



Augustine in the Footsteps of Moses: On the History of Interpretation and Impact of Exodus 3:14a

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Abstract: This article compares the revelation of the divine name to Moses in Exod 3:14 and its counterpart in Augustine's first vision in his *Confessiones*. The main aim is to elucidate the continuity and difference in Augustine's relationship with, and thought regarding, the figure of Moses and the revelation Moses received. Methodologically, it is based on comparing the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions of the text, their relationship with the history of thought, and on juxtaposing it with selected relevant passages in Augustine's work. It proceeds from the change brought about by the Greek text through its reception, with particular reference to Philo of Alexandria. The main part of this article focuses on the *Ego sum qui sum* as the content of Augustine's visionary experience and as an object of interpretation in interrelation with the philosophical concept of being; the main finding is that Augustine does not define God, but interprets his self-identification with being as the starting point for Augustine's own indirect reference to being and to humanity's relationship with the incomprehensible but repeatedly revelatory God.

Keywords: Augustine, Moses, Philo of Alexandria, God, being, theophany

In the history of biblical reception, it is not only the performance of the biblical interpreters that plays a role but also the influence of the biblical traditions. How do the reception and the received illuminate each other? This question should be taken into account when considering Augustine of Hippo's reception of such an important biblical passage as Exod 3:14a. Moreover, the very distinctive divine address to Moses contained therein has its own strong meaning and, in view of this, was also subject to some philosophical references in Augustine's writings. Augustine draws on philosophy to interpret the Bible, thereby revealing a relationship with the concept of being that has long been debated. Thus, one cannot help but notice clear specifics and differences in his thinking, especially in comparison with Platonism (Westphal 2004, 94–95).¹ In the following considerations, the specifics of Augustine's reception of Exod 3:14a will be discussed with particular reference to the seventh book of his

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¹ On the closely related but wide-ranging question of the relationship between ontotheology and the “metaphysics of Exodus,” cf. Aertsen 1996, 3–4.

Confessions. In this context, the question will first be asked how the history of the impact of this biblical passage in Hellenistic and early Christian times contributed to Augustine's own understanding.

As will be shown later, Augustine finds an expression for the revelation of the divine name in Exod 3:14a. At this point, one should recall that Name Theology began to develop in the time of the Babylonian exile, which conceived the destroyed Jerusalem temple as the place of the presence of the divine name (cf. Deut 7:2–4).² One expression of this presence is Exod 3:14a. It has been disputed whether it is of pre- or post-exilic origin (Van Seters 2011, 144–45). However, this discussion cannot be addressed here. Augustine's reception reproduces Exod 3:14a in its Latin version, which in turn—as will be shown—presupposes the Greek text of the Septuagint. In order to at least indicate how the two versions relate to the Hebrew text and where they deviate from it, it should now be noted that in Exod 3:14a in the *Biblia Hebraica*, God interprets his name Yahweh by etymologizing אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, “I am who I am.”³ This sentence has the character of a paronomasia in the sense of a semantic and phonological play on the name of Yahweh (Utzschneider and Oswald 2015, 123),⁴ which is supposed to be hidden in the verb אֶהְיֶה, the first person singular imperfect (*Qal*) of the verb הָיָה (“to be”), as if the tetragram יְהוָה corresponded to the third person singular imperfect (*Qal*) of the verb הָיָה.⁵ In this passage, Yahweh proclaims and interprets his name to justify and legitimize his worship. Another important aspect of the abstract nature of this divine self-naming is the fact that it does not evoke any visual images.

In view of Augustine's recourse to the biblical tradition, the following will outline the development of interpretation, which could neither take sufficient account of the linguistic peculiarities of the Hebrew nor of the cultic context of Exod 3:14.⁶

² Cf. Bauks 2019, 340–341; Mettinger 1982, 59–66; Keller 1996, 113; Renz 2022, 126–27. For a discussion of Deuteronomistic “Name Theology,” cf. Nentel 2000, 221–23.

³ On the literature on Exod 3:14, cf. Dohmen 2015, 160–161. For a summary of the previous interpretations and discussions, see Surls 2017, 4–13; Lewis 2020, 210–227; Davies 2020, 271, 274–78. Graham Davies points out the vagueness of the formulation and suggests that it should be understood as an *idem per idem* interpretation. However, his doubts about the etymologizing nature of Exod 3:14a are themselves uncertain, cf. Davies 2020, 278. Recently, there has also been a proposal to understand Exod 3:14 as created under the influence of philosophy but this proposal argues primarily from the history of reception and denies the uniqueness of this biblical passage, cf. Fieger and Roesner 2022, 15–25.

⁴ On the concept of paronomasia, cf. Reckendorf 1909, 162–67.

⁵ For a discussion, cf. Wilkinson 2015, 11–12, 41.

⁶ The semantic aspects of the Hebrew verb הָיָה are the subject of extensive discussion, which cannot be dealt with here. Thus, one must consider the uncertainties of a possible comparison with the Greek concept of being. Among other things, a comparison can be made with regard to the conception of the relationship between being and movement. The verb הָיָה is associated with movement, as shown by many years of research following William Albright (1924, 374), among others, who identified a causal form of the verb יְהוָה (“he who causes to be, brings into existence”) in the name of God. For an overview of the discussion, see Parke-Taylor 1975, 58–60; Lewis 2020, 220–222.

1. The Path to Early Christianity

If Augustine finds a divine self-identification with being in Exod 3:14a, this can be seen as a philosophical interpretation of the biblical text. This reading has already been accommodated by the Septuagint, which renders as an equivalent ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, “I am the Being One,”⁷ a translation that linguistically greatly differs from its Hebrew model, since it introduces a personal pronoun; does not introduce a relative pronoun as an equivalent to the Hebrew particle אשר, “which”; forms a subject-predicate clause structure instead of a relative sentence; and renders the second verb as a participle, as opposed to the Hebrew imperfect (which more or less corresponds to the imperfective aspect of the verb in modern languages).

