

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Divine simplicity and scripture: a theological reading of Exodus 3:14

Jonathan M. Platter*

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

*Corresponding author. E-mail: jmplatter@gmail.com**Abstract**

Exodus 3:14 had traditionally been taken as God's self-identification as 'being-itself', and hence as a source for the doctrine of divine simplicity. I begin this essay by arguing that the appropriateness of this interpretation of Exodus 3:14 should be evaluated by attention to the *judgements* about God made within scripture rather than merely the semantic range of a few words. There are three questions elicited by Exodus 3:1–14, concerning God's incomparability, intimacy and ineffability, that are relevant to the significance of verse 14 for divine simplicity. Consideration of the kind of judgements these questions elicit about God allows a case to be made for the aptness of divine simplicity to hold the judgements together, thereby allowing for a more sympathetic retrieval of premodern uses of Exodus 3:14.

Keywords: being itself; divine simplicity; Exodus 3:14; theological interpretation; Gerhard von Rad

For much of Christian tradition, Exodus 3:14 has been understood as God's self-identification with 'being-itself', and hence as a source for the doctrine of divine simplicity. However, recent linguistic studies have rendered the ontological reading of 3:14 as 'I AM THE ONE WHO IS' less plausible, in particular by arguing that the Hebrew is more faithfully rendered as 'I AM WHO I AM' or 'I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE'. There have been a number of responses from theologians and philosophers of religion, and in this paper I contribute to the task of rearticulating the connection between Exodus 3:14 and divine simplicity.¹ By 'divine simplicity' I mean the claim that God is not composite in any way: God does not have physical parts and is not spatially extended, but neither does God have metaphysical parts, as if God were 'made up' of more basic components

¹E. L. Mascall suggests that, though the precise wording of Exodus 3:14 does not readily permit the more ontological interpretation, the latter can be developed out of the broader Old Testament witness to the uniqueness and power of God (E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to 'He Who Is'* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949), pp. 12–15). More recently, Katherine Sonderegger has proposed yet another way of reading Exodus 3:14 in line with the doctrine of divine simplicity in terms of the perfect identity of subject and object in God's action and self-disclosure (Katherine Sonderegger, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), pp. 210–23; cf. pp. 80–2). Though I am sympathetic with Mascall's and Sonderegger's approaches, they also have limitations. Mascall's approach requires sweeping – and therefore highly contestable – generalisations in OT theology; and Sonderegger's approach does not relate directly (or at least explicitly) to the traditional connection of divine simplicity with Exodus 3:14 as formulated by the church fathers.

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

or determinations of the divine being.² One of the most radical articulations of divine simplicity also insists that with respect to God it is not possible to distinguish between either subject and existence or essence and existence. God is perfectly identical to the divine act of existence; for if there are no metaphysical categories more basic than God, then in God the distinctions between these categories break down, and what the categories express converge extensionally.³

I propose reading the self-designation in Exodus 3:14 within the broader scene of Exodus 3:1–14. First, I discuss some preliminary concerns of interpretation. I offer a summary of the criticisms of an ontological reading of Exodus 3:14 and then offer some hermeneutical reflections that will guide my reading of the text. Second, I present my narrative reading of Exodus 3:1–14 and find three questions present within the narrative that are significant for metaphysical discussion of the divine being. I argue that the text as a whole elicits questions of God's incomparability, intimacy and ineffability. Third, I present the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity in discussion with these three questions. I argue that the form of divine simplicity presented in dialogue with Exodus 3:14 can be seen as in part a gloss on the perfect compatibility of God's fiery presence in the burning bush with God's transcendence. While this reading of Exodus 3 does not logically *necessitate* the doctrine of divine simplicity as I am articulating it, it does permit it. Further, the doctrine of divine simplicity and Exodus 3:1–14 are, on this reading, mutually illuminating.

