Naming God at Sinai

The Gift of the Name

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Is the Christian God a Metaphysical Monster?

'You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps 47.2): great is
your power and your wisdom is immeasurable' (Ps 146.5). Man, a
little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being
'bearing his morality with him' (2 Cor 4.10), carrying with him the
witness of his sin and the witness that you 'resist the proud' (I Pet
5.5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece
of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you,
because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until
it rests in you.[1]

Saint Augustine begins the poem of love that is his
Confessions by invoking and praising his God as a God
of power and immeasurable wisdom. Augustine and his
contemporaries had no difficulty calling upon a God who
is powerful, eternal and immutable. Yet to many of us
today, a God delineated by such perfections is entirely at
odds with the God of loving kindness who, in the pages of
Scripture, bends down to human need. Indeed, the God
of these perfections appears no less a monster than the

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[1] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I. Unless otherwise indicated,
all excerpts from the *Confessions* are from the translation by Henry
Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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cruel and capricious God sketched by contemporary critics of Christianity – indeed God seems just a metaphysical monster.

Some modern theologians have argued that a mistake was made early on, that early Christianity never developed 'a consistent doctrine of God' but rather adopted 'the metaphysical tradition of Greek philosophy' and with it the attributes of a 'god' of natural theology. Jürgen Moltmann stated it thus:

If, in the manner of Greek philosophy, we ask what characteristics are 'appropriate' to the deity, then we have to exclude difference, diversity, movement and suffering from the divine nature. ... Impassible, immovable, united and self-sufficient, the deity confronts a moved, suffering and divided world that is never sufficient for itself. For the divine substance is the founder and sustainer of this world of transient phenomena; it abides eternally, and so cannot be subjected to this world's destiny.[2]

This God of what we have grown used to calling 'the classical attributes' is, on this argument, a philosophical cuckoo in the biblical nest – a remote deity that could not address our needs.[3] Talk of God's eternity

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[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, 1st US ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 22.

[3] Katherine Sonderegger suggests that it was the Process Theologians who coined the category 'classical theism' by way of rejecting 'the God of classical theism'. 'Classical theism', she adds, is a category 'now so widely used as to seem self-evident'. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I: *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 165. See Sonderegger's book, and especially Part III, for an excellent analysis of the shortcomings of process theology and its ilk, and a robust defence of the divine perfections (attributes) firmly anchored in the Christian doctrine of God, deploying a nuanced understanding of religious language.

and immutability, his omniscience and omnipresence, conjures up a dictator, ruling in power and might, that most find impossible to love and, after several centuries of western imperialism and sexism, embarrassing if not impossible to own. What use in Christian life is one who is called *ipsum esse subsistens* or 'Being itself' whose attributes are unfolded as simplicity, infinity, eternity, omnipresence and so on?[4]

Some theologians have even argued that it is not just the God of the philosophers but God of the Bible itself – eternal, almighty and omniscient – who is a monstrous potentate. Gordon Kaufman, an extreme instance, insisted that Christianity must discard a God conceived as infinite and almighty, and was especially exasperated with Christian philosophers who defend a God whom he thinks no longer deserves defending.[5] The God who is 'an arbitrary, imperial potentate, a solitary eminence existing in glorious transcendence of all else' is, he tells us, a thing of the past. We can no longer think of God as 'an objectively existing powerful agent-self'.[6] We should no longer speak of God as creator/lord or father either, for these terms are infested with the anthropomorphism

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[4] Cardinal Walter Kasper makes this point in his *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 10.

[5] See his exchange with Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann in the issues of *Faith and Philosophy*, 1989 and 1990: Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response', *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 6, no. 1 (1989): 35-46, https://doi .org/10.5840/faithphil1989613.

[6] Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Reconstructing the Concept of God: De-reifying the Anthropomorphisms', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 95–115 at 104.

responsible for much oppression (of the weak, of women, of the poor) in the past and even now.

If this is a warning against idolatry, then few will disagree, but Kaufman is not simply reminding us, as did almost every theologian before him, of the dangers of idolatry and anthropomorphic language. He goes further and suggests that we move beyond belief in a God altogether. His is a thoroughgoing abandonment – we once needed this 'God symbol', but so his argument goes, we do not need it now. In fact, its retention keeps us in a state of moral immaturity, forever waiting for a powerful deity to reassemble the pieces of our fractured world.

In the Bible God stands behind and governs all that exists. In this picture it was apparently the autonomous, free agent, the 'I' (ego) existing alone in its solitude that was the core model on the basis of which the image/concept of God was constructed. When Moses, in a very early story, asks the voice from the burning bush, 'Who are you? What is your name?' the answer that comes back to him is 'I Am; I Am Who I Am' (Exod. 3.13–14, paraphrased). God is identified here as the great 'I Am', the ego-agent *par excellence*, sheer unrestricted agential power. Given this model, it is not surprising that God has often been conceived of as an all-powerful tyrant, a terrifying arbitrary force before whom women and men can only bow in awe and fear.[7]

Kaufmann seems clear that his 'imperial potentate' is the one who addressed Moses at Sinai, but it is hard to believe that the God painted in such lurid colours could be the same God who awoke the love and devotion of Anselm or Aquinas, Augustine or Julian of Norwich – or, for that matter, that this could be the God of the Bible itself.

