

Francesca Albertini

Moses Mendelssohn



Translating Ex. 3,14, at first Mendelssohn clashes with a grammatical and linguistical difficulty, which is immanent to that verse. In the first place, the particle *ashèr*, called locative of origin, introduces a secondary proposition where we generally find the object of the predicate or of the subject of action, or also we find any kind of complement. But in the Bible *ashèr* often acts as conjunction with an explanatory subordinate sentence. In the second place, and it's the greatest difficulty, *èhyèh* is the first singular person of verb *hâyâh* (imperfect here), which is usually translated as "to be". According to Mendelssohn, in the particular case of Ex. 3,14 it is possible that we are in front of an archaic and contractive form of verb "to be", which could indicate here an action happening contemporaneously in the past, in the present and in the future. In others words, Mendelssohn observes that, even if the verb "to be" indicates a permanent and definite *status* of subject, in Ex. 3,14 it stresses the dynamism of a subject, dynamism which sets on the same temporal plane both the principal sentence and the secondary one.

In the light of these difficulties, it's clear the translation of Ex. 3,14 isn't founded on the linguistical and grammatical competencies of translator at all, but on his particular conception of Divine Being seeing that an exact translation of Ex. 3,14 is in effect impossible.

Mendelssohn translates the whole passage with a long periphrasis, rather than to appeal to a concise translation as the previous German experts:

Gott sprach zu Mosche: Ich bin das Wesen welches ewig ist. Er sprach nämlich: So sollst du zu den Kindern Jisraels sprechen: Das ewige Wesen welches sich nennt: Ich bin ewig, hat mich zu euch gesendet.

This long periphrasis can be translated in the following way:

God spoke to Moses: I am the Eternal Being. And He said: So you spoke to the children of Israel: The Eternal Being, who names Himself "I am eternal" sent me to you.

Since this moment, in Mendelssohn's translation of *Torah* we will always find the *Tetragrammaton* as "*Der Ewige*". It's just Mendelssohn to introduce into German Judaism of his age this term to translate the inexpressible *Tetragrammaton* and later this tradition was able to impose itself on the German Jewish world in spite of numerous experts' resistance.

With regard to his original translation, just Mendelssohn clears up his own point of view in the wide *Biur* dedicated to Ex. 3,14, where the philosopher explains the reasons which led him to translate in that particular way *èhyèh ashèr èhyèh*:

"I am who I am": according to Midrash (Berakot 9b), the Saint (can He always be blessed) said to Moses: Tell them, I am who I was and now I am the same and I will be the same in the future [and furthermore our rabbis of venerable memory said: I will be with them in this sufferance as well as I am with them in the slavery under others reigns. They wanted to tell that], past and future are in the present of Creator, seeing that there are no changed and no fixed time for Him (Jb. 10,17) and no one of His days is never spent. For Him all times are called with the same name and with an only expression which includes past, present and future".

As a consequence, according to Mendelssohn *Der Ewige* or *Ewiges Wesen* points out the necessity of God's existence and points out also His neverending and incessant Providence. Using this name it's even if God said: *I am with men's children to be benign and merciful with whom I will use mercifully. Now say to Israel I was, I am, I will be.... and I will be with them everytime they will cry towards me".*

In this part of his commentary relative to Ex. 3,14, Mendelssohn seems to return the definition of Divine Being to the human experience of time, to the unforeseeability of a future, which can assume innumerable forms. In the light of this particular meaning, the first part of the verse should indicate God's Essence, while the second part should indicate the changeable manifestations of an only substance, which is in reality always identical with itself.

This *incipit* of Mendelssohn's commentary confutes one of Raphaël Hirsch' criticisms, according to that the term *Der Ewige* would depreciate the Divine Providence's intervention in the human history. On the contrary, Providence is one of the fundamental categories Mendelssohn's philosophical and religious thought and Providence will have an essential rôle in *Jerusalem*, where the philosopher points out how without having faith in Providence, in soul's immortality and in God's eternal truths, human being can't realise his final destination, that is to be happy.

According to a fascinating hypothesis advanced by a few French experts, through *Ich bin das Wesen, welches ewig ist* we would stress the given to God by Providence possibility to exceed time inside time itself or to transform memory into a Redemption's instrument.

In the light of this Mendelssohn's lecture of Ex. 3,14, Providence gives human being (the finite being who can't know other dimension than his own finiteness) an opening up of a dimension beyond time. But the way to reach this dimension configures itself in the terrestriality of human condition, that is Providence as eternity is already experienced in the world of men and women, in the community of prayer. The experts, who has suggested a so suggestive hypothesis, don't explain if Mendelssohn understands the eternity as time absence or as a dimension beyond time which isn't definable in a negative way respect to what we know as time.