There is no recognizable error in the Greek text, as was assumed in earlier research (McDonough 1999, 131–32), but rather an expression of reader-friendliness. The translation comes as close as possible to the original. However, the Septuagint was unable to capture the Hebrew wordplay and its inherent understanding.⁸ In addition, 3:14bβ reads ὁ ὢν, “the Being One” because it would be nonsensical to translate it with ἐγώ εἰμι, “I am” (Wevers 1990, 35). If one now asks about the influences that have contributed to the understanding of the Septuagint, philosophy comes to mind. Martin Hengel (1969, 189) doubted that the translation of the Septuagint itself was philosophically influenced. Although philosophy had an influence on general education in Hellenistic times, which is why at least the indirect influence of Platonism (Gericke 2012, 128) or popular philosophy cannot be ruled out (McDonough 1999, 134), it would be pure speculation to assume that the translators were interested in ontology.

The Greek version of Exod 3:14a represents a developmental step that was followed by Christian interpreters. Later, with the Latin Church Fathers, including Augustine, the effects of the Latin translation can be observed. In the Latin translation *Ego sum, qui sum* there is also a pronoun but in agreement with the Hebrew text there is a relative sentence structure and two identical verbs in the first person singular. The Vulgate translation is therefore somewhat closer to the Hebrew version than the Greek.

⁷ On this, with regard to the relationship of verses 14a and 14b, cf. Gurtner 2013, 206–7: “... since a first-person subject would not work for the necessary ἀπέσταλκέν (a third sg form), Exodus is forced to resort to the participial ὁ ὢν, ‘the One who is.’ The first יהוה could be rendered as ἐγώ εἰμι because it is not formally the divine name, but introduces the divine name which Exodus renders ὁ ὢν . . .” For a discussion of the translation possibilities, see Birnbaum 2016, 276.

⁸ With regard to verse 15, cf. Birnbaum 2016, 277: “Unlike the Hebrew, the Greek does not raise the questions about a possible verbal connection between the pronouncement in Exod 3:14 and the name of God in Exod 3:15. If anything the Greek of Exodus may invite questions about why God issues two apparently unconnected statements and what precisely God’s name is.” Moreover, in the LXX the tetragram is generally replaced by κύριος (Lord), so that as Being One, he is the supreme One without a proper name, cf. Starobinski-Safran 1978, 51–52.

In order to place Augustine's reading of Exod 3:14a in its intellectual-historical context and to mark its continuity with the history of biblical interpretation, a brief sketch of the development of the interpretation of Exod 3:14a will now be made. It is assumed that the path from the Septuagint to the early Christian thinkers was also supported by the deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom, which speaks of God as $\acute{\omicron}$ $\omega\upsilon\nu$ (13:1) (Gilbert 2021, 82). An analogous idea is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where God is referred to as *hww* ' *wlm*, "eternal being" (1QS XI: 4–5).

This path then led via Philo of Alexandria, who also read the Septuagint and apparently preferred to speak of God as "the Being One" in connection with and motivated by Exod 3:14a, and then via the prologue to the Gospel of John (cf. 1:1–4), which may have been indirectly influenced by Philo, the "I am" sayings of this Gospel being—according to Emilie Zum Brunn—first linked to Exod 3:14 by Augustine (*Tract. Ev. Jo.* 38, 8–11; 40, 2–3; 43, 17–18 [CCSL 36, 341–45, 350–352, 380–381]) (Zum Brunn 1988, 110).⁹

In addition, this development was influenced by contact with the history of Greek philosophy which, however, cannot be traced here in its entirety (see below).¹⁰ One should at least recall here the middle Platonist Numenius, who not only started from Plutarch's God as $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omega\varsigma$ $\acute{\omicron}\nu$, "true being" (see below), but also called his First God $\acute{\omicron}$ $\omega\upsilon\nu$ (Numenius, *Frg.* 13 des Places),¹¹ probably with knowledge of Exod 3:14a, since he knew the Exodus story (Numenius, *Frg.* 9 des Places).¹² He regarded divine being as incorporeal (Numenius, *Frg.* 4a25–32 des Places) and unchanging (Numenius, *Frg.* 3 des Places) and recalled Plato's (*Tim.* 27d) position that being always is and thus never comes into being. An important step for the identification of God and being in the Christian sense was the identification of the absolute "(I) am" (as in Exod 3:14) with the absolute "being" in Philo and later in Augustine, which was preceded by the identification of $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ and $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ taken from the Septuagint and which is found in Cyril of Alexandria (*Comm. in Is.* I, 2 [PG 70, 0223]). In Pseudo-Dionysius, the identification of $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ and $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ refers to the divine in its entirety (with reference to Rev 1:8) (*De div. nom.* II, 1 [PG 3, 637A]). It can be seen that without the reference to $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ in Exod 3:14a, an association of God and being in early Christian theology is difficult to imagine.

Philo's work contains not only scattered interpretations of this biblical passage but also related aspects of his philosophical understanding, which is why it is worth taking a closer look at him. While the Septuagint offers a different reading of Exod 3:14a, in Philo as a thinker there is a change of perspective in which $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ $\acute{\omicron}$ $\omega\upsilon\nu$ appears. Philo refers to God philosophically as "the being One," and he finds

⁹ A certain precursor to this was Tertullian's identification of Jesus with *qui est*, "(He) who is" in *Or.* III, 3 (CCSL 1, 258–59). See below.

¹⁰ On "being" in the history of ancient philosophy, cf. McDonough 1999, 11–40.

¹¹ On the comparison of Philo with Numenius, cf. especially Sterling 2015, 80–82.