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[7] Kaufman, 'Reconstructing the Concept of God', 104.

Exodus 3 Revisited

We have now reached a pivotal text – Exodus 3 with its famous account of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush. The sequence in which Moses requests, and indeed, is given, the Holy Name, *YHWH*, was to be of immense influence in the history of Christian theology; however, to read it as presenting us with a divine tyrant, an 'ego-agent *par* excellence', is entirely misleading. For those thinkers we will examine in this book, Jewish and Christian, the story of Moses on Sinai is a foundational story of God's love and nearness – God's gift to God's people in their time of need.

Finding the God of the Bible to be a capricious tyrant, and even pointing the accusing finger at this passage from Exodus, is far from new – indeed, it is a favourite theme of modern atheism from the eighteenth century onwards. A tyrannical God was memorably sketched by David Hume in the *Natural History of Religion*. In one of the first attempts to provide a materialist and reductionist account of religious belief and bucking the eighteenth-century trend to see progress in matters of religion, Hume tells a story of decline. Hume's 'natural history' portrays religion created and fuelled from first to last by craven fear and blind hope. Since human society improves 'from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection', Hume confidently concludes that 'polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind'.[8] Monotheism

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[8] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757, 1777), 1.1, Hume Texts Online (davidhume.org). Richard Dawkins is just one in a long line of critics of this unpalatable God.

is simply a refinement of polytheism. Simple and barbaric peoples will naturally choose a particular god as their patron and, having done so, endeavour to inflate his attributes to incomparable supremacy. Praise of their 'god' as the greatest god soon leads to praise of him as the 'only god' and, elevating their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection, at last beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality.[9]

Monotheism turns out to be the highest, and therefore best concealed, kind of idolatry, and the divine attributes – far from being the reasonable results of philosophical or spiritual reflection – are no more than distilled grovelling. Where God is so elevated, says Hume, (anticipating Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) the human mind is abased. It is a zero-sum game – if God is great, 'Man' is small. Monotheism is not morally preferable to polytheism – rather, the reverse. Polytheism, while untidy and primitive, is at least tolerant, but those religions which maintain 'the unity of God' are intolerant, implacable and narrow. Hume admits that a refined and reasonable religion would be quite acceptable to him, but as to religions as they are actually found – 'You will scarcely be persuaded that they are other than sick men's dreams.'[10]

With a capricious, inexorable God already made familiar by Enlightenment critics of religion, Freud was able to craft his own portrait of the overbearing heavenly father. Yet there's a certain irony in the fact that Freud's *Future of an Illusion*, while echoing Hume's contention that religion is little more than sick men's dreams, cannot dispense with

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[9] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 8.2.
[10] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 15.6.

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the myth of the Exodus. The God of Exodus becomes, in Freud's terms, the murdered primal father who is behind every divine figure, and the father who is giver of the law. Freud's talking cure revolved around 'our God, the word' and his late work, *Moses and Monotheism*, can be read as an extended, modern midrash on the Exodus story, in which Freud himself appears at times to be Moses, leading the people from pre-scientific slavery to the promised land of psychoanalysis. This borrowing of overtly religious terminology is even more apparent in Freud's famous French interpreter, Jacques Lacan (himself from a Catholic background). Lacan's essay 'The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis' is filled with reference to 'the Word' of the patient, with quotes from scripture (sometimes in Greek), and with theological terminology such as *anamnesis*, 'nature and grace' and so on.[11] Lacan provides his own psychoanalytic gloss on the famous Exodus 3 passage. Moses at the burning bush, according to Lacan, meets the symbolic father who is literally capable of laying down the law – of saying 'I Am Who I Am.' Here, analytically, is the fixed point of the law to which all who wish to enter psychic maturity must relate.

Since so many in the history of western philosophy and theology have glossed the story of this famous bush, it might seem to be only intellectual courtesy to allow Freud and Lacan their analytic allegories. The problem is that modern westerners, brought up on a diet of half-digested psychoanalytic theory, may take Freud's reading not as one reading of Exodus but as gospel truth.

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[11] In *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

In this new gnosis the 'real meaning' of the God of Jewish and Christian origins is taken to be the Oedipal father, standing over and against us at the gates of psychic pre-history. Many who gag over fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture swallow without difficulty the exegeses of a Freud or a Lacan. Is perhaps Freud's God the real intellectual ancestor of Kaufman's 'ego-agent *par excellence*' before whom we must cower and grovel?