Preliminary considerations

Among premodern theologians, the identification of God with being-itself was readily confirmed or even derived from God's self-designation in Exodus 3:14. Authors as otherwise diverse as Philo, Augustine, John of Damascus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas are in agreement that Exodus 3:14 identifies God as being itself. In biblical studies, beginning at least in the early twentieth century, this premodern interpretation has been diversely treated, though largely rejected as so much Hellenisation of Hebrew thought. One problem raised for our engagement with premodern exegesis is that their interpretation is based on the Greek and Latin translations of the original Hebrew. The Hebrew *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* is claimed to have less resonance with 'being' in an abstract sense than do the Septuagint's *ego eimi ho ōn* and the Vulgate's *ego sum qui sum*. This raises the question of what the Hebrew text is in fact *doing* if it does not license speculation about the being or existence of God. An example of this critique of premodern readings of Exodus 3:14 can be found in Gerhard von Rad, who proposes a non-metaphysical reading:

Nothing is farther from what is envisaged ... than a definition of [God's] nature in the sense of a philosophical statement about his being – a suggestion, for example,

²For an extended discussion along these lines, see James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

³I insist that the convergence is only extensional and not intentional, at least to the extent that the categories as we use them do not become synonymous. Or, in Thomistic language, there is always a distinction between the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*, so that all God's names or perfections are identical in respect of the *res significata* but distinct according to the *modus significandi*. On Thomas' use of this distinction, see Gregory Rocca, 'The Distinction between *Res Significata* and *Modus Significandi* in Aquinas's Theological Epistemology', *The Thomist* 55/2 (April 1991), pp. 173–97.

of his absoluteness, aseity, etc. Such a thing would be altogether out of keeping with the Old Testament. The whole narrative context leads right away to the expectation that Jahweh intends to impart something – but this is not *what he is*, but what he *will show himself to be* to Israel.⁴

For von Rad it is not only the case that the original Hebrew is not as exclusively oriented to the disclosure of the divine ‘being’ as in the later Greek and Latin translations, but that those later translations are in fact *opposed* to the meaning of the original text.

Such a conclusion would seem to present a final verdict, foreclosing the premodern attempt to reconcile God’s self-disclosure with the speculative naming of God as ‘being itself’ – that is, naming God as perfectly simple. However, there are problems with the argument as it stands, which have elicited several responses. Within the guild of biblical scholars, Andrea Saner has pointed out the problems of circularity in historical reconstructions on which arguments like von Rad’s depend.⁵ And both Michael Allen and Paul Gavrilyuk have posed serious challenges to the function of the ‘Hellenisation thesis’ (i.e. that philosophical readings of scripture are corrupted by the influence of Greek thought) in claims like von Rad’s. Allen and Gavrilyuk argue that the Hellenisation thesis typically presupposes an overly monolithic understanding of Greek thought, an unsupported claim that early Christians used Greek thought uncritically and an unsustainable assumption that all cultural and philosophical borrowing is antithetical to the gospel.⁶

To this I add a further problem, especially relevant to von Rad’s claim. Von Rad’s interpretation of Exodus 3:14 in an explicitly non-metaphysical manner assumes a clear distinction between metaphysical and non-metaphysical judgements about God, attaching the former to later Hellenised thinking and the latter to Hebrew thinking. However, by attempting to excise everything that could find resonance with later Greek ‘metaphysical’ thought from the semantic range of the original Hebrew, von Rad actually assumes – against his claims – that Hebrew thought not only was not explicitly engaged in metaphysical reflection on God’s being or essence but was to some degree *self-consciously engaged in an activity clearly differentiated from such metaphysical speculation*.

However, this could only happen by virtue of awareness of the possibility of metaphysical speculation on the part of the authors and editors. If they had no notion of such activity, then neither could they self-consciously engage in an alternative and clearly differentiated sort of reflection. To make the historical claim that the authors of the Old Testament were engaged in such a strictly delimited activity anachronistically deploys a later distinction between explicitly metaphysical and non-metaphysical judgements about God as if the distinction was also observed by people within an earlier cultural moment. If the distinction only appears later, then it is plausible that the original

⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (London: SCM, 1966), p. 180 (emphases added).

⁵Andrea D. Saner, ‘Too Much to Grasp’: *Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), pp. 22–3, drawing on the work of William Propp.