¹² On $\acute{\omicron}$ $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ $\gamma\epsilon$ $\acute{\omicron}\nu$ *Fr.* 22 Leemans.

this designation more appropriate because it detaches him from characteristics of the inner-worldly realm. In doing so, he uses the masculine participle ὁ ὢν borrowed from Exod 3:14a (LXX) and occasionally also the nominalized participle τὸ ὄν (Kahn 1973, 455) as a “Platonized expression,”¹³ sometimes almost side by side (*Det.* 160–161; *Deus* 69; *Mut.* 10–11; *Somn.* 1, 230–231; *Abr.* 121–22). For Philo, the absolute being is immovable and unchangeable (cf. *Deus* 22; *Post.* 28; *Mut.* 27–28, 57, 87), in contrast to the transient human being (*Det.* 160). Essentially, it can be said that he interprets the divine pronouncement in Exod 3:14a “in terms of the Platonic doctrine of being, as encouraged by the Septuagint translation on which he bases his commentary.” (Runia 1995a, 209) He thus distinguishes between God as he is in himself and God as he is in relation to human beings, without the two contradicting each other. In *Somn.* 1, 230, it is pointed out that from the fact that nothing can be known about God, it follows that from a human perspective it is only appropriate for him εἶναι τὸ ὄν, “to be the Being One.”¹⁴ With regard to Exod 3:14—who God is, is his own affair, while for people he is, more than anything else, the God of the forefathers (cf. Exod 3:15; cf. also *Abr.* 50–52; *Mut.* 1, 12–13; *Mos.* 1, 76) (Runia 1995a, 210–211, 216).

Philo refers to the concept of being without avoiding the personal “God” and is the first to understand “being” as a divine name.¹⁵ Thus, in *Abr.* 121 he refers to the Scripture that identifies the name of the Lord as ὁ ὢν, “the Being One” (McDonough 1999, 80–84). Before that, however, he argues in 51, alluding to Exod 3:14–15, that God himself does not need a name and prefers a “relative” (πρὸς τι) name to an eternal one so that people can address him.¹⁶ In *Det.* 139, he at least implicitly indicates by the designation ὁ ὄντως ὢν θεός, “the God who is actually being,” that it is derived from Exod 3:14a. In *Det.* 160, he invokes Exod 3:14a with reference to Moses to distinguish God from the finite, from that which only appears to be being: ὁ θεός μόνος ἐν τῷ εἶναι ὑφέστηκεν, “God alone subsists in being.” Immediately afterward, in *Det.* 161, he speaks of τὸ ὄντως ὄν, “actual being,” and in *Abr.* 80 and *Mos.* 2, 67 of τὸ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὄν, “true being.”

In *Mut.* 11, however, he claims that God as ὁ ὢν πρὸς ἀλήθειαν, “being that is true,” has no corresponding name,¹⁷ and interprets Exod 3:14a as the principle that God is proper “to be” (εἶναι), not “to be spoken/expressed” (οὐ λέγεσθαι), and one who is οὐ λέγεσθαι, “not to be spoken/expressed,” so that he can only be spoken of as unnameable. Similarly, in *Somn.* 1, 231, the name of God is ἔστιν “(he) is,” so that one

¹³ For the reference to Plato (*Tim.* 27d) and a discussion of the continuity with Eudorus as to the concept of God, see Sterling 2016, 141. For the further discussion about τὸ ὄν, cf. Atkins 2021, 81 note 43.

¹⁴ Cf. Kweta 1996, 365. On the contrast between the inaccessible divine being and the unknowable essence, cf. *Post.* 168–69; *Deus* 62; *Spec.* 1, 32–44; *Virt.* 215; *Praem.* 39.

¹⁵ Philo thus deviates from Greek philosophy, cf. Runia 1990a, 11.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Birnbaum and Dillon 2021, 201–2.

¹⁷ What is meant is the “true name,” not the personal proper name, cf. Runia 1990b, 76. Cf. also *Somn.* 1, 230–231; *Mos.* 1, 75.

cannot understand that which is inherent in him.¹⁸ According to *Mut.* 15, the unconceivable God is also ἀπερινόητος, “inconceivable” and ἀκατάληπτος, “incomprehensible.” Philo also explains the divine ineffability here with reference to Exod 33:13.

In *Mos.* 1, 75, however, he goes so far as to distinguish being from non-being based on Exod 3:14a: “Tell them first that I am he who is, that they may know the difference between that which is and that which is not (τε καὶ μὴ).” Then follows the instruction that οὐδὲν ὄνομα τὸ παράπαν ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ κυριολογεῖται, “no name of mine can be appropriately used,”¹⁹ for no name can be suitable for the exclusive εἶναι: “To Him alone belongs being (τὸ εἶναι).”²⁰

The previous overview shows how differently Philo treats the name of God. On the one hand, he calls him “the Being One” according to Exod 3:14a; on the other hand, he refuses to name him. Is this a development in Philo’s thinking or just a divergence from his own views? If one tries to find a connection between these interpretations, one can conclude that Philo respected the divine name in Exod 3:14a and that the biblical passage refers to God who is, however, unnamable in the proper sense and at most indeterminable, while he can be named indirectly in a semantically empty and attributeless sense as “the Being One.”

Philo quotes Exod 3:14a several times²¹ and this is sufficient to conclude that he found a point of reference for identifying the biblical God with the philosophical concept of being. Exodus 3:14a served him in his attempt to free the idea of God from the ideas that people have of inner-worldly, not just physical, realities. In this respect, his understanding of the biblical passage in question is consistent at its core. As David T. Runia notes: “Philo, as the first in a long succession, interprets the divine pronouncement in Exod 3:14 in terms of the Platonic doctrine of being, as encouraged by the Septuagint translation on which he bases his commentary. God alone is the Existent (or the One Who is), in contrast to Non-being, i.e. created reality.” (Runia 1995a, 209) Philo also became a mediator between the Septuagint reading of Exod 3:14a, without knowing the Hebrew text (Hertog 2012, 159), and philosophical inquiry of being. This shows once again why it is necessary to grant Exod 3:14a special significance—because of its content, but also because of the history of its impact. By identifying God with being, Philo anticipates Augustine. However, the relationship between Augustine and Philo of Alexandria will be

¹⁸ If, according to Philo, God can be inferred from the consequences of his actions (cf. Runia 1986, 436–37), this corresponds to Exod 3:14–15, where God appears detached from attributes and can only be inferred from them.