Meeting God at Sinai

Again, we must ask, is the God whom Moses meets on Sinai this domineering agent? I quote the relevant passage in full:

Moses was looking after the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian. He led his flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in the shape of a flame of fire, coming from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing but it was not being burnt up. 'I must go and look at this strange sight,' Moses said 'and see why the bush is not burnt.' Now Yahweh saw him go forward to look, and God called to him from the middle of the bush. 'Moses, Moses!' he said, 'Here I am,' he answered 'Come no nearer,' he said. 'Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father,' he said, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God. (Ex. 3.1–6)

Then Moses said to God, 'I am to go, then, to the sons of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you." But if they ask me what his name is, what am I to tell them?' And God said to Moses, 'I Am who I Am. This' he

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added 'is what you must say to the sons of Israel: "I Am has sent me to you".' And God also said to Moses, 'You are to say to the sons of Israel: "Yahweh, 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 all time; by this name I shall be invoked for all generations to come.' (Ex. 3.13–15)

Moses as an infant is miraculously saved by Pharaoh's daughter, plucked from the Nile in his basket of reeds. The next we hear of him is as a grown man – educated as an Egyptian but showing some conscience about the conditions of his fellow Israelites. He is over-zealous and kills an Egyptian whom he sees striking a Hebrew, an action which does little for his reputation with the Egyptians or his fellow Hebrews. Moses, effectively outcast, removes himself to Midian, marries Zipporah whom he meets at the well and who is not a Hebrew, and takes employment as a shepherd for her father.

In the course of seeking new grazing land in 'the far side of the desert', Moses comes to Horeb (a place of double isolation, a mountain in a desert) – and his life is changed once and for all.

Moses looked, we are told, and there was the bush blazing but it was not being burnt up. 'I must go and look at this strange sight,' Moses said, 'and see why the bush is not burnt'. Then Yahweh called,

'Moses, Moses.'

'Here I am,' he answered.

'Come no nearer. Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.'

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He must have a closer look. But it is when God *speaks to him* from the bush that Moses is astonished. Lacan, for all the idiosyncrasies of his reading of Exodus, has at least noticed that this decisive revelation of God to Moses is in the medium of speech, *in words*.[12] More specifically is it a 'call' narrative. Moses is called by name and called to lead the Israelites out of their captivity, for 'to call' has this double sense.[13]

In the narrative of Exodus 3, names and naming are to the fore. God calls Moses *by name* and tells him to take off his shoes. God then gradually discloses to Moses a series of divine names. God does not begin with 'I AM WHO I AM.' Rather, in the first of a sequence of names, God says, '*I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*', the God, that is, of Moses' ancestors. God tells Moses that he has seen the misery of his people, Israel, in Egypt and means to deliver them. Moses is to be the agent of this delivery. Moses is to go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of bondage.[14]

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[12] Walter Brueggemann notes that this is not so much a 'theophany' as a 'voice to voice encounter'. 'Exodus 3: Summons to Holy Transformation', in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 155–72 at 157.

[13] 'Call narratives' are an established form in the Hebrew Bible. Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel are all 'called' using similar narrative forms: introduction, commission, objection reassurance, sign. See Norman Habel, 'The Form and Significance of the Call Narrative', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77, no. 36 (1965): 297–323. For some widening of the 'call narrative' beyond Habel's model, see Fred Guyette, 'The Genre of the Call Narrative', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2015): 51–9.

[14] I am not happy with the use of male personal pronouns to refer to God in discussing this most cautious and numinous locus of biblical naming, but the English language lacks ways to express the personal nature of agency without using 'he' or 'she' at this juncture. It is the

Far from crumbling before the 'all-powerful tyrant' sketched by critics of the Bible from Hume through to Richard Dawkins, Moses becomes argumentative. He raises difficulties that perhaps God has not thought of – he is not a good speaker, he has a stammer, his brother Aaron might be better, Pharaoh won't listen to him, and to sum it up:[15]

'Who am I to go before Pharaoh?'

'I shall be with you' is God's reply.

This promise, 'I shall be with you', fails to satisfy Moses who is as uncertain of his reception among his fellow Israelites as before Pharaoh.

'What', he says, 'if the sons of Israel ask me what your name is – what am I to tell them?'

At this stage God gives a second name.

'And God said to Moses "*I Am Who I Am.*"'

And then a third – 'you must say to the sons of Israel "*I Am* has sent me to you".'

Then follows a fourth name, the four-lettered sacred name, or Tetragrammaton:

You are to say to the sons of Israel: 'YHWH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name for all time; by this name I shall be invoked for all generations to come.

These names, three or four depending on how we count them, are given in sequence of text, names whose

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personal nature of the God of Israel, not God's gender (which God does not have), which is the point.

[15] Brevard Childs speaks of the prophet's 'resistance to his inclusion in the divine plan' – *Exodus: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1974), 71.

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origins, Hebrew Bible scholars tell us, are lost in the overlapping and successive textual traditions, but whose significance in this final canonical form have been meditated upon for generations by Jews and Christians. Of these the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*), is privileged. This is unpronounceable and, by pious Jews, the unpronounced name of God. This name appears over 6,000 times in the Hebrew Bible. When prophets and psalmists, 'call upon the name of the LORD', they invoke this name. Yet the Tetragrammaton's overwhelming presence in the Bible is masked for Christians by modern translations, which almost universally replace the *YHWH* in the original Hebrew with the capitalized 'LORD'. This is, of course, not without reason, for even at the time of Jesus the Tetragrammaton was not articulated. Instead, those reading aloud would substitute *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for Lord. Yet this translation practice obscures, for Christians, the importance of the Name (*YHWH*) in their own Bibles.

Exodus 3 marks the high point in a series of names and naming, of people and places, which began in Genesis with Abraham and ends with the first of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, 'I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.' It is not only God who is the subject of naming. Abram, who will be the father of nations, has been renamed 'Abraham'; Isaac is given his name from Sarah's 'laugh'. Naming in these texts is not simply a matter of tagging or simple denomination, it is, rather, a practice which locates a certain individual or place within the emergent, symbolic, remembered history of Israel.