At any rate, surely Redemption is for Mendelssohn a sight upon the past, which is now read in the light of his deepest meaning and which transforms itself in a "providential present". This providential present nullifies its temporality just when it reaches that.

In the commentary of Ex. 3,14, Mendelssohn doesn't compare himself only with the temporal category at all. According to the philosopher, this verse contains a triple signification: eternity, necessary existence and, obviously, Providence. Justifying his position, in his commentary of Ex. 3,14, Mendelssohn finds out a few of eminent predecessors (Onqelos for Aramaic language, Saadia and Maimonide for Arabian language) have had to take a draconian choice: the former opted for the exploitation of Providence's idea, the others for the necessary existence and still Jonata Ben Uziel for the link with temporality.

Mendelssohn affirms to have opted for term *Der Ewige* both translating Ex. 3,14 and translating the *Tetragrammaton*, because all others meanings of identity and of Divine Name would spring all those from this substantivized adjective. According to this point of view, the "Necessary Eternal Being" (*Das ewig notwendig*) and the "prevident and provident Being" (*das vorsehende Wesen*) are one the mirror of the others, that is they have got an equivalent value. In fact, in Mendelssohn's thought all these meanings are involved in Ex. 3,14.

In Mendelssohn's choice we find a part of his conviction (which isn't already for Rosenzweig, as I show better later, more maintainable) in the possibility of a rational theology. In evident contradiction with the experience offered by the History of Philosophy, the Prevident-Provident Being springs for a logical conclusion from the Necessary Existent Being.

In others words, for Mendelssohn, whose thought is still pre-critical (that is anterior to the most important Kant's works), is the essence to have got the supremacy on existence.

Even if Mendelssohn's God acts through His Providence in the History, He is still a God whose

conceptual and abstract identity excels in His concrete theophany.

Mendelssohn's God is still philosophers' God, even if Mendelssohn tries a difficult mediation between his Jewish faith and his Enlightenment thought.

Franz Rosenzweig

According Leo Baeck, on the basis of the correspondence of those years between Rosenzweig and Buber, we can affirm, without going away too far from reality, that Rosenzweig influences Buber for the translation of Ex. 3,14, since it represents a tradition perfectly consonant with Rosenzweig's concept of Redemption developed at the age of *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Rosenzweig translates Ex. 3,14 in the following way:

Gott aber sprach zu Mosche:

Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde.

Und sprach:

so sollst du zu den Söhnen Jisraels sprechen:

"Ich bin da" schickt mich zu euch

Beginning from Rosenzweig's explanations which are present in his correspondence, we have to try to understand what *dasein* and *werde* means respect to the Mendelssohn's *Ewigkeit*.

In a letter to Hans Ehrenberg dated 23rd April 1926, Rosenzweig affirms his translation of that enigmatic verse has been influenced by Benno Jacob's research on Exodus (published in 1922 as *Moses am Dornbusch*). In the light of this research, which is centralised on the problem of divine identity as it shows Itself in Exodus, for his translation Rosenzweig doesn't privilege of the term *èhyèh* the meaning of "necessary existence", but the meaning of "Providence". Even at a mere linguistical level, *èhyèh* hasn't got the static meaning of the being, but the dynamic meaning of a Being who becomes and acts.

This verse indicates the pronounced and showed just by God Divine Identity, therefore it returns to an effective God's presence next to Moses. According to Rosenzweig, it is clear, seeing their slavery condition, that the unhappy Jewish people, Moses has to turn to, don't expect a conference *ex-cathedra* about God's necessary existence. They need, as their hesitating leader, an explanation which dispels any reasonable doubt.

For this reason, according to a Rosenzweig's letter to Buber dated 23rd June 1923, the biblical context justifies only a translation for Ex. 3,14, translation which can't regard the "Eternal Being", but, on the contrary, the "Present Being", who is and who becomes with and next to Jewish People.

In Rosenzweig's conception, biblical monotheism doesn't consist in the simple unique God's idea, but it consists to recognise this God as a Being who isn't separated from concrete existence, from what is more personal and immediate: *èhyèh* and *Ich bin da*, pronounced from burning bush and delivered to human being through Moses.

According to Rosenzweig, the third chapter of Exodus shows Divine self-testimony, which allows to elucidate the *Tetragrammaton's* dull surface. God doesn't name Himself as the "Essent Being" (*der Seiende*), but as the "Existent Being" (*der Daseiende*), He Whom exists not only in Himself, but also "for you", Who exists for you in the face to face (metaphor which be held dear by Emmanuel Lévinas), He Whom approaches to you and helps you. According to this particular meaning, Rosenzweig writes in a letter to Ernst Carlesbach dated 2nd August 1924:

Mendelssohn's God doesn't allow me to use the familiar form of address; I can't say to Him: "You".