⁶Michael Allen, ‘Exodus 3 After the Hellenization Thesis’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3/2 (2009), pp. 179–96; and Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impossible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 21–46. For a discussion of this text, the Hellenisation thesis and Philo’s exegesis in particular, see Janet Martin Soskice, ‘Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8/2 (April 2006), pp. 149–62.

text may include a diversity of meanings within its semantic range that supervene across the distinction as later conceived. Paul Ricoeur's comments are apposite:

the Greek *einai* and the Latin *esse* have always signified more than one thing, can the same thing not be said about the semantic field ... which applies to the Hebrew *'ehyeh* and even to the Tetragrammaton? Who can say whether in the ears of the ancient Hebrews the declaration *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* did not already have an enigmatic resonance? And if so, this resonance would already have at least a double sense: the enigma of a positive revelation giving rise to thought (about existence, efficacy, faithfulness, accompanying through history), and of a negative revelation dissociating the Name from those utilitarian and magical values concerning power that were ordinarily associated with it. And perhaps the even greater enigma of a revelation, in the usual sense of a theophany, or a nonrevelation, in the sense of a withdrawal into the incognito.⁷

The denial that *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* could possibly have metaphysical resonances seems to assume that *'ehyeh* has a narrow semantic range excluding such resonances, and this is a questionable assumption precisely because it distinguishes metaphysical and non-metaphysical language in a way that can only happen when some language has achieved a highly technical and entrenched metaphysical function distinguished from more mundane uses. But specific words only become distinguishably metaphysical (as explicitly opposed to their ordinary uses) after many years of terminological refinement and paradigm-establishing *use* for technical philosophical purposes. In a context prior to or independent of an exclusively technical use of a word for philosophical purposes, it is question-begging to claim a clearly delimited *non-metaphysical* use was intended. No word is inherently exclusively philosophical or metaphysical. Rather, words have potential metaphysical resonances that get conscripted for particular uses over time. So, contrary to von Rad and those who insist on a non-metaphysical reading, it seems appropriate to keep open a broad range of meanings in Exodus 3:14.

If semantics alone cannot determine whether or not scripture intends or permits a metaphysical reading, then an alternative approach to the theological task of interpreting scripture is needed in order to responsibly discern when metaphysical interpretations are appropriate. Here I sketch my approach. First, I reject any *a priori* assumptions about the incompatibility of metaphysics and scripture. Compatibility or incompatibility must be demonstrated in particular cases, not decided in advance, and I present here one argument for compatibility between Exodus 3:14 and the doctrine of divine simplicity.⁸ Second, I focus on judgements within the text rather than looking exclusively to concepts or words and their translations.⁹ In any act of reflecting

⁷Paul Ricoeur, 'From Interpretation to Translation', in André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 340–1.

⁸For examples of careful reflection on compatibility on particular issues, see Christopher Franks' argument that God's simplicity as explicated by Aquinas and Barth is not in fact contrary to the livingness of God depicted in scripture. Christopher A. Franks, 'The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth, and Some Philosophers', *Modern Theology* 21/2 (April 2005), pp. 275–300; and Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁹For an elaboration and defence of this distinction, see David S. Yeago, 'The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis', *Sewanee Theological Review* 45/4 (Michaelmas 2002), pp. 371–84.

theologically on a text of scripture, one is not only concerned with the precise meaning of words and sentences but also with the *judgements* the text makes about God, creation and their relationship. By ‘theological interpretation’, then, I intend an exegetical practice that is engaged in rearticulating the judgments made about God in scripture, and which thereby contributes to the regulative task of patterning our language after scripture’s judgements. So, while I maintain that there is irreducible value in attending to the grammar and language of the original text (i.e. we must take seriously ‘the way the words go’¹⁰), I believe the primary theological focus should be on the judgements that the text makes about God. The question then becomes: how should the reader understand the judgements presented in Exodus 3:14’s account of God’s self-naming in order to continue to perform faithful judgements about God?

My shift from words to judgements is not licence for any interpretation whatsoever, because the goal is still to discern the salient judgements about God *communicated in the text*. To identify areas where theological interpretation needs to be exercised, I follow a *quaestio* procedure, modelled partly on Thomas Aquinas’ commentary practice: *when an interpretive difficulty specifically concerned with judgements about God arises in the narrative context of the text, let this become the occasion for theological interpretation, for which the use of resources beyond the particular text may be deployed as assistance*.¹¹ Though such a procedure is not exhaustive, it should be clear in what follows that, to whatever extent I engage in metaphysical speculation about the meaning of Exodus 3:14, it is because I believe the narrative itself elicits such interpretive reflection, and the metaphysical reflection is used to enter more deeply into scripture’s judgements about God.