It should be emphasised, however, that while naming and renaming are frequent features of the Hebrew Bible,

divine self-naming is extremely rare. God is named, or called upon by name, hundreds of times by others – by Psalmists, Prophets and Moses himself – but rarely does God, as it were, name Godself. This is almost solely in the Book of Exodus and to Moses, hence the weight of the encounter of God and Moses at the burning bush. Here God not only gives Moses the Holy Name, *YHWH*, but glosses it, placing himself as the God of Israel's history. Moses is to know that whom he meets is the God of Israel's past (of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), of its present who sees its suffering and of its future who will lead them from slavery to the promised land.[16]

While the Tetragrammaton should be privileged, the *'ehyeh asher ehyeh'* of Exodus 3.14–15 ('I AM WHO I AM') has fascinated Christian theologians, especially those whom we associate with 'negative' or mystical theology. The truncated form 'you must say to the sons of Israel "I AM has sent me to you"' (Ex. 3.14) with its suggestion of metaphysical ultimacy, of God as 'Being itself', was attractive to theologians of the early church. The Septuagint translation of the Hebrew (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) as *Egô eime ho ôn* acted as an encouragement to just such a metaphysical reading, as did the Latin Vulgate's *Ego Sum Qui Sum*, and *Qui est*, for 'I AM'.

These renderings of the Hebrew in Greek and Latin, and the '*I Am Who I Am*' of the English Bibles, do not,

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[16] See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New Voices in Biblical Studies (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) in which Levenson points out that the encounter is not narrative as though 'it occurred on the level of mere fact …' but, rather, 'the writers enlisted history in the service of a transcendent and therefore metahistorical truth' (17).

however, do justice to the Hebrew text. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* seems to be a gloss on the Name, *YHWH*, which is suggestive of the Hebrew verb, *hayah* 'to be', or better 'to become'. And while it would be incorrect to say, strictly speaking, that this is what *YHWH* means (for, technically, proper names do not have meanings), it is a commonplace of the Hebrew Bible that names may tell something of their bearers.[17] Walter Kasper suggests that the verb *hâyâh* here means not so much 'to be' as 'to effect' or 'to be effective'. The Name thus glossed is a promise that God will be with Israel in an effective way. For Brevard Childs, *ehyeh asher ehyeh* emphasises the actuality of God so that we might translate it as 'I am there, wherever it may be – I am really there.'[18]

Jewish writers emphasise the particularity of the disclosure on Sinai – God speaks at a specific time and for a specific purpose. I AM WHO I AM is not, in Exodus, a timeless abstraction derived from reason alone, as we saw with Descartes, but the God who Israel meets in her moment of need. It is the name of the God who delivers, the God who saves, who comes with everlasting love and that will continue throughout the Hebrew Bible as the faithful 'call upon the Name of the Lord'.

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[17] See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 95. Moberly mentions Gen 32.28, Ruth 1.20, I Sam 25.25.

[18] In personal correspondence, Andrew Macintosh suggests that 'to be' is an 'appropriate but not always accurate rendering. The verb implies transition, movement, intervention. I think the opening verses of Psalm 124 (Masoretic text ordering) give the best definition of the divine name: "If the LORD had not HAYAD-ed for us, we would have been clobbered by our enemies".'

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This unfolding of Exodus 3 will prove the key to bringing together the biblical and the metaphysical, as can be seen when we look to the writings of the two Jewish philosophers most attentive to the Name and the naming of God in the twentieth century, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

Buber and Rosenzweig on the Name and the Naming of God

No modern philosophers have worked harder to recover, indeed to rescue, the God of the Book of Exodus from the clutches of abstract philosophical speculation than Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Theirs was, at the same time, an attempt to recover for jaded readers, both Jewish and Christian, the vividness of the Hebrew original.

In 1925 Buber and Rosenzweig began work on a new translation of the Bible from Hebrew into their native German. Rosenzweig was already afflicted with the degenerative disease that would kill him in 1929 at only forty-three years of age, but he threw himself into the project with the intellectual vigour of a young man. This constituted a *volte-face*. Early in the same year he had declared himself entirely resistant to the project, being of the opinion that the reigning German translation (the Luther Bible) could not, or should not, be substantially changed and that to do so would be an affront to German language and culture. By the end of 1925 he had changed his mind. The plan was not simply to tweak the Luther Bible's translation of the Torah away from its Christian-inflected emphasis but to recover the power of the original Hebrew, and the beneficiaries would be Jews and

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Christians alike.[19] Soon he and Buber were well into a free translation of the Torah which sought to catch the vigour of the Hebrew, and which departed radically from previous translations. In this project the Luther Bible was as much their inspiration and template as it was the subject of their criticism. In its day, Rosenzweig argued, the Luther Bible had been 'a trumpet-call in the ear of those who had fallen asleep', complacent with an accepted and familiar text.[20] Buber and Rosenzweig, already inducted into existential philosophy, sought the same 'trumpet-call' effect. Moments of divine address, of encounter and response were of particular importance to them, and thus the attention to Moses and the gift of the Name.

