

NOEL D. OSBORN

THIS IS MY NAME FOREVER: "I AM" OR "YAHWEH"?

The Rev. Dr Noel Osborn is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Manila

When the *Good News Bible* first appeared in 1976, it was illustrated by a number of unique line drawings. As we all know, these drawings had been created expressly for this new translation by Swiss artist Annie Vallotton, and they undoubtedly helped to sell the book. Although not fully appreciated or understood in many parts of the world, they were given captions intended to tie them to the text, thereby assisting the reader in interpreting both text and picture.

One illustration, however, has been bothering me for twelve years. I refer to the the drawing in Exodus 3 of Moses kneeling before the burning bush. I have no criticism of the picture, and only slight criticism of the translation in which it is placed. Both artist and translators, in my judgment, have done a satisfactory job. The real problem is with the caption below the drawing, which is taken from verses 14 and 15 and reads, "I am who I am . . . This is my name forever."

Now I fully subscribe to the principle of "breaking the verse barrier" in translation. One aspect of this principle is stated in the GNB Preface for the benefit of the reader:

In some instances . . . where the order of thought or events in two or more verses is more clearly represented by a rearrangement of the material, two or more verse numbers are joined.

But in the present edition of GNB, there is no rearrangement of the material in verses 14 and 15 of chapter 3. And I have the feeling that the person who selected the captions for the Vallotton drawings was not a member of the translation team. The use of the three dots in this caption, in my judgment, unfortunately betrays the editor's misreading of the GNB text, and most certainly of the Hebrew. As it now stands, in the American edition of GNB, Ex 3.14-15 reads as follows:

¹⁴God said, "I am who I am. You must tell them: 'The one who is called I AM has sent me to you.' ¹⁵Tell the Israelites that I, the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have sent you to them. This is my name forever; this is what all future generations are to call me."

This seems to me to be a fairly accurate rendering of the Hebrew text, allowing for a few adjustments that translators are expected to make in expressing the meaning of the text clearly. These adjustments are easily seen when we compare GNB with the more literal RSV:

¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and

thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

The problem with the caption, “I am who I am . . . This is my name forever,” is that the three dots attempt to stretch the influence of the demonstrative “This” beyond its syntactic limits. The casual reader will immediately conclude that the name to be remembered forever is “I am who I am”. Even some translators we have worked with have concluded the same thing under the influence of this caption. More recent editions of GNB have changed the caption to “I AM . . . This is my name forever”, which reduces the “stretch” a bit. But even this suggests that the name by which the God of Moses is to be remembered is *Ehyeh* “I am” rather than *Yahweh*.

As the RSV rendering reveals, there are four demonstratives in these two verses, three of them rendered as “this”, and one rendered as “thus”. The Hebrew uses two different adjective words, one a demonstrative adverb (*koh*) and one a demonstrative adjective (*zeh*). It may be helpful to list them as follows:

verse 14 <i>koh</i>	RSV: Say this to the people of Israel GNB: This is what you must say to them
verse 15 <i>koh</i>	RSV: Say this to the people of Israel GNB:—
verse 15 <i>zeh</i>	RSV: this is my name for ever GNB: This is my name forever
verse 15 <i>zeh</i>	RSV: and thus I am to be remembered GNB: this is what all future generations are to call me

In the context of this passage, it is easy to recognize that the two instances of the word *koh* refer to what follows, especially since they are used in connection with the word *'amar* “to say”. In fact, the expression, *koh t'omar* “thus you shall say”, identical in both verses, is an example of the so-called “messenger formula”, the function of which is always to introduce a direct quotation. Therefore, the *koh* in verse 14 clearly points to the *'ehyeh* “I am” which follows, and the *koh* in verse 15 points to *YHWH* “the LORD”.

It is equally clear that the two instances of *zeh* in verse 15 refer back to what has just been said. Specifically, the expression *zeh-shemi* “this is my name” most certainly points back to “the LORD” in the earlier part of the same verse, and the words *zeh zikri* “this is my remembrance” serve as a second shot at the same target. It is only when we begin to explore the possible meaning of *YHWH* that we are tempted to stretch these *zeh*'s back too far, doing a “leap-frog” over the second *koh*, which clearly refers to what follows it.