Let us turn now to the passage in question. I first offer a brief retelling of verses 1–14, followed by an examination of three key interpretive questions the text elicits. This then leads to my argument for divine simplicity in understanding and continuing to articulate the judgements within the text.

Call and theophany: reading Exodus 3:14 in context

Moses encounters the burning bush while tending his father-in-law’s sheep. By appearance alone he does not seem to regard it as holy or theophanic but simply as a curiosity. He wonders why the bush remains unconsumed by the flame. Only after God addresses Moses from within the bush does he come to regard the whole situation as theophanic.¹² God explains that Moses is on holy ground, in the presence of ‘the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (v. 6).¹³

¹⁰Cf. Rowan Williams, ‘The Discipline of Scripture’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 44–59.

¹¹Consider Aquinas’ similar exegetical approach, discussed in Jeremy Holmes, ‘Aquinas’ *Lectura in Matthaeum*’, in Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating and John P. Yocum (eds), *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), pp. 73–97.

¹²In putting it this way, I am in partial agreement with Walter Brueggemann, who calls this less a theophany than ‘voice to voice encounter’. However, I see this voice-to-voice encounter as precisely what enables Moses to recognise the theophany, so that theophany and voice-to-voice encounter are not contrasted with one another. See Walter Brueggemann, ‘Exodus 3: Summons to Holy Transformation’, in Stephen E. Fowl (ed.) *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 157.

¹³All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

After this introduction, God proceeds to commission Moses to the task of confronting Pharaoh and leading the Israelites out of Egypt.

To God's call, Moses offers a series of objection questions, notably asking 'who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?' (v. 11) and 'If I come to the Israelites ... and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' (v. 13). God's self-designation, I AM WHO I AM, is given as a response to Moses' objections. Consequently, the significance and meaning of this name is related to the kind of objections Moses is raising. The key to understanding what kind of judgements Exodus 3:14 is making about God concerns how God's self-naming addresses Moses' situation. Two intratextual observations are useful in addressing this question: first, Moses is concerned in his initial objection about his status in relation to Pharaoh. In order to evade the call God is extending, Moses alludes to his own insignificance vis-à-vis Pharaoh. Andrea Saner notes that this should be troubling to the reader, for Moses' language echoes a common Old Testament sentiment about the relative unworthiness of a human before *God* (e.g. 2 Chron 2:5; 2 Sam 7:8; Pss 8:5; 144:3), though Moses is here using such language about Pharaoh.¹⁴ Moses seems to be thinking within a quantitative power continuum. As a murderer and expatriate, Moses is relatively low on the continuum. God's response does not attempt to convince Moses that he should think better of himself but, on the contrary, shifts the emphasis away from Moses' relative power to God's own self: 'I will be with you' (v. 12).

Second, when Moses asks for a name, it is clear upon reflection that he is not actually worried about satisfying potential questions the Israelites might raise. Why this was likely not on Moses' mind can be seen if we imagine what it would look like if Moses had wanted a name simply to give to inquisitive Israelites. For if the Israelites were to ask for a name, they would want one that confirmed that it is in fact their God on whose behalf Moses was acting. But in that case, they would want a name they recognised and not a new name. However, God had already offered the name they would recognise: 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'.¹⁵ Moses is not just asking for a name that he can give to the Israelites, as if he genuinely thinks they will demand one. The question is not about being able to prove that Israel's God did in fact appear to him; rather, the reference to potentially inquisitive Israelites is rhetorical.¹⁶ Moses is instead asking God for a name of *power*, by which he will perform the role to which God is calling him.¹⁷ Saner sums this up well:

the verse seems to present the question of under what name – what understanding of the nature of God – the Israelites will be able to trust ... For Moses inquires about the name of God, but he receives both a name and a statement of who God is. For both Moses and for the Israelites, the sending of Moses marks a new act of God, one that will require new and substantial trust.¹⁸

¹⁴Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, pp. 118–19.

¹⁵Additionally, Moses does ask in 4:1 about the possibility that the Israelites might want proof that it was truly their God who appeared to him. But why would Moses continue to question God with the same concern, especially considering that all the other questions raise distinct problems? For elaboration of this point, see Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, p. 121.