In his translation/interpretation of Ex. 3,14, Rosenzweig is almost obliged to compare himself with Mendelssohn. In the essay *Der Ewige*, Rosenzweig shows a great esteem towards Mendelssohn, "who allowed German Jews to understand the meaning of their *Deutschtum*", even if Mendelssohn's Judaism is exclusively founded on divine *Gesetzgebung*, that is only on revealed legislation. It is true that, in accordance with Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig thinks that faith is founded on Revelation's event and thinks that Revelation is reflected by Divine Law. But if Mendelssohn conceives commandments as symbolical acts, Rosenzweig attributes the possibility to make understand the link between faith and reason to the concrete experience of revealed theophany.

Martin Buber

Here, we will limit ourselves to that period of Buber's life (1923-1938 ca.), when dissertations on Ex. 3,14 appear frequently in philosopher's correspondence. The privileged interlocutors of this last one are, during this period, (except obviously Franz Rosenzweig) Ernst Simon, Gerhard Scholem, Hugo Bergmann and Hugo von Hoffmannstahl.

In the course of his collaboration with Franz Rosenzweig, Buber always shows a great esteem for this last one's observations and advices, in fact the two philosophers elaborate the following work plan: to send each other translations of a few more complicated verses and to value together the most consonant with biblical text version.

It dates back to 5th March 1923, the first Rosenzweig's work sent to Buber about difficulties

Rosenzweig meets comparing himself with Ex. 3,14: *On the basis of what till now illustrated, I think the translation which approaches more to Scripture is "Ich werde dasein als der ich dasein werde".*

Buber's answer dates back to 30th March and shows as the considerations on that one which will be later his dialogical philosophy played a very important part in the translation of that enigmatic verse: *In Ex. 3,14, we have to try to keep the doubleness of Divine Promise included into the repetition of term "èhyèh": "I will be present and I will remain present in your way" [...]. Dialogue's importance is given to "ashèr", which joins the two promises and the two interlocutors each other.*

According to Buber, as he writes later in the same letter to Rosenzweig, even if a promises joins in the same way who makes it and who accepts it, the focal point of Ex. 3,14 is represented by God and not by human being.

Traditional hermeneutics usually thinks Moses' answer means only that: to know the answer to give Jewish people, when they ask Moses the true God's Name, God Who gave Moses the message. So conceived, according to Buber, the meaning of this verse transforms itself in one of the focal points of kenit hypothesis. On the basis of this last one, Jewish people's God should be only an evolution of a few god already present in that area and whose principle characteristic is the appropriation of name by believers.

According to Buber's perspective, this hypothesis is invalidated by the fact that, in biblical Jewish (and nowadays also in Modern one) to ask for name the question isn't "What [] your name?", but "Who [] are you?". Seeing that Moses' request shows itself just through the question " ", it is clear Moses interrogation doesn't refer only to God's Name, but also to what this name hides.

In a letter to Ernst Simon dated 15th November 1923, Buber writes the deepest meaning of Ex. 3,14 is the same we find in Gn. 35,10, when, after God's struggle with Jacob on the bank of river, the Lord imposed Jacob the name of Israel ("He who struggles with God"). According to Buber, the substantial difference between these two old-testamentary episodes is the fact that, while in Gn. 35,10 we have a unilateral imposition, in Ex. 3,14 we face a direct dialogue between creature and Creator. Surprisingly, in a certain sense, in Ex. 3,14 human being "limits" God, obliging Him to an answer God can't avoid.

In this letter, as in that one dated 4th August 1925 to Hugo von Hoffmannstahl, it is evident how Buber tries to connect Ex. 3,14 with Divine Name and how Buber tries to explain It in the light of *èhyèh ashèr èhyèh*.

During this period, Buber thinks that, as Ex. 3,14 appears as answer to an appeal, also God's Name is at first a vocative: *Ya-hu*. Beginning from this vocative (here is Rosenzweig's influence), God is called through an unpronounceable name, which is contemporaneously more and less than a name: YHWH.

In a letter to Hugo Bergmann dated 14th September 1927, Buber observes that, as *Tetragrammaton* is answer to an appeal if we interpret It in the light of Ex. 3,14, it is clear why own biblical names rarely refer themselves in their form and root to *Tetragrammaton*. The only exception is represented by Moses' mother's name, Yochebed ("God is great"). This name almost witnesses a kind of "family tradition", which would prepare the way to Revelation's event of Divine Essence. Really, it is more reliable to support that, in a period of religious lassism, as the slavery age under Egyptian aegis, the intimate *Tetragrammaton's* essence is sunk into oblivion. So *Tetragrammaton* transforms Himself in an empty phonetical resonance.