Several months ago we were encouraged to respond to the worldwide call for reviewers of a proposed revision of the *Good News Bible*. I decided to tackle some sample portions that had been circulated. One of these was Ex 3.1-17. I found the following to be the proposed revision of verses 13-16:

¹³But Moses replied, "When I go to the people of Israel and tell them that the God of their ancestors has sent me, they will ask me what your name is. What shall I tell them?"

¹⁴God said: "I am who I am, so you must tell them that the one called I AM has sent you to them. ¹⁵This is my name forever, and this is what all generations must call me.

Tell the people of Israel that the LORD God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has sent you to them. ¹⁶Bring together their leaders and tell them that the LORD has appeared to you, and that I have come and seen what the Egyptians are doing to them."

Note what has been done in "revising" the present GNB text. The two sentences of verse 15 have been interchanged so that the two instances of *zeh* come before the name *YHWH* and are thereby made to refer to the *'ehyeh* "I AM" of verse 14. And then a new paragraph is even introduced, separating all the more the three demonstratives in the Hebrew text from the crucial statement about "the LORD" (*YHWH*) to which they point.

There are two things a translator knows about these verses which the average reader does not know, and they are the two contributing factors to what I would call a mishandling of the text. The first is the use of the title "LORD" (in caps) for rendering the name *YHWH*, and the second is the scholarly consensus that both the *yehwah* (*YHWH*) in verse 15 and the *'ehyeh* "I am" in verse 14 are different forms of the same verb "to be" (*hayah*). I personally subscribe to both of these positions, but I also feel that special care must be given to the handling of a few passages like this one so that the reader is not misled.

The problem of how to render the name *YHWH* is familiar to all of us. We have been reminded of this again and again in recent years by articles and papers from all parts of the globe. I will not go into a further discussion of this problem, other than to summarize what we all should know, namely, that the translator has only three options:

- (a) **Translate** the meaning of *YHWH*. But the exact meaning of this name is not certain and is widely debated. Furthermore, personal names defy translation simply because they are names.
- (b) **Transliterate** the sound of *YHWH*. But the exact pronunciation is not certain due to the early taboo against its oral use. Furthermore, certain cultures and religious traditions object to a personal name for deity, as though God were only one god among many.
- (c) **Substitute** a title similar to "Lord". But this makes it difficult to distinguish the name *YHWH* from the title *'adonay*, especially in public reading. Furthermore, the full meaning of certain passages, such as Ex 3.14-15, depends on an understanding of the name as a name.

Each of these options has its own drawbacks, so there is no completely

satisfactory solution to the problem. My own position is that option (c) is the least inadequate solution in most cases. But there are a few passages that need to be handled differently if the full meaning is to be made clear. One may resort either to option (a) or to option (b) and then provide the necessary additional clarification in a footnote.

It is option (a) that has caused the problem which we are addressing here. The **meaning** of the name is certainly important in these verses, especially since the Hebrew ear would immediately have recognized the connection between *'ehyeh* and *yahweh* as a shifting from first person singular to third person singular of the verb "to be". Of course these are two different forms of the same word, but they represent two distinct "names". The God who calls himself "I AM" is the God who is to be addressed by the people of Israel as "HE IS". But neither of these sounds like a name in translation.

It is generally unwise to try to use more than one option at the same time, for either the translation becomes "padded" or the intended focus of the text is shifted. And the focus of verse 15 seems to be quite different from that of verse 14. A careful study of these verses leads to several conclusions:

- (1) There are really two questions in verse 13—the anticipated question of the Israelites and the actual question of Moses. The first is embedded in the second:
 - (a) The Israelites' question: "What is his name?"
 - (b) Moses' question: "What shall I say to them?"
- (2) Verse 15 provides a direct answer to the Israelites' question, with the repeated emphasis of *zeh-shemi* "this is my name" and *zeh zikri* "this is my remembrance".
- (3) Verses 14b and 15a provide direct answers to Moses' question. Note the *koh t'omar* "thus you shall say" in both cases. The answer in 14b is *'ehyeh* "I am", and the answer in 15a is the name *YHWH*.
- (4) Verse 14a is ambiguous in that it may be understood as an answer to either question or to neither. At the very least, it must be understood as a statement prompted by the questions and related in meaning to the answers.
- (5) There are three distinct introductions to God's reply:
 - verse 14a—God said to Moses . . .
 - verse 14b—And he said . . .
 - verse 15a—God also said to Moses . . .
- (6) There are therefore three possible "names" suggested: "I am who I am", "I am", and "Yahweh".