They had in Moses Mendelssohn a distinguished Jewish predecessor. This learned man translated the Pentateuch into German in the early nineteenth century and, with others, compiled the commentary known as the *Biur*. Mendelssohn's translation was indisputably elegant. Rosenzweig was to say, however, that, apart from its role in shaping German literary style, it had 'lasting effect on German and world Judaism only in one respect: translating the divine Name, YHWH, as "the Eternal"'.[21] The decision to use an abstract and philosophical term to translate the Tetragrammaton was, from Rosenzweig's point of view, a mistake and, moreover, one which was to influence

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[19] Mara H. Benjamin, *Rozensweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 107–10.

[20] Franz Rosenzweig, 'Scripture and Luther', in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 57–69 at 57.

[21] Franz Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal": Mendelssohn and the Name of God', in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 99–113 at 100.

all 'Jewish piety of the Emancipation, even in orthodox circles'.[22] In his translational choice Mendelssohn shows himself under the sway of the 'rationalizing, classicizing spirit of his century'.[23] Rosenzweig takes the rendering of the Tetragrammaton as 'the Eternal' to be indicative of attenuated belief, and of Mendelssohn's apparently Enlightenment conviction that 'the notion of a being necessarily existent might inevitably imply the notion of a providential one'.[24] In a final ringing criticism, Rosenzweig suggests that in 'Mendelssohn's case the spirit of the age made alliance with the spirit of Maimonides, whom Mendelssohn had honoured all his life, against the sure instinct of Jewish tradition'.[25]

But how should a modern translator deal with the Divine Name? Buber and Rosenzweig wrote more on this topic than almost any other twentieth-century theologian, and certainly more than any philosophers. They were convinced that, alone amongst the biblical names for

[22] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 100.
[23] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 100.
[24] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 105.
[25] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 105. The disagreement over whether the God of the philosophers can have anything to do with the God of Scripture which we've marked in Christian writers is to be found amongst Jewish ones. Frequently, but not always, hostility to philosophy is aligned to criticism or dismissal of Maimonides such as we have here with Rosenzweig (for another contemporary example, see Michael Wyschogorod's *The Body of Faith: God and the People of Israel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996)). For a defence of Maimonides as both rabbi and philosopher, see José Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Lenn Evan Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: the legacy of Maimonides* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Of these Faur is especially interesting since he writes as a scholar

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God (*Elohim*, *El*, *El Shaddai*), *YHWH* had the status of a proper name and not a concept. Its truest form as a name is found in direct address – the 'I' which calls to 'You', that is, in the vocative. As a name it could be neither pluralised nor transformed into a noun. Yet it was also a meaning-bearing name, and this not just in the weak etymological sense in which the German name 'Friedrich' can be seen to be derived from *Friede* (peace). The Tetragrammaton was meaning-bearing in virtue of the revelation to Moses at the burning bush and the gloss given there for the Name.[26] The Name cannot be separated from the gloss, but how does the translator convey this to the non-Hebrew reader?

Mendelssohn, like other Jewish translators before him, had avoided the obvious translation 'my Lord' (Herr) because, although true to the Hebrew *adonai*, this had become too much associated in German language and through the Luther Bible with Christianity. Rosenzweig agreed, writing that through the Greek of the New Testament and its German translation, 'the Lord'

of Rabbinic literature, literary theory and Jewish law, and from an orthodox perspective. It is also worth stating that these defenders read Maimonides quite differently on different points. Seeskin, for instance, suggests that God cannot be spoken of as acting in the world, thus 'Revelation is not a case of God's choosing to speak with Moses but of Moses' coming to understand the will of God' (21), whereas Faur argues that Maimonides is above all anxious to defend God's providence and freedom to act. But both would agree with the suggestion, put by Seeskin that there is no tenable division between Maimonides the Rabbi and Maimonides the philosopher (20).

[26] Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, 'A Letter to Martin Goldner', in *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 189–92 at 190; Martin Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible: In Memoriam Franz Rosenzweig', in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 73–89 at 87.

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has come to refer not to God but to the founder of Christianity – a reference that even today gives a Christian coloring to the Old Testament. When the devout Christian says, 'The Lord is my shepherd', he thinks not of God but of 'the Good Shepherd'.[27]

Rosenzweig has some sympathy for Mendelssohn's choice not to follow earlier Germano-Jewish translations, which used simply 'God'/*Gott* in place of the Tetragrammaton, for this loses the *particularity* of the Name. Yet 'the Eternal' was still an odd choice. Calvin had used it in his French translation, but it was 'biblical' only insofar as it appeared in the Apocrypha, texts written during the period of Hellenistic Judaism and not included in the Jewish canon. There in the Letter to Baruch *ho Aionios* appears several times as a name of God, and it was probably there that Calvin found this 'austere, sublime, genuinely "numinous" term' with which he rendered the name of God.[28]

Rosenzweig and Buber despaired of the ponderous metaphysical associations of the 'I AM WHO I AM' (in German, *ICH WERDE SEIN*, *DER ICH SEIN WERDE*) mediated to the west by the Septuagint and the Vulgate. Their resolution was to dispense with any single rendering of the Name but to translate the Name and its gloss in many variations, all of which favour the dynamic sense of *'becoming*, of *appearing*, and of *happening*'.[29]

Rosenzweig conceded that Moses Mendelssohn, despite a poor choice in translation, showed great insight on the Name. For instance, at the first use of the

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[27] Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible', 101.
[28] Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible', 101.
[29] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 104.