As Buber writes in a letter to Rosenzweig dated 14th July 1925, *in a certain sense, in the collective memory and consciousness of Jewish People, Ex. 3,14 arouses the last Tetragrammaton's meaning, showing His deepest essence which even Patriarchies didn't know (Ex. 6,3). The usual translation "I am Who I am" [Ich bin der ich bin] gives a Divine Being's description as the "Unique Essent" or "Eternally Essent" that is He Who keeps Himself for ever in His being. [...] However, this kind of abstraction isn't suitable to the rebirth of religious vitality as that one which happens inside Jewish People through Moses.*

In this letter, Buber stresses how *hâyâh* doesn't indicate a pure metaphysical essence at all, but a happening, a "coming-to-be", "to-be-present between this one and that one", but it doesn't indicate an abstract and transcendent existence.

According to Buber, the answer "I am Who I am" isn't suitable to a Revelation, but at the worst it can be congenial to an essence which desires to remain mysteriously hidden even to people it introduces itself to. Under this perspective, "I am Who I am" shows itself as a meaningless tautology or whose meaning can be understood by human mind. What should be Revelation's meaning, if God's purpose was that one to remain hidden?

When Jewish people are informed about their imminent liberation, they need to experience divine proximity and not Its deep distance from human destiny and events.

The Lord is present as He Who has been, who is and who will be present in a both transcendent and earthly immediacy.

Buber observes that just after and just before Revelation (Ex. 3,12 and Ex. 4,12), God reaffirms His presence next to whom He has chosen.

When Moses, timorous for the task given to hem, asks God what he will be able to say to Jews, how he will be able to convince them, God replies *I will be with you*. Renewing this just made to Yzchaq promise, God nullifies any possible difference we could notice between Patriarchies' God and the voice speaking to Moses from burning bush. During this exceptional linguistical challenge, Moses is

invited to introduce himself to Jewish as *èhyèh's* envoy. As Buber observes in a letter to Ernst Simon dated 12th April 1932, *èhyèh* isn't a name at all, but is the contractive form of verb *hâyâh*, which contains into itself the last Revelation's meaning. God can't be named *èhyèh*, or rather God shows Himself in this way only in the third chapter of Exodus, when it is necessary Jews has got self-consciousness of God to permit Him to communicate His will. This self-consciousness can't be taught by a theological treatise, but it can be experienced in the certainty of the daily dialogue with Patriarchies' God.

According to Buber's perspective, the link between Ex. 3,14 and Divine Name decrees just the birth of a new alliance, where Creator and creature find themselves joined, even if at different levels, in the always open dimension of dialogue.

Buber examines carefully the interpretation of Ex. 3,14 also in the essay (1945) "Moses", where the analysis is led eminently on historical basis. Revelation, which in the essay *Ich und Du* can appear as a mere spiritual essence where the concrete world of reciprocity finds itself, conquers more and more earthly distinguishing features during the evolution of Buber's studies on the Bible. In the essay "Moses", Revelation is faced both as political and as historical category, even if It never loses neither Its ultramondaninity nor Its connective character between Creator and creature. In the work *Eclipse of God*, a collection of essays written between 1930 and 1950 (when Buber is already an over seventy years old man), these particular Revelation's aspects are more carefully examined in the light of a new problematic: God's hiding caused by human Ego.

It is true that Ex. 3,14 grants God's presence next to human being, but human being can escape from this link when he wants. Desiring a comparison with a son and not with a servant, God has granted to human being the possibility not to choose in favour of Creation. God has permitted human being to refuse Revelation and to replace a new God: the *Ichheit* (we can translate it as *Egoity*).

In this sense, Buber concludes his decennial speculations about God and Revelation, stressing the neverending struggle of human being to keep the link with God alive. In every moment, this link can be swallowed up from objectiving and egoistic *Ich*, an *Ich* who doesn't know the dialogical dimension of love.

Notes

1. Cfr. Mendelssohn Moses, *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlino, Frommann Verlag, 1991, vol. 9/1, pp. 133-134.
2. Such as Colette Sirat and René Lapassier.
3. Cfr. Rosenzweig F.- Buber, Martin, *Die Bibel*, Stuttgart, Bibelgesellschaft Verlag, 1992, p. 189.
4. Cfr. Rosenzweig F., *Der Mensch und sein Werk*, Dordrecht, Nijhoff Verlag, 1990, 1° vol., p. 1104.
5. Cfr. Jacob Benno, *Moses am Dornbusch*, Frankfurt am Main, Källiger Verlag, 1922.

6. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 1128.
7. Cfr. Buber, M., *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, Heidelberg, Lambert Schneider Verlag, 1975, 2 vol., p. 78.
8. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 89.
9. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 147.
10. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 195.
11. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 161
12. Cfr. Ibidem, p. 431.
13. Cfr. Buber M., *Eclipse of God*, London, Happingen Publ., 1973.