¹⁶Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121–2.

¹⁷As argued by André LaCocque, 'The Revelation of Revelations', in *Thinking Biblically*, p. 311.

¹⁸Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, p. 122.

This brings us to the name that God supplies: 'I AM WHO I AM'. He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you"' (v. 14). The name is given as a response both to Moses' uncertainty in the face of Pharaoh, and to his request for a name of power in which he and Israel can trust. A third point arises: God gives a name that is also seemingly the evasion of a name. In response to the request for a name of power, God offers a strictly first-personal self-reference, as if to say that the name and the power by which Moses is being sent is not something within Moses' grasp – the name is not a token that Moses can comprehend and wield as he pleases.¹⁹ The name does not overcome God's ineffability but in some sense betokens it.

Incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability: divine simplicity and Exodus 3:14

Based on the above reading, I suggest that the narrative elicits three interpretive questions about God's self-naming. (1) How does God unsettle the quantitative power continuum between Moses and Pharaoh to validate Moses' call? (2) How does God's self-naming address Moses' concern about trustworthy power? (3) How is God's self-naming discontinuous with typical acts of naming? My contention in this section is that divine simplicity can be used as a conceptual tool for attempting to think through these three interpretive questions. And I contend that simplicity does so in a way that draws the reader deeper into the text itself and does not abstract from the text's depiction of God, Moses and Israel. The three questions concern God's incomparability, intimacy and ineffability.

Incomparability

Notice what is at issue in the question of incomparability: Moses is tempted to interpret his ability to accomplish the task to which God calls him through a quantitative difference between his own power/ability/status and that of Pharaoh. God's response, including the giving of the name in Exodus 3:14, shifts away from the quantitative comparison by promising God's own presence to Moses. This suggests that there is something radically different about God that distinguishes him from the kind of continuum on which Moses and Pharaoh are separately placed. Might God's promise of presence – as a disruption of Moses' sense of relative weakness – display an utterly *qualitative* rather than merely quantitative difference between God and both Moses and Pharaoh? Perhaps if Moses can come to rightly perceive God's ontological difference, then his perceived quantitative incommensurability with Pharaoh will pose no threat to God's call. God's incomparability is therefore the condition of the possibility of Moses' sending and of the success of his mission.

Already this begins to connect with divine simplicity. If God unsettles the quantitative power continuum internal to the creaturely plane of being, then God's incomparability can be understood non-quantitatively. God is not a member of a quantitative series, hence God's being cannot be described or defined in quantitative terms (except perhaps metaphorically). A non-quantitative incomparability would *prima facie* resemble simpleness (namely, non-compositeness), for anything that is composed is quantifiable both in terms of its components and in terms of sharing in a genus within which it is in principle possible to be one in a numerical series. If God is depicted as unsettling

¹⁹Sonderregger, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 210–23, offers a powerful and compelling elucidation of this point.

the quantitative power continuum, and therefore somehow *incomparable* and *non-quantifiable*, then there is reason to further consider God in terms of simplicity.²⁰

Intimacy

The question of ‘intimacy’ is therefore already internal to the question of ‘incomparability’. Moses wants something that betokens the power of his call, and it is to this desire that God responds with the name I AM WHO I AM. In this light, I suggest that even if THE ONE WHO IS of the LXX is not the *only* legitimate translation of the Hebrew, it seems to be not only plausibly included in the semantic range of the original but also related to the request Moses is making. Moses asks for a name of power that validates his mission. From the fiery-but-not-consuming intimacy engulfing the bush, God announces just such a name, I AM WHO I AM – THE ONE WHO IS. The name signals a unique kind of power and presence. It expresses the One so radically other and yet intimately present to creation that there is no competition; the One whose ‘is’, whose being and life, is so infinite and unqualified – as Augustine and Aquinas say, the One who is ‘to be’ itself – that this One’s presence to finite, particular creatures brings the creatures to their own radiance and perfection.