Tetragrammaton in Genesis 2.4, Mendelssohn forbears to say *anything at all*, simply telling his readers to consult his later notes for Exodus 3.14, 'for there is the place to discuss it'.[30] This suggests that for Mendelssohn, as for Rashi, the significance of the Name is to be read 'backwards and forwards', so to speak, from the revelations to Moses at Horeb/Sinai.

When we reach Exodus 3.14 Mendelssohn paraphrases in this way:

God spoke to Moses: 'I am the being that is eternal.'
He said further: 'Say to the children of Israel,
"The eternal being, which calls itself, I-am-eternal, has sent me
     to you."'[31]

Mendelssohn's own comment on this is the following:

It says in a midrash,
  'The Holy one, Blessed be He,' said to Moses: 'say to them, "I am the one who was, and now I am the same and will be the same in the future." And our teachers, may their memory be a blessing, say further: "I will be with them in this need, will be with them in their bondage in the kingdoms to come."' (Cf. Berakhot 9b)
  Their meaning is the following: 'Because past and future time are all present in the creator, since in Him there is not change and dependence and of His days there is no passing – because of this all times are in Him called by a single name, which embraces past, present and future alike. Through this name he indicates the necessity of existence and at the same time the continuous and abiding character of providence. He says, then, by this name, "I am with the children of men, to be

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[30] Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 104.
[31] Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible', 101.

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well disposed and to have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Ex. 33.19). Say then to them, to Israel, that I am He who was, is, and shall be, and who practices lordship and providence over all. I shall be with them in this need and shall be with them whenever they call to me.'[32]

Here we have 'omnitemporality, necessity of existence and providence'. The word which best catches *all of these meanings* is, Mendelssohn believes, 'the Eternal'.

This comment makes it altogether clear that Mendelssohn *both knows and believes* the famous gloss on the Name to be far more than 'a lecture on God's eternal necessity'. He knows it to be *altogether* to do with the contingent, and with God's concern for the plight of the children of Israel at this narrative moment. Citing Onkelos, Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, he says that the holy Name in fact has three meanings: one concerning providence, another eternity and the third existential necessity. All of these are caught up in the Name and its gloss, and Mendelssohn sees no conflict between them.[33]

Mendelssohn's rationalism was by all accounts far reaching, yet it is harsh to accuse him of ignoring the best

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[32] Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible', 101.

[33] Rosenzweig notes that the Talmud knows only the midrash of 'providence' and makes a distinction, alien to Mendelssohn, between the 'classic religious philosophers' (Maimonides et al.) and 'the genuine popular tradition' (Onkelos, Talmud, Rashi), (Rosenzweig, '"The Eternal"', 103). Other modern Jewish writers are not so averse. See the entry for 'God, Names of', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 277–88, which notes that the gloss is interpreted as denoting 'eternal existence'. See also Herbert Chanan Brichto commenting on the 'I Am Who I Am' of Ex. 3.14 in his *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

tradition of Jewish piety, or of being unduly swayed by the Vulgate or Septuagint. He would have been baffled by such a criticism. We could add that no one who was following Maimonides could possibly think the notion of a 'necessary existent' implied that of providence. Maimonides was committed to a theological notion without precedent in the philosophical theology of Plato and of Aristotle – *creatio ex nihilo* – which, as we shall see, defeats such an implication.

To bring these reflections on naming God at Sinai to a close, Exodus and Deuteronomy are not works of philosophical speculation. It would be anachronistic, to suppose that they were. But it is not unreasonable to read them as attesting to the disclosure of the One who is and was and will always be. This is what much subsequent Jewish and Christian reflection has done, and it was in order to secure this distinctive insight that Abrahamic understandings of divine eternity were developed. Providence here is not derived from some pre-existing philosophical commitment to a 'necessary existent.' The order is, if anything, the other way around: Scripture and its narratives come first, the text of Torah with the 'I Am Who I Am' and 'the One Who Is'. Philosophical reflection and Christian metaphysics can only follow what has been disclosed. The eternal God, ever free to act and be present to His people, is known as eternal God through his everlasting, providential concern.

It is this 'being present' of God that provides the point of departure for much late antique reflection on the giving of the Name to Moses. Those writing in this metaphysical register, whether Jews or Christians, were, as they

saw it, defending the Bible's distinctive understanding. Moses Mendelssohn's explanation of why he translated the divine Name as 'the Eternal' stands in line with this tradition, even if it might not have been the best choice for a translation of the Holy Name.[34]

The genuine kinship between metaphysics and revelation was evident, it must be said, to Rosenzweig, as well. Writing of the giving of the Name to Moses he says:

Only because this one-becoming-present-to-you will always be present to you when you need him and call upon him – 'I *will* be there' – only for this reason does he become in our reflection, our after-thought, also the ever-being, the absolute, the eternal, separated thus from my need and my particular moment … His eternity is made visible only in relation to a Now, to my Now; his 'absolute being' only in relation to my present being; his 'pure being' only in relation to the least pure being of all.[35]

Was Mendelssohn wrong then to translate the Name as 'the Eternal'? In the end Rosenzweig's best instincts allow him to be generous. The translator in him disapproves, but the religious writer concedes that such notions as 'being,' 'he-who–is' and 'the Eternal' are 'connected with the name, and latent in it, as philosophical consequences'.[36]

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34 My preference would be for the name to remain in Hebrew, or in transliterations such as *YHWH*. The New Jerusalem Bible uses 'Yahweh'; most other major English translations use LORD.