¹⁹ On the nameless god, cf. McDonough 1999, 79–84, esp. 82.

²⁰ Cf. Burnyeat 2006, 148 note 28: “Philo does not connect the name with eternity, but explains it as designating nothing but God’s ὑπαρξις in contrast to his οὐσία or ποιότης, which are beyond our comprehension.”

²¹ Allenbach (1982, 60) counts a total of 52 citations of Exod 3:14 in Philo’s work, including allusions, 8 of which occur twice in one verse. The list of quotations and allusions compiled by Sterling (2014, 419) shows that from the book of Exodus, Philo most frequently quotes Exod 3:14, cf. 419.

only partially mentioned here.²² Philo represents an important step in the development of thought.

2. *Ego Sum, Qui Sum* in Augustine

Augustine's interpretation of Exod 3:14a is remarkable, considering not only that he addresses it in 49 passages of his work (Glowasky 2020, 178) but also how much this biblical passage shaped his thinking. It is also very peculiar²³ and should therefore first be briefly placed in the intellectual-historical context of his work. Suffice it to point out what is usually recalled of the development of Augustine's thought, that it reflects his personal confrontation with Manichaeism, which in his opinion relativized the divinity of God (McDonald 1993, 73–75), and with the philosophy²⁴ that pointed him towards God and led him into his own inner self (*Conf.* VII, 17.23 [CCSL 27, 107]; *Conf.* X, 6.9–24,35 [CCSL 27, 159–74]). He himself defined the framework of his concern as the knowledge of God and the soul: "I want to know God and the soul" (*Solil.* I, 6.15 [CSEL 89, 11]; Vaught 2003, 8–15).

He owed the preparation for this realization to the Platonists (above all Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichos), whom he considered not to have attained it (*Epist.* 118, 2–22.33 [CCSL 31B, 112–27, 135]). Their books brought him to an inner turning point (*Conf.* VII, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 103–4]). However, he himself only came to this realization through faith in Jesus Christ as the Word of God made flesh (*Conf.* VII, 18.24 [CCSL 27, 108]). The deepest reason for this lies in the point of Augustine's question of God, which can be summarized as follows: "Gott ist für Augustinus der Seiende, weil er in seiner Liebe der gegenwärtige Gott ist." (Studer 1987, 152) For him, Exod 3:14a became a testimony to this divine presence, the interpretation of which is then shaped by his personal and intellectual development (cf. the entire interpretation Studer 1987, 142–52), which shall be analyzed below.

In his reception of Exod 3:14a,²⁵ he is preceded on the one hand by the Alexandrian tradition, which is consistent with Philo (Mrugalski 2021, 5–11 with Literature): Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* I 71, 2 [GCS 12, 18–21, 131]; *Strom.* I 166, 4; *Strom.* V 34, 5–6 [GCS 15, 348]; *Strom.* V 82, 1–2 [GCS 15, 53]) and Origen of

²² Augustine was probably directly familiar with only some of Philo's writings, but was above all familiar with his thought through the patristic tradition, cf. Solignac 1984, 1372. It is noteworthy, however, that Philo (and through him Basileus) and Augustine are the only biblical exegetes who, based on Exod 3:14–15, distinguish between God as essence and the God of the patriarchs, cf. Runia 1995b, 2.

²³ On Augustine's conception of biblical exegesis and his distinction between the fourfold (historical, etiological, anagogical, and allegorical) sense of Scripture, cf. Lubac 1998, 123–32.

²⁴ On the general influence of philosophy on Augustine's thought, cf. TeSelle 2008, 19–55.

²⁵ On the history of the Christian impact of Exod 3:14, see Buffa and Meiser 2022, 197–200.

Alexandria (*Comm. Io.* II 13, 95–96 [GCS 10, 69]; *Princ.* I, 3, 6 [GCS 22, 57]). On the other hand, the Latin patristic tradition already quotes Exod 3:14a from Novatian, who in *De trinitate*, like Augustine later on, claims that *qui est* “(He) who is” as the name of God implies immutability (*Trin.* IV, 4.23–12.27 [CCSL 50, 17–19]). Like Augustine, they both also speak of the eternity, infinity, and incomprehensibility of God (Madec 1987, 122–24).²⁶ In *Or.* 3.1 (CCSL 1, 258–59), Tertullian refers to the name that God revealed to Moses, and in *Adversus Praxeian* mentions *qui est* in a quotation from an adopted list of divine names and claims that the names of the Father are also those of the Son (*Prax.* 17, 1–3 [CCSL 2, 1182]). This development also includes Christian theology of the Logos (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian), which identified the messenger of Exod 3:2 with the Logos, but against which Augustine undertook “an ontologization of the name of God” (Mrugalski 2021, 1).

Augustine’s identification of God with being, however, presupposes the Greek wording of Exod 3:14a;²⁷ for when in the seventh book of *The Confessions* he quotes Exod 3:14a, he prefaces it with the assurance *immo vero*, as if he had understood the quoted words as divine self-identification (*Conf.* VII, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 104]). Such an understanding—as well as Augustine’s *idipsum*, “the selfsame” and *ipsum esse*, “being self,” which will be discussed later—results more from a reading of the Septuagint than from Jerome’s translation of the Bible. However, Augustine is not only a classical author who identifies God with being but also a thinker who can be compared with Moses, as shown in the following section.

