogue, and comes to explicit trial in the incident of the golden calf. But, especially in the latter instance, these subsequent texts only make explicit what is implicit as the fundamental issue in Israel's plight in Egypt: Is the actual the limit of the possible? The idol-polemic of the Old Testament is entailed in the name of Israel's God: Yahweh.

The first person to face this issue is Moses. He is challenged to move beyond who he knows himself to be and to re-define himself as one who is promised the presence of One who "will be who he will be." In principle, Moses' self-understanding now must remain open to possibilities which will be disclosed only in the successive situations in which he will find himself. By virtue of the self-transcendence which Yahweh's presence makes possible to Moses, he may now return from the wilderness (the setting for encounter with the power of the possible) to the actual situation in Egypt—himself no longer merely an actual component in that structure or tangled skein of actuality, but now a bearer—in his new identity as it were an embodiment—of new possibility. That new possibility is offered repeatedly to Egypt, as a possibility in terms of which Egypt may reinterpret itself as a power-structure and so re-define itself. But Egypt's response stands in the sharpest contrast to that of Moses. The first address to Pharaoh in Yahweh's name evokes the question, not as to his *own* identity, that he should let them go, but rather, "Who is *Yahweh*, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go?" (5:2). Moses' initial resistance of Yahweh was

gradually overcome by the signs Yahweh granted him (4:1–17); Pharaoh's initial and reiterated resistance is momentarily overcome at several points, as he momentarily moves beyond his settled decision, but finally his resistance is stiffened by all the signs granted in the plagues. Egypt learns to its grief that where the actual seeks to continue as an unchanging definition of the possible, that equation spells death, not for the oppressed, but for the oppressor; and this is not solely by an arbitrary or extrinsic judgment, but by the very rigidity of its own actuality which becomes a form of *rigor mortis*. As for Israel, the people in their response to Yahweh find themselves somewhere between Moses and Egypt, responding, but timidly, and then repeatedly falling back. Only Moses' steadfast commitment to the people and to Yahweh at crucial points turns the situation in the direction of an open future. For, as steadfastly open to Yahweh, Moses himself embodies in the world, and in a finite way, the power of the possible to re-define the actual. And, as steadfastly anchored within the people as one of them (cf., e.g., 32:9–14), Moses himself constitutes the recalcitrant community's pin-point openness to Yahweh and the realm of the possible. He, by embodying both in himself, is the mediator between the actual situation and the power of Yahweh.

But the divine self-definition in Exodus 3 holds yet one more item for comment. If the God of the Exodus is not to be identified merely with that emerging structure of actuality represented by the patriarchs, nevertheless as 3:15 shows, that identity continues to *include* the most intimate association with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, forever and throughout all generations. Thus, we are not to drive a transcendental wedge between what might appear to be merely a religion of culture and Yahwism as a transcendental critic of culture and its religious dimensions. From now on, the issue of the faithfulness of God is posed both in terms of his faithfulness to the actual situation and its historical claims upon him, and in terms of his faithfulness to the intrinsic mystery of the divine life as pure unbounded intention. Complementarily, from now on the issue of the faithfulness of Israel is posed in terms of its loyalty to the name Yahweh: in the implications of that name for who Yahweh is and for who Israel is. Like Yahweh, God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, Israel is called to be faithful to its past. Like Moses, Israel may never again allow itself merely to come to terms with the actual situation—for this is idolatry and death. The secret, the burden, the vocation of Israel lies in the divine name entrusted to it in the Book of Exodus.

## The Name and Its Meaning for Existence Today

It remains, now, to indicate some aspects of the bearing of the central thesis of this paper upon our existence today. The preceding remarks have been offered in the mode of exegetical exploration and theological generalization. Now I would like to speak confessionally. I will try to say what difference all this has made to me and leave it to others to make of this essay what they wish in the context of their own actual situations.

1. It so happened (for reasons that are beyond my understanding) that much of my early life was freighted with a sense of my own unreality. Life was something that happened to other people, or that other people enacted; I was there as an onlooker, or I was elsewhere as a daydreamer. In fourth grade we all were to copy out a poem and submit it in a local handwriting competition. On the day of the exhibit, we stood around examining the entries and noting the awards. "Where was my entry?" asked my older brother. I pulled it out of my pocket where I had stuffed it and showed it to him. It was no prize-winner; but it was no worse than some there. Yet it had seemed pointless to submit it—that was only what *other* kids did. This incident embedded itself in my memory as representing how I felt about myself. Now, appropriation of the biblical portrayals of existence—especially with the help of certain contemporary philosophical modes of thought—has worked a change in my sense of myself-in-the-world. Increasingly, as with a sense of "participatory dynamic realism," I am aware of myself as enjoying and exercising specific existential powers in a community of other beings—human and non-human—who display such powers also, in their own way and after their own kind. I become aware that *I* make a difference in a world of *others* who make a difference. And the differences that are made are utterly worthwhile, as measured in terms of the increasing appreciation of all kinds of actual objects and events and persons and structured situations and as measured in terms of my willingness to enter into public exchange through my own concrete action. For example, after writing this paper, I did not stuff the manuscript into my pocket and leave it there. From this personal Egypt I have begun to experience deliverance toward a restoration of my primal creatureliness as a finite efficacy among other finite efficacies.