35 Rosenzweig and Bubner, 'A Letter to Martin Goldner', 191.

36 In the end his objections are those of a translator. He is as opposed to rendering the Name as 'he-who-is-present' as he is to translating it as 'the Lord' or 'the Eternal'. All of these reduce the Name to '*only* meaning' and lose the vocative sense. The Name should never seem just a noun. Rosenzweig and Buber, 'A Letter to Martin Goldner', 191.

Naming and Invocation

Pseudo-Dionysius begins his *Mystical Theology* with prayer. In direct allusion to Moses' ascent of Sinai, he prays that we will be led

> up beyond unknowing and light,
> up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture
> where the mysteries of God's word
> lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
> in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.[37]

This is the kind of abstracting and allegorising that Jewish readers can find so annoying in Christian writings. What then are Christians to do with their inheritance of readings of the Exodus texts, readings dear to the mystical tradition? Certainly, Christians should take care not to interpret the disclosure at the burning bush as just a lesson in metaphysics. We must take to heart the Jewish insistence on the specificity of this particular moment in Israel's history. But, following Rosenzweig, we can say that the 'I *will* be there' who speaks to Moses is at the same time 'the ever-being, the absolute, the eternal'. In the hands of great theologians like Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine or Dionysius this 'ever-being' and eternal God of hidden silence is also *and always* the God of intimate presence, too.

Perhaps the most powerful and certainly the most effective of the western expositions of the divine perfections, or we might better say divine names, is to be found in Augustine's *Confessions*. Here God's omniscience and

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[37] 'Celestial Hierarchy', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Lubheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 134–91 at 135.

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omnipresence, his unity and impassibility need scarcely be discussed, and indeed are not discussed in philosophical terms, for Augustine's text simply displays them. Augustine's God is 'omnipresent' because God is, simply, always present to Augustine – and was so even when Augustine was not aware of the fact. How do we know God is always there for Augustine? Because Augustine talks to his God, in any place, at any time – 'this, O Lord, you knew'. Augustine displays the presence of his God by his literary and doxological practice, retaining the vocative. He is calling upon his God and calls his God by many names. There is no time at which God is not, no place in which God is not, no secret centre to the soul where God is not. The God of these perfections is not remote but near, very near.

Who then are you, my God? What, I ask, but God who is Lord? For 'who is the Lord but the Lord', or 'who is God but our God?' (Ps 17:32). Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old … you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety … You recover what you find, yet have never lost.[38]

One could of course suggest that Augustine simply *has not noticed* that he is mixing the language of philosophy (omnipotence, immutability) with the language of Psalms and Gospels. It is much more credible, however, to see him being deliberately provocative, rubbing our noses in

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[38] Augustine, *Confessions*, 4–5.

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the point he wants to make – he can only mix these words willy-nilly and without embarrassment because all are terms of God's intimacy with us.

The recognition that 'the One Who Is' or 'I AM' precisely **is** 'God with us' is the recognition Augustine makes when he moves from the schools of the Platonists to full Christian commitment. With the acceptance of the claim of the Jews that God has acted in their history, and of the even more startling Christian claim that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, living a human life and dying a human death, Augustine comes to the recognition that history – lives as lived and deaths as died – far from being a distraction from things eternal is the only place where we can meet and know the God who is eternal, loving Lord.

When adumbrating these divine perfections, Augustine is not just speaking 'about' God but speaking to God. He is praying. The genre of the text performs the intimacy of his address. Augustine has begun *the* Confessions by invoking his God in prayer. Throughout the work Augustine will name God in hundreds of different ways, all scriptural, and in doing so he is participating in an already long-established practice which will endure for many centuries in theological reflection, worship and devotion. He is both naming and 'calling upon' God, as does Pseudo-Dionysius in beginning his 'Mystical Theology'.

The primary mode then for naming God is the vocative – calling, invoking, beseeching, praising. In earlier theological writings, ascriptions such as 'eternal', 'immortal' and 'all-knowing' stood not as lonely philosophical eminences but had their place amongst a host of divine names which were indeed discussed philosophically

but also invoked in prayer and praise.[39] They were, in short, attached to *practices* of naming, and these practices were in turn embedded in sustained meditation over many generations on the biblical texts and what it might be to name 'the Holy One of Israel'.