2.1. Interpretation of the Mystical Experience in *The Confessions* VII

In Augustine’s reception of Exod 3:14a, his life story, his religious experience, his biblicism and his philosophically influenced theology overlap. This can be seen in the way in which Exod 3:14a relates to his conversation with God (Cary 2003, 63) after his inward turn when he is in direct contact with the dual object of his main concern (knowledge of God and knowledge of the soul). In Book VII of *The Confessions*, Augustine describes his visionary ascent (Conybeare 2016, 85–88). In doing so, he summarizes the idea of turning inwards, with which he had already dealt in his earlier writings (*Fund.* 40–41 [CSEL 25, 245–47]), and in this context, he also draws on Platonic and Stoic thought (Cary 2003, 63–67). Starting from philosophy, he

²⁶ For the further Latin tradition up to Jerome, cf. Madec 1987, 125–30, esp. 129: “Dès la première citation latine, celle de Novatien, les conséquences fondamentales de l’identification de Dieu à l’Être sont tirées et affirmées simplement: Dieu est, il est éternel, immuable, infini, insaisissable. Les textes forts d’Hilaire, d’Ambroise et de Jérôme ne disent pas autre chose, peut-être parce qu’il n’y a rien d’autre à dire.”

²⁷ Augustine himself had a positive, multi-layered, but not entirely consistent relationship with the Septuagint, cf. Kotzé 2009, 256–59. Cf. also Runia, 1995a, 217: “It is something of a mystery how this Philonic theme finds a place in the writings of Augustine. The Church Father mentions the Jewish thinker once in a rather critical vein.”

simultaneously distances himself from it because he had only found what he was looking for, the Word made flesh, the Son who humbled himself and whom God then exalted, by reading the New Testament (*Conf.* VII, 9.13–14 [CCSL 27, 101–2]). It can therefore be said that he thereby presupposed an overcoming of the distance and opposition between the divine and the human, rather than direct access to the divine spirit in one's own mind, as Plotinus did (Cary 2003, 63). Moreover, in contrast to Plotinus, God plays an active and decisive role here by establishing a reciprocal personal relationship,²⁸ which anticipates the orientation towards salvation, as shown below.

In this context, Augustine comes as close as possible to the content of Exod 3:14a, albeit in the context of a broader consideration. Similarly, as on other occasions, e.g., in the interpretation of Ps 101 (102) when Exod 3:14a serves to interpret other biblical passages and does not constitute the main theme (Falardeau 2008, 144). In so doing, he not only engages in scholarly exegesis, but also wants to record the result of his search for knowledge of God (Feldmann 1991, 885–86). With this in mind, he reports on his first “Platonic ascent,” which he experienced in Milan in 386 (Dobell 2009, 135): “Through this I was admonished to turn into myself and, guided by you, I entered into my innermost being (*intima mea*) . . .” (*Conf.* VII, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 104]) Then, experiencing the abysmal distance from God, he heard the divine utterance that culminated in the words: *Immo vero ego sum, qui sum*, “Truly I am who I am” (*Conf.* VII, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 104]). It was as if he had had an instantaneous experience of God—formally, comparable to Plato's experience according to *Epist.* 7, 341d—which simply erased his doubts: “. . . and I heard it as it is heard in the heart, and there was no reason at all to doubt it . . .” (*Conf.* VII, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 104])²⁹ This experience is followed by an awareness of the unchanging identity of God, who is *in se manens*, “abiding in himself” (*Conf.* VII, 11.17 [CCSL 27, 104]). A brief experience is enough to gain essential insight.

In the words of Exod 3:14a, which form the climax of Augustine's account of his own ascent,³⁰ it is as if God were repeating for Augustine his earlier words to Moses. However, this can be explained with the help of the words quoted above, that he is always the same. Thus, the words *in se manens* can also be read as an allusion to Exod 3:14a.

Augustine not only documented his experience, but also reflected on it and thought it through. It should therefore at least be noted that in the seventh book of *the Confessions*, the time in which the visions took place overlaps with the time in

²⁸ Cf. Beierwaltes 1991, 137. On the influence of Neoplatonism on Augustine, see Kenney 2005, 49–60.

²⁹ A certain analogy can be found in *Homily* VII, where Augustine characterizes the experience of Moses “as if struck by lightning.” *Serm. VT* 7.7 (CCSL 41, 75–76).

³⁰ Cf. Dobell 2009, 198: “I submit that the Platonic ascent of *Confessions* 7.17.23 should not be understood as a singular experience, but rather as a type of ascent that Augustine was elaborating in the period between (roughly) 387/8 and 391.”

which he wrote *the Confessions* around ten years later (Ruhstorfer 1998, 283–84, 293). However, in his accounts of the visions, it is not possible to distinguish what exactly reflects his authentic experiences and what is an interpretation of them. Rather, one can hypothetically assume that the latter merges into the former and trust in the authenticity of Augustine's account (Hattrup 2011, 444). Overall, it can be said that his experience, the content of which was light (*lux incommutabilis*, “unchanging light”) (*Conf.* IX, 10.16 [CCSL 27, 103]) and the divine word, cannot be attributed to the performance of his intellect, so that it is rightly described as a “vision.”³¹

2.2. On the Eternal *Esse* in Augustine

It follows from the previous considerations and must now be affirmed that Augustine not only read God's self-presentation in Exod 3:14a but also derived his statements about God from it, as if it were a template for what and how God can be thought about in the first place. From this perspective, the revelation to Moses gives human thinking an authoritative prerequisite for this. God speaks here of himself as the One who is and thus refers to himself as the Being One with which he is identical.³² However, as already indicated, it also follows from Exod 3:14b.15 that God develops a relationship from within himself to that which is external to him and finite. Augustine was also confronted with both aspects in his vision. According to *De doctrina christiana*, the calling of Moses agrees with the fact that God gives everything its beginning (*Doctr. chr.* I, 32.35 [CCSL 32, 26]).

Augustine himself could not simply re-enact the story of Moses, but he understood *Ego sum, qui sum* as the starting point for further thought—and not only for himself, for just as Moses' mission to the Israelites is derived from the revelation of the name, for Augustine the divine *esse* becomes the point of reference for thinking through God's relationship with man, also with regard to the history of God's people.