2. But the difference I make by virtue of my existential powers is discovered to be dismayingly ambiguous. The sense of the hurt and the injury that I bring to others—injecting negative energies into their lives, damaging their sense of self and of the world, converting their situation by that much into negative structures of efficacy—increases and becomes

more problematic with the growing sense of myself as being capable of action. Such dynamics produce situations in which defensive hardenings of guilt and stiffening reactions of offended innocence lock one another in an impasse which becomes mutually imprisoning and destructive. Here that other "exegesis" of the name Yahweh in Exod 33:19 becomes relevant. At that point in Israel's life, the divine mystery earlier named as *'ehyeh 'ašer 'ehyeh* specifies itself, vis-à-vis the situation, as *weriḥamti 'et-'ašer 'araḥem*—"I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy." Forgiveness here becomes experienced as a mode of the enactment of Yahweh's infinite power of possibility in the face of the actual impasses arising out of the rigidities of guilt and offended innocence. Forgiveness enters into the impasse, on both sides, as a melting of the situation and as an opening—however pin-point and however brief—within which words can be said and deeds done to restore to the relationship and to the situation a possibility of forward movement.

3. Since my early teens, I have been haunted by the sense of the emptiness of worldly values and the futility of worldly achievements in the face of their inevitable annihilation in death and, eventually, the death of the solar system. The passing years have placed more and more of what significance life held for me *behind* me. Nostalgia and resistance to change were sea-anchors intended to secure me against the wind-drift which carries everything toward the edge of the world. But Easter has begun to mean the presence of Yahweh in the face of that actuality to end all actualities. The resurrection has come to represent the treasuring up of the concrete achievements and actual values to which history has given birth, negotiating at the cost of death itself the impasse thrown up by the concrete failures and actual evils to which history has given birth. Under the sign of the name of Yahweh, Easter has led me no longer to resist time and not to a flight from this world but to a positive valuation of and commitment to this-worldly actions in the knowledge that they are "not in vain" in Yahweh.

4. I begin, then, to experience what it may mean to live eschatologically, in myself, toward others, and toward the various structures of contemporary actuality. This does not mean playing off eschatology against history, or the future against the past. For Yahweh is forever the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob (Exod 3:15). For me, to live eschatologically is to live out of a past that I have incorporated into myself, toward an open future. With Moses I must be willing genuinely to ask "who am I?" And I must again and again overcome the idolatry which desires to

settle on who I know myself so far to be. Much more importantly, I must overcome that idolatry in my attitudes toward others. I take warning from such attitudes shown toward Jesus by his own family, noting that such attitudes possessed sufficient negative efficacy to inhibit even his existential powers (Mark 6:1–6). And I take encouragement from Simon's (initially brief) freedom from such attitudes in his response to Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" In the act of envisioning Jesus as Messiah (Matt 16:13–20), he in turn found himself envisaged as Peter—a name wildly at variance with his actual character up to that point, a name later needing reinstatement through forgiveness (John 22:1–23), yet a name whose accuracy was eventually borne out.

5. The dominant focus of the preceding remarks falls on individual existence and inter-personal relations. I have deliberately chosen such a focus as a counterbalance to the social and political character of the situation portrayed in the Book of Exodus. As that book should make sufficiently clear, the central thesis of this paper should be capable of application to the larger social structures in which we find ourselves today. Meanwhile, as an ordained minister, I ponder this question in its bearing upon all dimensions of our existence: when we bless and are blessed in these words,

> Yahweh bless you and keep you;
> Yahweh make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
> Yahweh lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace,

what does this mean, and what is happening? Is such an act of blessing a piece of shadow-play? Or is it a dynamic event, after its own kind? And to what extent is its efficaciousness bound up with an understanding of what it means to have Yahweh's name "put upon" us (Num 6:27)? This chapter is offered as an attempt to contribute to such an understanding.