Naming and Calling Upon in Prayer

We are brought back to the words with which this chapter began, words of prayer with which Augustine opens his *Confessions*. It has often been remarked that Augustine begins this book with an epistemological quandary – how can he search for God if he does not yet know who or what it is he is searching for?[40] Yet Augustine has a prior question in his very first sentence – how, he wonders, can he praise God? 'How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord?' How can he praise God if he does not know how to call upon him? Here the former professor of rhetoric agonises over how he *can speak at all* about the God who is beyond all naming. This is not just an epistemological and metaphysical question, it is a spiritual and a doxological one. For to name God is to risk making God into an object or an idol, and this is as true of the most seemingly non-idolatrous names that may be used for God, such as eternal, immutable and omniscient, as it is of the more obviously metaphorical names like king, shield and fortress.[41]

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[39] Augustine uses the verb *invocare*, 'to invoke', six times in a few short sentences in *Confessions* Book I, i(1).

[40] See, for example, Denys Turner's discussion in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[41] Gordon Kaufman's 'God', or rather the one he credits to classical Christianity, would be just such a philosophical idol.

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Augustine has already anticipated the dangers that Hume and Freud, and since them many theologians, have felt acutely – that our speaking of God may be a false speaking, simply exalted and disguised ways of speaking once more about ourselves. For someone setting out to write a spiritual autobiography this must be an ever-present danger.

He cannot speak if God does not call, and so Augustine begins with invocation. He beseeches his Lord, repeatedly, that he may find words, that God will give him words – 'Speak to me so that I may hear.' 'Allow me to speak.' The answer to his quandary is given in a practice, not a proposition – in the practice of prayer. God cannot be called down by human naming, however philosophically exalted this may be but surely, as Augustine says, 'you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known'. This prayer is itself already a gift.

My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, by the ministry of your preachers. (*Confessions*, Book I, i(1))

What those who diagnose servile terror in the account of Moses at the burning bush fail to notice is that when Moses asks God for a name, he is given one. Augustine's recognition is that we can speak of God only because, as with Moses and Israel, God has first spoken to us.

For 'those who have nothing to say or don't want to know anything', says Jacques Derrida, 'it is always easy to mimic the technique of negative theology'.[42]

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[42] Jacques Derridak 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold G. Coward and Toby A. Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73–142 at 75.

The language of the divine attributes is readily conceived either as painting a picture of a bullying God, or as vacuous. Yet despite its cautions and qualifications, this 'rhetorical of negative determination' is by no means vacuous and not, in the hands of theologians like Augustine or Dionysius, a technique for 'those who have nothing to say'.[43]

The agnostic Derrida proves an unexpected ally in that he does not find theological apophaticism to be trapped in a circle of negation. The reason for this is the place it gives to prayer. Why do the texts of Augustine, or Gertrude of Helfta, or any number of others, begin with invocation? The prayer which precedes these apophatic utterances is, as 'the address to the other', more than a pious preamble. One *must* begin with supplication, for the power of speaking and of speaking well comes from God.[44] Far from condemning the theological enterprise, there is in Derrida's essay the wistful implication that only the language of true theology, language whose destination is assured not by verbal domination but by grace, is truly language at all. To be a theologian, we might say, is always to stand under the primacy of the signified over the signifier (an exact reversal of what Derrida thinks to be the case for language in general) but at the same time to know the signified can only be

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[43] Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', 74.

[44] Derrida quotes Dionysius, 'to That One who is the Cause of all good, to Him who has first given us the gift to speak and then, to speak well' ('How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', 98). Derrida writes, 'This is why apophatic discourse must also open with a prayer that recognizes, assigns, or ensures its destination: the Other as Referent of a *legein* which is none other than its Cause' (98).

named through gift. The problem with which Derrida's reader is left is not one for theological language, but for any speaking or theory of speech which is atheistic. How, on Derrida's account, can anyone speak of God if he cannot first pray?

Above all this is true of course when speaking of God. The naming of God can never be, without risk of idolatry, a matter of simple denomination. Its foundation is gift – the gift of God's self-disclosure in history – and practice, the practice of prayer which is itself a gift. Our faith, Augustine says, is God's gift, through his Son. Augustine's search for self-knowledge and true speaking finds its conclusions not with 'cogito ergo sum' but rather in 'only say the word, Lord, and my soul shall be healed'.[45]

To conclude, instead of seeing a tension between detached philosophical reason on the one hand and scriptural warmth and intimacy on the other, we see bold theological commonality. Jews and Christians in the first centuries of the common era did not haplessly 'borrow' Greek metaphysics but, as we shall see, transformed it.

After Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, we are intellectually conditioned to think of philosophical monotheism as an intellectual notch above story-based, mythic religion. Attending to the textual and interpretative history of the Exodus narrative prompts a more demanding

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[45] Liturgical response. See Matthew 8.8. For the continuing history of divine invocation in the writings of the mystics (or those we now call mystics), see Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, Vol. I: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially Ch. 5.

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thought: from tribal henotheism and fledgling monotheism, Judaism moved to an account of divine transcendence more radical than any on offer in the philosophical monotheisms of Plato or Aristotle. The Bible provides the grounds for saying that God is 'Being Itself' – not a far-away God, but a God who is at the heart of everything and near to everyone. This philosophical transformation was built around the creator God as found in Scripture. This is not the 'god' of the philosophers but a God who is active, loving and free – a God who can call and be called upon and indeed 'be with the people'. To better see what transformation is involved it will be helpful to look back to the time of Christianity's origins and focus not on the Christians but on a Jew who interested himself greatly in naming God, Philo of Alexandria.

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