Thus for Augustine, Exod 3:14a testifies to the transition between the eternity of the Creator and the perspective of creation, the priority of the former, and the dependence of the latter. This connection is already hinted at when Augustine says at the beginning of Book VII of *The Confessions* that God is the highest (*summus*), the one (*solus*), the true (*verus*), the incorruptible (*incommutabilis*), and the unchangeable (*incommutabilis*) (*Conf.* VII, 1.1 [CCSL 27, 92]). If this being is eternal, it means “to be fully present” (*totum esse praesens*) (*Conf.* XI, 11.13 [CCSL 27, 201]; cf. *Conf.* IX, 10.24 [CCSL 27, 147–48]). Although Augustine does not refer to Exod 3:14a in these

³¹ Cf. Miles 1983, 135: “The vision of God [. . .] is the only activity in which the soul does not construct from its own substance the image which is seen and remains in the memory after the moment of vision.”

³² On the identification of God and being, cf. esp. Augustinus, *Trin.* VI, 10.11 (CCSL 50, 241); *Enarrat. Ps.* 68, 1,5 (CSEL 94/2, 259). On the Neoplatonic concept of pure being, which Augustine arrived at via Porphyry and Marius Victorinus, cf. Hankey 2010, 128. For a more detailed comparison of Augustine's concept of being with the concept of being in the philosophical tradition, cf. Anderson 1965, 19–25.

references, the biblical passage fits well with the words quoted as evidence—as evidence of the presence of the eternal. It thus testifies to the divine presence, which appears once but is not exhausted in it.

In Exod 3:14, God appears as the One who speaks of himself and as the One who reveals himself, who is not only present but also has a conversation with Moses as the representative of the Israelites who are to be liberated from Egypt, and more generally, as the One who of his own accord develops the mutual relationship of which Philo had already spoken, as previously indicated. In his Christological interpretation of Ps 101 (102), Augustine himself addresses in part the relationship between divine eternity and finite humans: “Then he called himself Creator for the creature, God for man, the Immortal for the mortal, the Eternal for the perishable man: I am who I am, he said.” (*Enarrat. Ps.* 101 II, 10 [CCSL 40, 1445]; cf. also *Serm. VT* 7.7 [CCSL 41, 75–76]) Here, he also points to two aspects of being—first, being for himself and second, being for humans. God does not want, as it follows from his perfect being, that human beings are not (*Serm. VT* 7.7 [CCSL 41, 75–76]).

However, *Ego sum qui sum* raises a number of questions that require careful consideration. Augustine refers to God using various forms of the verb *esse* (in addition to the infinitive, also 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular): . . . *tu vero idem ipse es. Tu quis es? Idem ipse es.* “But you are the same. Who are you? You are the same.” This is how he addresses God with his self-naming, from which he derives *qui sum*, “(He) who I am” as his name. To this Augustine adds, according to Exod 3:14b, *qui est*, “(He) who is,” *ipsum esse*, “being himself” and *magnum est*, “Great Is.”³³ However, this revealed divine identity, which is also expressed from the perspective of the recipient of the revelation, is incomprehensible. *Qui sum* is an expression of the incomprehensible.³⁴ That is why God comforts people in their weakness: “I am (as he said) the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:15). He thus provides an intelligible name that is identical to the former, which is also recognizable from the fact that both contain *ego sum* (*Enarrat. Ps.* 101 II, 10 [CCSL 40, 1445]).³⁵ At the same time, it expresses the divine presence, so that people should learn an understandable name and can find a relationship with the incomprehensible (Glowasky 2020, 183), so that they can participate in it, even some of those who were not yet born at the time (*Enarrat. Ps.* 101 II, 11 [CCSL 40, 1446]). This can be understood as the consequence drawn by Augustine from Exod 3:14a, in the awareness of God’s eternal being.

³³ To *summum esse* “highest being” cf. *Conf. I*, 6.10 (CCSL 27, 5); *Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 (CCSL 40, 1805).

³⁴ According to Michael Cameron, in the *Enarrationes*, which are intended for people “of simple faith,” Augustine concentrates on divine revelation in history, “to stimulate pastorally the initial steps of faith” (Cameron 2012, 17), so that Augustine distinguishes different stages of knowledge—from knowledge of revelation in history to spiritual contemplation.

³⁵ Cf. *Enarrat. Ps.* 104.4 (CCSL 40, 1493); *Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 (CCSL 40, 1802); *Enarrat. Ps.* 134.6 (CCSL 40, 1940); *Serm. VT* 6.5 (CCSL 41, 64); *Serm.* 7, 1.7 (CCSL 41, 70, 75–76).

Yet how can one orient oneself towards such a God? Given his absolute indeterminacy, this is not possible, whereas God, as the God of the forefathers, connects the present with the ancient past and is also the God of salvation (*Conf.* VII, 21 [CCSL 27, 110–112]). As a one-word interpretation for the revelation of the divine name, Augustine offers *idipsum*, “the selfsame,” the pure self.³⁶ In his interpretation of Ps 121 (122) in particular, he conclusively explains how *idipsum* has become accessible to humans in the first place, although it remains inaccessible to human thought. However, nothing more can be said about it other than “the selfsame” (*Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 [CCSL 40, 1802]). Yet it can be interpreted. It is itself incomprehensible because it completely transcends the human mind; but if God expressed it to Moses, then people can speak of it themselves, albeit in a very limited way, “by some proximity of words and meanings” (*Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 [CCSL 40, 1802]). This is why Augustine identifies *Ego sum, qui sum* with *qui est* (given the connection between 14a and 14b) and then with *idipsum*. From the divine self-naming, Augustine thus derives the divine name in the forms that humans can use.