This connection comes to the surface in Augustine’s thought. In his reading, God the Creator who addresses Moses in the burning bush is ‘the one who *is* in the supreme degree’ in contrast to creatures that do not possess being in the supreme degree.²¹ The relative difference in mode of existence is not a matter of quantitative variation in form or actuality, as if creaturely being is on a single continuum with God, for the whole scale of actuality and form is created by God. Rather, the difference has to do with the relationship between a subject (e.g. God or a creature) and existence. To say that God ‘*is* in the supreme degree’ is to say that God, distinctly from creatures, *has existence (esse)* in the supreme degree, which means that God has existence by identity or nature rather than by reception or participation. In other words, God is identical to God’s existence, whereas creatures only exist by *receiving* existence from God. In this way, creatures are composite by virtue of their dependence on God for existence, whereas God is simple by virtue of perfect identity with existence.²² ‘Existence’ here does not express a mere property a thing possesses but is the actuality of the being, that by virtue of which a being stands forth from non-being. If God is *identical* to the infinite act of existence itself – in Aquinas’ phrase, *ipsum esse subsistens* – then, as the Creator, God shares with others by gift what God is in God’s self. God’s intimate self-donation is that by virtue of which creatures are made actual. Because God perfectly ‘is’, God can be radically intimate to that which God brings into being.

Consequently, God’s incomparability and intimacy converge, at least in one way of thinking these categories. God is utterly incomparable, other than the quantitative series in which creatures exist, and this incomparability glosses God’s perfect ‘is’. Therefore,

²⁰Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, trans. English Dominican Friars (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963–81), 1.11.3.2. See also Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 100–1, 152–3.

²¹Augustine, *True Religion*, 18.35, trans. Edmund Hill, in *On Christian Belief*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005). Cf. also Augustine, *The Confessions*, 12.8. trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997).

²²Similarly for Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 39.

God can be perfectly present and intimate without competition with creatures. Janet Martin Soskice puts it nicely:

The God of the attributes is not far away but near, very near – and so Augustine is able to mix, willy nilly, and without embarrassment, the language of divine perfection with the language of [scripture], because all are terms of God's intimacy with us. ... The metaphysical attributes are not discarded, rather their meanings are only given in fullness through God's self-disclosure – through revelation. For this God who acts in lived lives, whether that of the cosmos, of Israel, or Augustine, ultimacy and intimacy are one.²³

The non-competitive presence of God to Moses is precisely the assurance requested, promising that Moses will be acting with the proper power to fulfil God's mission. Because of *who* and *what* God is – namely, the Creator of all, who exists by perfect identity with God's own act of existing – the 'name of power' that God gives in response to Moses' question is simply an expression of God's fiery presence to Moses. This presence ensures that Moses' relative inadequacy against Pharaoh is subverted, and that his call will be sustained by the One who is present in the name.

Ineffability

Finally, how and why is God's self-naming discontinuous with typical acts of naming? Do we not see in Exodus 3:14 a strange alliance of naming and of simultaneously evading being exhaustively signified by the name? It may seem that this tension has been collapsed by the direct appeals in the previous section to the identity between God and God's act of existing – in effect penetrating beyond what is humanly knowable of God. In fact, I argue it is the reverse that is the case: just such an identification between God and God's existence is able to sustain the connection between the gift of God's name and the ineffability of God. For only that which exists within the series of other finite particulars can be grasped and fully known, tagged and categorised by things like genus and difference. But this is the case only for those things that *receive existence* but are in themselves not identical to existing. God, by contrast, is not so bounded but is simply God's own infinite act of existing, unqualified by any other beings or limits. Consequently, we have no possession in our language and knowledge of God, for God always exceeds what we can think and say.²⁴

While deploying a different conceptuality than what is provided in scripture, this explication of God's ineffability named through gift offers a rendering of Exodus 3:14 that connects with the questions discussed above as incomparability and intimacy. The name of power that Moses received in Exodus 3:14 is not one that can be at his disposal, a name by which he can conjure divine power at will. Instead, he receives a name that only God could rightly use. Saner shows how this interpretation makes

²³Janet Martin Soskice, 'The Gift of the Name: Moses and the Burning Bush', in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 72–3.

