ON EXODUS iii 14 — “I AM THAT I AM”

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The answer which Moses received to his question regarding the name of the deity who commanded him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt is very much of a mystery. “I am that I am” is obviously an explanation of the meaning of the Divine name, and it connects this name with the root א-ת-ו-ת “to be”.

Now the verb “to be” has two connotations: it may express “identity” or “existence”. If in our passage it denotes identity in both instances (the first and the second “am”), the passage must mean that God cannot be identified; Moses receives no positive answer. If it denotes existence, in the second or in both instances, as a number of scholars maintain, then the passage as commonly translated makes little sense; it is but a confusing tautology.

Most translations are variations of one pattern: I AM THAT I AM (King James; Jewish Publ. Soc., R.V.); I am who I am (American Tr.; R.S.V.); I am what I am; I will be what I will be (RSV mgn); I will be that I will be (RV mgn); I am wont to be that which I am wont to be; I am wont to be He who I am wont to be (McNEILE, Exodus); Ich bin, der ich bin (most German versions).

In all these versions, the first “am” denotes identity; the second expresses identity according to some interpretations; existence according to others.

WELLHAUSEN’S rendering “Ich bin, sintemal ich bin”, has been followed by several German scholars and is also offered in the margin of the RV: “I am because I am”. Thus translated, אֶ-ת-ו-ת denotes existence in both instances. Similar in this respect, but different syntactically is the BUBER-ROSENZWEIG version: Ich werde da sein, als der ich da sein werde. Difficult to reproduce in English, this translation means literally “I shall exist as the one as whom I shall exist”, or “I shall exist as the one I shall be”.

With the exception of WELLHAUSEN’S and the BUBER-ROSENZWEIG version, all these translations suit the generally accepted exegesis,
viz. that this passage is meant to emphasize the mystery of God, the impossibility of defining his nature, his “Name”. “I am what (or Who or That) I am” means: I am not telling you who or what I am: I am I. It is a non-committal, circular definition: God cannot be defined by or as anything else, he is his own definition. “The expression is (to be) taken as an instance of the *idem per idem* idiom, which a speaker employs when he does not want to be explicit (cp. 1 Sam xxiii 13 — ‘they went where they went’; 2 Sam. xv 20 — ‘I am going where I am going’). Moses asks for God’s name, i.e. for a description of His nature and character; and he was taught that it was impossible to learn this all at once (McNEILE, Exodus).” McNEILE goes on to say, without noting that this is a slightly different interpretation, that the answer suggests that “God would be what He would from time to time prove to be; each age would discover fresh attributes of His Being” (This corresponds practically to the BUBER-ROSENZWEIG rendering). McNEILE also cites a few other interpretations: “I am who I am”—i.e. it matters you not to know (sic!); or: I am he who is unnameable and inexplicable.

Similarly G. BEER, in his commentary on Exodus (Tuebingen 1939) offers the following as one of two possible interpretations: “Ich bin, der ich bin, d.h. wer ich bin, sage ich dir nicht, ich bin der Deus absconditus (p. 29)”. (For a consideration of his other interpretation see below p. 301).

All these interpretations rest on the same syntactical approach to the text of our passage. They must be regarded as highly questionable, however, in view of a point of syntax which seems to have been generally overlooked. On the basis of the syntax of the relative clause in Hebrew, an entirely different translation may be obtained and yield a greatly preferable meaning.

The word רֹאשׁ, as is well known, is not a relative pronoun but merely indicates the subordination of the following clause. The relative clause itself is a complete and structurally independent sentence, as is evident in those cases where a retrospective or resumptive pronoun is employed to draw the governing noun into the relative clause construction. This would not be necessary if רֹאשׁ was a pronoun like the relative pronouns in English which represent the governing noun in the relative clause.

Thus, the relative clause is a complete sentence which stands in