According to Augustine, human weakness is evident in the fact that he considers the divine name to be incomprehensible, particularly in relation to greatness (“There is much to understand, much to comprehend.”) (*Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 [CCSL 40, 1802]). This is similar to his interpretation of Ps 101 (102), where humans, who cannot comprehend being (*esse*), are contrasted with God as the “Great Is” (see above). Whilst Augustine recognizes a comforting function for the Word of God in Exod 3:15, it should be noted that for him, human weakness is not only of an intellectual nature but also manifests itself in the danger of despair.³⁷

The contrast to God is terrifying for humans but it is precisely in this contrast that Augustine also finds encouragement for them. Here, too, God assures Moses that as “I am who I am” he is identical with the God of the patriarchs. What is more, he is close to everyone, even if the Old Testament tradition does not go that far. However, it does correspond to the words of Acts 17:28: “For in him we live and move and have our being.” Ultimately, the incomprehensible is accessible to humans because the Word has become flesh, as Augustine’s Christological reflections (see below) show.

Since Augustine’s thought relates to being, it is appropriate to suggest several points of connection, especially with Platonic philosophy. Augustine thus dared to interpret the revelation of the name of God, with whose recipients he identified

³⁶ On *idipsum*, cf. also Augustine, *Conf.* XII, 7.7 (CCSL 27, 219). Augustine took this expression from six places in the Psalms in the Vulgate and linked it to the idea of the one, unchanging, eternal, and simple God, cf. Teske 2008, 122. For the reference of the *idipsum* to Exod 3:14, see Anderson 1965, 27; Kenney 2005, 77.

³⁷ In *Homily VII*, with reference to Exod 33:18, Augustine speaks of Moses’ despair as a human being who is far removed from the *excellencia essentiae*, the “excellence of essence,” cf. *Serm.* VT 7.7 (CCSL 41, 75–76).

himself, by means of philosophy.³⁸ On the one hand, Augustine's Platonism is inconceivable without the Platonic question of being, which in turn was fundamentally influenced by Parmenides' theory of being (*Fr.* 8.1–4 [Simplicius, *In Arist. Phys.* 78,5; 145,1.5.27.29; 146,5]).³⁹ Plato wondered what the philosophers actually understood by "being" (*Soph.* 242c–244b) and what is that which always is (τὸ ὄν) (*Tim.* 27d). However, Augustine did not pursue these questions, which were later also discussed by the middle Platonists (Sterling 2014, 420–421), but referred to them in relation to God. To him, Plato's ὄντως ὄν, "actual being" (*Soph.* 240b7), is the one manifested God, *verum esse*, "true being" (*Serm.* VT 7.7 [CCSL 41, 75]). In addition, Augustine may have been guided by Plotinus' understanding of being as spirit and his juxtaposition of temporal being with its timeless divine principle, as well as Porphyry's identification of God, being and the One (Ruhstorfer 1998, 303–4). Other Platonic themes he takes up are immutability (*Phaedo* 78d)⁴⁰ and eternity (*Tim.* 37e–38a).⁴¹ Furthermore, the actual being⁴² is only one—God's being (God as *ipsum esse*) as one in contrast to Plotinus (*Enn.* V, 1.10 Henry–Schwyzer)—which exists in itself, but is not only for itself. The decisive factor for Augustine was the biblical text Exod 3:14a, in which he saw proof that the God who is and the God who appears are one and the same.⁴³

When he reflects philosophically on God, he is aware of his human perspective and endeavors to speak of God's being rather indirectly. This can be seen in the way he prefers the concept of essence, whereby essence refers to being (Teske 2008, 119). He also sees it as equivalent to Aristotle's οὐσία, which he prefers to *substantia*.⁴⁴ In *De trinitate* he explicitly derives *essentia* from the substantivization of the verb

³⁸ To summarize Augustine and philosophy, cf. Fuhrer 2023, 93–108—with a reference to *communis opinio*, according to which "with his repeated recourse to Marius Victorinus, he points to the tradition in which the two doctrines [i.e. Christianity and Platonism] were considered compatible." (Fuhrer 2023, 96) On Augustine's reception of Neoplatonism and his polemic against Manichaeism with the help of philosophy, cf. Kenney 2005, 49–60.

³⁹ His oneness, his sameness, his necessity, his wholeness, his completeness, beginninglessness and endlessness, his ungenerability, his immortality, his immobility, his eternity, his indivisibility, his placelessness, his timelessness and his constant presence can be cited for comparison. Cf. Catapano 2024, 125–50.

⁴⁰ Cf. Anderson 1965, 33: "Since God is a metaphysically simple being and ordinary substances are not, Aristotle's theory of predication does not apply to God in the ways it does to ordinary substances."

⁴¹ On the expression αἰδιος in the sense of necessarily imperishable and necessarily unborn nature, identity, and immutability in Plato, cf. Festugière 1971, 254–71.

⁴² On ὄντως ὄν, "true being" in Plutarch, *E Delph.* 19, 392 E, and on Apollo identified with τὸ ὄν in 8, 388 E, cf. Whittaker 1969, 189.

⁴³ I.e. also in contrast to the three gods of Numenius (*Frg.* 9 des Places: αὐτοαγαθον, the *Good-in-itself* / αὐτὸ ὄν *Self-being*; ποιητής / δημιουργός *Creator*; ποίημα *creation*). Cf. Kahn 1973, 122–30.

⁴⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Trin.* V, 8,9 (CCSL 50, 216) and, in relation to Exod 3:14, *Trin.* VII, 5,10 (CCSL 50, 261). On Aristotle's God as οὐσία cf. *Metaph.* 1072b22–30. For this, see Zubiri 2010, 47: "Aristotle considers the θεός as an οὐσία, as something that is fully self-sufficient." On Augustine's use of *substantia* and his preference for *essentia*, see Teske 2008, 125–26. On Augustine's limited and rather indirect knowledge of Aristotle, cf. Tkacz 1999, 58–59.

esse.⁴⁵ *Essentia* itself is therefore understood as being in itself (*ad se*). Thus Augustine identifies God with both being and essence, God being the supreme essence that is being (*Civ.* XII, 2 [CCSL 48, 357]; Anderson 1965, 73–74).