Consideration of all these factors has led many scholars to the conclusion that the text itself has been composed from different strands. That is, verses 13 to 16, as we have them, are made up of more than one source. Martin Noth, in his commentary on Exodus (pages 43-44), concludes that

. . . we should regard the simple giving of the name in verse 15 as an original answer to the question at the end of verse 13, in the same way as the sentence in verse 15b, 'this is my name for ever', will then take up the question 'What is his name?' in verse 13. Verse 14a would then have been added subsequently as an explanation of the name Yahweh and would have been inserted into the context by means of 14b which verbally anticipates the following clause . . . Be this as it may, verse 14a(b) however old it is is of great significance as the only explanation of the Old Testament name for God which has actually been handed down in the Old Testament.

In the final form of the text, therefore, the first of these three possible answers, "I am who I am", should be ruled out as the "name forever" by which God is to be "remembered throughout all generations". The second answer, "I am", could indeed be used as a name. In fact, it seems that the intended idea of the passage is that God, in referring to himself, uses the form *'ehyeh* "I AM". So the answer to the question of the Israelites, "What is his name?" could be either *Ehyeh* or *Yahweh*.

Reference has already been made to the so-called "messenger formula" indicated by the expression *koh t'omar* "thus you shall say". This was a form well known and widely used in the ancient world for sending messages from one person of status to another. It signaled the beginning of the exact words of the author of the message through the lips of a professional messenger, much like our present-day use of quotation marks. The messenger spoke as though he were the sender himself, and the subtle shift from third person to first and second person pronouns was understood by the one to whom the message was addressed as clearly as if the sender were standing there in person.

Since both *Ehyeh* and *Yahweh* are introduced separately by this messenger formula, it may be accepted that Moses was instructed to give the Israelites both forms of the verb "to be" in answer to their question. In verse 14b, however, Moses the messenger is simply repeating the exact "word" of God, who calls himself *Ehyeh* "I am". Were it not for verse 15a, this form could have been accepted as the divine name. But again, it could only be used by the Israelites with the qualification, "The one who calls himself *Ehyeh*".

The clarification given in verse 15, therefore, should settle the matter. "This is my name forever" and "this is my title" are both clear references to *Yahweh*, not to *Ehyeh*. So the "name forever" cannot be interpreted as "I AM" since it is to be the "title for all generations". Furthermore, a "name" is defined as "a word or phrase by which a person, thing, or class of things is known, called, or spoken of" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, page 944). The use of the passive voice in this definition implies that it is others who make use of a name, not the one to whom the name refers.

Accordingly, we would reject the proposed revision of GNB as far as

Ex 3.14-15 is concerned. The present rendering of these verses is much to be preferred. But in the light of our discussion here, we feel the present GNB text could be improved significantly in several ways. First of all, the phrase in verse 14b, "The one who is called I AM", should be changed to "The one who calls himself I AM". Then in verse 15b, the pronoun "This" should be changed to "the LORD" (or to "Yahweh") since the average reader will not understand the demonstrative to be pointing to the name rendered in 15a as "the LORD". The present footnote for verse 14 should be divided into two, with the second part identified by a raised letter placed in verse 15 after "the LORD". And finally, the two final clauses in verse 15 should be set off in poetic format. This is easily seen as an intended couplet from the Hebrew.

The GNB text for verses 14-15 would then read as follows:

¹⁴God said, "I am who I am. You must tell them: 'The one who calls himself I AM^c has sent me to you.' ¹⁵Tell the Israelites that I, the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have sent you to them.

'The LORD^f is my name forever;
this is what all future generations are to call me.' "

And the footnotes would read as follows:

^cI am who I am . . . I AM; *or* I will be who I will be . . . I WILL BE.

^f*The Hebrew name Yahweh, traditionally transliterated as Jehovah, sounds like the Hebrew for I AM. In this translation it is represented by "the LORD" in capital letters, following a usage which is widespread in English versions.*

ROBERT KOOPS

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS AND IMPLIED MEANING IN THE BOOK OF JOB

Robert Koops is a UBS Translation Adviser based in the United States

Whenever I read the Book of Job, even in a modern English translation, I find myself muttering, "Now what's he driving at?" or "What's that got to do with the last thing he said?" Even when