²⁴See Soskice, 'Gift of the Name', p. 75: 'To be a theologian, we might say, is always to stand under the primacy of the signified over the signifier ... but at the same time to know the signified can only be named through gift ... The naming of God can never be, without risk of idolatry a matter of simple denomination. Its foundation is gift – the gift of God's self-disclosure in history (both Israel's and our own) – and practice, the practice of prayer which is itself a gift.'

sense of the broader discourse between Moses and God. Her words are worth quoting at length:

God cannot be known as an ‘item in the universe’, but only as a subject who meets Moses in Midian and the reader in the text, pronouncing his own name. Thus, Moses’ perspective must again shift from concern about a name to give the Israelites to attention toward the reality of the God who is sending him, who addresses Moses directly. ... in response to Moses’ concerns about his own weakness, YHWH reveals himself as the one who is able to carry out the task. YHWH’s self-disclosure as subject in verse 14 is precisely in opposition to Moses’ self-concern, because it draws Moses’ attention away from himself and into God’s ‘I’. Knowledge of YHWH will require Moses’ ongoing attention, because God does not describe himself according to a definition or by means of an object that can be mastered.²⁵

This suggests that the name is a gift of God’s immanent activity within God’s people *and* a privileged act of self-naming as the fiery transcendence that can never be exhausted. Precisely because these are not competing aspects of God’s reality – as if immanence and transcendence were tensions in God’s being – God can call Moses and provide assurance for the task set before him. From this perspective it seems fitting to take God’s self-naming in Exodus 3:14 as gathering up all the questions and concerns Moses has raised against accepting God’s call and redirecting attention to the unique *reality of God*. Exodus 3:14 can then be taken as expressing a judgement about God’s simplicity insofar as the later concept of ‘simplicity’ does in fact explicate the questions raised in the broader text.

Toward the simple God

We might think of divine simplicity, taken as a way of interpreting God’s self-naming in Exodus 3:14, as a summary statement that holds together the judgements that Moses need not fear or be concerned about his relative humbleness before Pharaoh because the God who sends him is (1) utterly incomparable, unsettling the quantitative power continuum; (2) intimate, as the fiery presence who sustains and perfects all creatures and does so uniquely for those whom God sends; and (3) ineffable, beyond mastery or closure and entirely escaping human control. It has been my contention in this essay that divine simplicity is a conceptual tool developed by Christian theologians to help the church recognise and follow the judgements made within this text (among others). We are alerted to this pattern of judgements by questions that arise within the narrative itself. While I acknowledge that the narrative does not require or directly provide us with conceptual language like divine simplicity offers, I also argue that the Christian doctrine of divine simplicity is disciplined by and directed toward judgements that are made within the narrative, and therefore the doctrine holds promise in our attempts to know the God who sent Moses and who sends the church. Simplicity helps us to attend to the trustworthiness of God.

Though I acknowledge that Exodus does not *necessitate* the doctrine of divine simplicity, I have argued that simplicity does in fact *benefit* our reading of this text. And there are other positive results of connecting Exodus 3:14 and divine simplicity. For instance, divine simplicity (and its partner, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*) aid us in

²⁵Saner, *Too Much to Grasp*, p. 125.

interpreting scripture's depiction of the interplay of divine and human agency non-competitively.²⁶ Insofar as one's ontology often informs the range of interpretive possibilities available in difficult texts, it would be worth continued study to test the kind of ontological reading I have put forward here by seeing what interpretive possibilities it might open up in other difficult texts.²⁷

Exodus 3:14 is not a self-contained account of God's reality – the judgements we make about God should be developed through reading it along with the rest of scripture. In conjunction with a dogmatic-exegetical account like that of Steven Duby, my reading of Exodus 3:14 might help in developing a theology of God informed by a broad range of scripture's descriptions.²⁸ As Duby has argued, according to scripture God is universally sovereign (e.g. cf. Gen 1; 2 Kings 19:15; Isa 37:14–20, Ps 2:1–12; Acts 17:24–6; Rom 3:19), is the uniquely true God (cf. Deut 6:4; Zech 14:9; Jas 2:19; with reference to Jesus, see John 5:44; 1 John 5:20) and is distinct from all other gods (cf. Deut 4:35, 4:39, 5:7; Isa 19:1, 21:9; 1 Cor 8:4). Similarly to my argument here, Duby argues that the singularity ascribed to God in scripture does not permit quantitative interpretation, for it signifies a radical ontological otherness, according to which God in fact transcends the realm of quantity and degrees. Neither, then, are God's perfections univocal instances to a maximal degree, for this again would be to make quantitative predications of God, which God's singularity obviates.²⁹ Rather, we might say that God is the simple actuality by virtue of which various names and descriptions of God are true.³⁰