It also thus raises the question of how Augustine connected biblical exegesis with philosophy in the first place. He not only subjected the Bible to a literary interpretation but also searched for its hidden meaning. In his view, such a procedure is possible because God entered the human world and declared: “I am who I am,” as Augustine states in *De vera religione* (*Ver. rel.* 49.97 [CCSL 32, 250]), and then he calls out: “Let’s climb the steps (*gradus*) that divine Providence deigned to set up for us.” (*Ver. rel.* 50.98 [CSL 32, 250]) Augustine regarded allegorical interpretation as a step on the gradual path to the eternal (Cameron 2012, 95). Allegory and philosophical thinking could thus exist side by side.

Therein lies also a certain analogy to the connection between philosophy and biblical exegesis in Philo of Alexandria. Above all, however, Augustine’s concept of being shows a kinship with Philo’s entirely transcendent being, whose eternity, immutability, and incomprehensibility are emphasized. For Philo, however, the divine name is the medium of man’s indirect relationship with the Being One, whereas for Augustine it is primarily a medium of revelation. Here, *esse* is related to revelation.⁴⁶

Augustine does not investigate being.⁴⁷ In *Homily VII*, where he interprets the doctrine of the Trinity from the divine revelation in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–4:17), Augustine derives *esse* from Exod 3:14a as an expression of immutability and eternity (*Serm. VT* 7.7 [CCSL 41, 75–76]). The immutable is that which is unlimited; and this is also complementary to truth (*Civ.* 8.11 [CCSL 47, 228]) and stands in contrast to changeable human existence. However, while Moses asks for the name of God in Exod 3:13, Augustine asks *quid est . . .*, “what is . . .” Even more clearly, when he asks in *Homily VI*, in which he deals with the revelation of God in the burning bush, *Quid est hoc?* “What is this?” and then . . . *quid vocaris?* “. . . what is your name?” (*Serm. VT* 6.4 [CCSL 41, 64]), he asks about the identity of God. This formulation of the question is clearly different from Moses’ question about the divine name in Exod 3:13. From verse 14a it is clear to him that God identifies himself with being, which he expresses from his human perspective with *idipsum*. Augustine indirectly interprets immutability, but also eternity and truth as if they were complementary aspects of being. They are entirely his own. As

⁴⁵ Cf. Augustinus, *Trin.* V, 3 (CCSL 50, 208). Only philosophical consideration leads to the conclusion of Exod 3:14a in the concept of *essentia*, which has “die Bedeutung des allein wahren und unwandelbaren ‘Seins’” (Ringleben 2018, 147) for Augustine, *Trin.* VII, 5.10 (CCSL 50, 260–261). Of the 188 occurrences of the term *essentia* in Augustine’s complete works, 182 are found in *De trinitate*, cf. Ayres 1999, 98.

⁴⁶ On the close but hardly verifiable connection between Augustine and Philo, see Runia 1995a, 217–18.

⁴⁷ It is therefore understandable when Marion (2008, 182) argues that Augustine is primarily concerned with immutability and not with being. But why should one concern oneself with divine immutability in the first place?

the unchangeable and the eternal, God is the precondition of human existence, just as truth is the guarantee of human knowledge. He is also One, but not, as in Plotinus, the One “beyond being” (*Enn.* VI 9, 2.12 ff.; *Enn.* III 8, 10.28 Henry-Schwyzler; cf. earlier the idea of Good in Plato, *Rep.* 509b).

Yet this God can be experienced by everyone as one who is near. As already indicated, God’s being is also for humans. According to Augustine, God does not only make himself known so that people know that they know nothing about him and can still think about him. It has already been indicated that for Augustine, *Ego sum, qui sum* has a Christological aspect. The incarnation of Christ made it possible for Augustine to identify the revealing being and his revelation without relativizing his transcendence. Exodus 3:14a provides him with proof of this (*Enarrat. Ps.* 121.5 [CCSL 40, 1805]). Just as God has always revealed himself, so he revealed himself in Christ, and when the Word became flesh, it was shown that the Word with whom God identifies himself in Exod 3:14a is identical with Christ (Studer 1997, 150–151). According to Augustine, the eternally self-same God revealed himself to Moses and in Christ, as can be derived Christologically from Exod 13:14a. What is true in the metaphysical sense is fulfilled in history. Was he also thinking here of the content of his visions?

Conclusion

How did Augustine follow in the footsteps of Moses? In his vision, according to the seventh book of *The Confessions*, he heard the same words as Moses and, like Moses, encountered the presence of divine authority, anticipating future redemption (this time in the form of resurrection). Augustine’s account of his experience also has a basic structure that is analogous to the biblical account of the revelation to Moses: according to it, God reveals himself of his own accord to an individual through his word and in conversation with his human counterpart. In both cases, the dominant phrase is *Ego sum, qui sum*, which Augustine heard according to his own testimony and which corresponds to the words already heard by Moses. However, he heard them not as a divine mediator, but as an interpreter. As such, he relied on the biblical tradition of the divine revelation of God’s name in Exod 3:14a, as developed through Greek, and then Latin translations. Thus, this biblical passage could be read as a divine self-identification with being. While in the Hebrew version of Exod 3:14a, Yahweh reveals his name and thus his powerful presence, in the Greek version (of which Augustine was probably aware) it is transformed into a divine statement about who he is, abstracting from anything definite. Thus, Augustine found in Exod 3:14a not only an instrument of interpretation for his experience but also a divine self-manifestation that legitimized thinking and speaking about the incomprehensible, yet did not

result in the clarification of being itself. The revelation of the divine name allowed Augustine to speak of that which the incomprehensible himself has made comprehensible. What is to be understood is what God makes known of his essence, while he allows his being only to be referred to.

In reflecting on his vision, Augustine himself thus stands on a line connecting his experience of the appearing God and the thought of the God who is in himself. The interpretation of Exod 3:14b in relation to the concept of being made it possible to think about God without referring to all specific attributes that would relativize his infinity. Both revelation and incarnation answer the question of the relationship between the infinite and the finite.

Translated by Michael Pockley

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