

Dissertation Summary

REVEALING THE NAME

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DIVINE CHARACTER THROUGH A
CONVERSATION ANALYSIS OF THE DIALOGUES BETWEEN GOD
AND MOSES IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS¹

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For much of the last century scholarly discussion of YHWH's statement to Moses אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה has related to matters of etymology, or history of religion, or the precise grammar of the text. However, more recently there has been renewed interest in understanding the statement in its present context as part of the book of Exodus, in particular its role in the call of Moses. In this thesis I seek to deepen our understanding through a close reading of the dialogues between Moses and YHWH.

The history of the interpretation of Exodus 3:13-15 from the early 1900s until the present day is surveyed in Chapter 1. I show that the phrase אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה is best understood as linking the meaning of the name YHWH to the verb to be and in particular God's promise to 'be with' Moses in 3:12. The phrase affirms both YHWH's presence with Moses and YHWH's freedom to be present in the manner he chooses. The indefinite nature of the phrase and its use at this point in the dialogue invites the reader to read the continuing narrative to see how this will be developed.

In Chapter 2 I review different approaches to understanding the portrayal of God in the biblical narrative and how methods derived from socio-linguistic studies, in particular conversation analysis, can assist a close reading of the narrative of dialogues. This close reading

¹ Mark Arnold, 'Revealing the Name: An Investigation of the Divine Character through a Conversation Analysis of the Dialogues between God and Moses in the Book of Exodus' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Gloucestershire 2015). Supervisor: Gordon McConville.

of individual dialogues proceeds by means of three steps: first, an investigation of the way in which the narrator portrays the actions of the characters; second, of the manner in which the narrator portrays individual speech of the characters; last, of how an analysis of the portrayal of the dialogues adds to an understanding of the characters.

In Chapter 3 I focus on Exodus 3–4, where YHWH, through the dialogue with Moses, transforms Moses into the means by which YHWH delivers his people from Egypt and by which YHWH is present with his people. I demonstrate how the second half of Exodus 4 completes this process, and therefore how these chapters function as a unit.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of Exodus 5–7, where YHWH is portrayed through his speech as one whose presence for his people is manifested at the time of his choosing in order that his people and their enemies might recognise that ‘I am YHWH’. This is a public recognition of YHWH’s statement in Exodus 3:14. YHWH acts to enable Moses to confront Pharaoh by designating him god to Pharaoh. YHWH accomplishes these plans through his speech, which re-designates and re-shapes those with and about whom he is speaking.

In Chapter 5 I examine Exodus 19–24, which is somewhat different from other sections of dialogue in that there is no sustained conversation between Moses and YHWH. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the fulfilment of themes in Exodus 3–7 and provides important background for Exodus 32–34, as well as adding useful information regarding YHWH’s presence. Furthermore, the revelation of YHWH in Exodus 20:3–7 is important for the understanding of Exodus 32–34. I show that many of the complexities of the text arise from the different ways in which YHWH manifests himself.

In Chapter 6 I show that YHWH’s dialogue with Moses in Exodus 32:7–33:11 gives further meaning and significance to the divine name in terms of YHWH’s response to the idolatry of the people. YHWH’s freedom to be present as he chooses is demonstrated by his threat to withdraw from the people and his determination to punish at the time of his choosing.

In Chapter 7, the final section of dialogue, Exodus 33:12–34:35, is examined and I show that the intercession of Moses is critical to the demonstration of YHWH’s mercy and compassion. Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that YHWH is a ‘jealous’ God, he shows mercy and compassion to an idolatrous people. This section finishes by affirming

that YHWH is present to Israel in and through Moses, and that because of YHWH's grace and forgiveness to an idolatrous people the covenant is confirmed.

Thus the consideration of these texts demonstrates that Moses' questions, criticisms, and objections in the dialogues prompt YHWH into revealing more of his ways and character, to affirm both that he will punish sin and that he will be gracious and merciful. At the same time, YHWH's responses function to re-orientate Moses from the mistaken or incomplete perspective revealed in his questions by deepening his understanding of an aspect of divine character and then re-directing him with new instructions for the next stage of his mission and learning. Each of YHWH's self-disclosures can be seen as an expansion of his original declaration of his name in Exodus 3:14. Therefore, within Exodus, while there are developments and tensions in the portrayal of YHWH's character, there is a fundamental unity of portrayal based around the tension between YHWH's freedom and his presence with his people.