This reading can also help the contemporary theologian and exegete more sympathetically approach premodern interpretations of Exodus 3:14; in particular, my interpretation may allow us receive premodern uses of Exodus 3:14 for divine simplicity as metonymy rather than naïve instances of 'proof-texting'. Read as metonymy, premodern exegetes used this single climactic verse to stand in for a way of reading and interpreting the larger passage. As I have argued, there are good reasons to read the whole passage as eliciting questions about God's trustworthiness in terms of incomparability, intimacy and ineffability. Insofar as simplicity unites these three questions conceptually

²⁶For some biblical studies that would be amenable to this approach, see Gary A. Anderson, 'Creatio ex nihilo and the Bible', in Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (eds), *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), pp. 15–35; Gary A. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017); and Nathan Chambers, 'Divine and Creaturely Agency in Genesis 1', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72/1 (2019), pp. 1–19.

²⁷Anderson and Chambers, cited in the previous footnote, each show how von Rad, Brueggemann, William Brown and others often develop interpretations of divine power and agency that presume a competitive relationship between divine and creaturely agency. When that presumption is challenged and another ontological rendering of God's relation to creation is considered, a different rendering of God's involvement in history might be available. From a different angle, Austin Stevenson has recently demonstrated how metaphysical assumptions have limited the range of possibilities considered within historical Jesus studies ('The Self-Understanding of Jesus: A Metaphysical Reading of Historical Jesus Studies', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72/3 (August 2019), pp. 291–307). Careful readings of scripture that allow for the unique reality of God (i.e. as simple) might also, then, affect how we pursue reconstructions of the identity and self-understanding of Jesus.

²⁸Cf. Duby, *Divine Simplicity*; but in contrast to Duby's approach, I believe that an exegetical account of divine simplicity could be developed without exclusive commitment to one metaphysical system.

²⁹Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, esp. pp. 91–108.

³⁰Consider also Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017).

by clarifying the judgements about God's reality to which these questions are directed, then it offers a coherent account of God's self-naming that stands in a mutually interpretive relationship to the rest of the passage. While Aquinas' use of Exodus 3:14, for instance, may not seem like sound exegesis at first glance, it would be hasty to call it 'eisegesis'.³¹ For, again, I am arguing that uses like Aquinas' might be taken as metonymy, standing in for exegetical judgements derived from a way of interpreting the theology of Exodus 3:14 within the larger narrative of verses 1–14. Consequently, my reading enables a retrieval of premodern exegesis that can simultaneously honour their readings on their own terms and open up a potentially more fruitful discussion with recent biblical studies.

Finally, divine simplicity and the divine naming of Exodus 3:14 are mutually illuminating. Divine simplicity offers conceptual resources to help readers grapple with the reality of God through the questions the text presents concerning God's incomparability, intimacy and ineffability. This reading acknowledges the internal unity of the three questions insofar as they each arise within Moses' struggle to trust God and to receive the vocation to which God is calling him. Consequently, interpreting the passage with the aid of the doctrine of divine simplicity draws the reader deeper into the mystery of God's self-revelation and being – involving the reader in an analogous posture of trust in the presence of the utterly unique reality of God. But simplicity is also clearly given content and character through its contact with this passage. By reading them together, simplicity is shown to address our ethical and personal involvement with God, and hence it is not simply an abstract philosophical doctrine.³² Contemplating who and what this God is has value in our struggle to trust the fire of God's presence and action. We might sum it up this way: in God's self-naming as *THE ONE WHO IS*, God assures us that by virtue of God's utter simplicity we can embrace the task of trust and the vulnerability that comes with it.

³¹Contra Paul Maxwell, 'The Formulation of Thomistic Simplicity: Mapping Aquinas's Method for Configuring God's Essence', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57/2 (2014), p. 383.

³²Similarly, see John Behr, 'Synchronic and Diachronic Harmony: St. Irenaeus on Divine Simplicity', *Modern Theology* 35/3 (July 2019), pp. 428–41.