

Multiple Facets of God: Divine-Human Relations in Exodus 3:1–4:17

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This article explores Exod 3:1–4:17—the theophany and description of Moses’s appointment—employing a synchronic literary approach to reach a theological objective.¹ In this article, I will discuss the content and theological significance of the unit as it appears in its final form. These chapters have been the subject of a number of recent theological studies. The purpose of my study and the methodology it is based upon, however, differ significantly from these studies, thereby justifying a new exploration of these chapters - an exploration which culminates in a different conclusion. I wish to take a closer look at the characterization of God in this unit, to define the multiple divine facets that appear in it, and to discuss the tension between these facets – none of these aspects have been explored in previous studies.² I will do so

¹ See: Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. D.E. Orton (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005), 432: “It is clear again and again that one can talk about God’s relations with Israel and with humanity as a whole even without the characteristic terminology...This shows at the same time that basic theological statements in the Hebrew Bible certainly are not always expresses in specific, firmly fixed linguistic terms.” Similarly, see the approach of Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, OBT 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 7; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *God in Times of Destruction and Exiles: Biblical Theology* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009), 135–44 (Hebrew), concerning the relationship between God’s literary representation and the perceptions He embodies.

² For example: Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus 3: Summon to Holy Transformation,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 155–171; Terence E. Fretheim, “Exodus 3: A Theological Interpretation,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 143–54; Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus: A Holistic Commentary on Exodus 1–11* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013). Gowan’s study reaches the conclusion that this unit presents God as an authoritative deity as well as a loving God. Though he recognizes dual divine facets, he does not clarify how he reaches this conclusion through a clear, textually based argument; nor does he present any other facets of God or discuss the tension between different divine aspects. (See, among others, Gowan, *Theology*,

by employing the literary tools of the school of New Criticism in a close reading of the text.³

By means of three literary phenomena, I will show how various divine aspects are presented in the unit of Exod 3–4:17, and discuss the significance of this multiplicity. These literary phenomena present an ambiguous, multivalent characterization of God within this unit. Based on these findings, I will argue that God is portrayed as multi-faceted and contradictory within the unit, which, accordingly, exhibits a variety of different relationships between God and humanity. These various facets, and the tension between them, together constitute the figure of God that arises from the unit in its entirety.

Rhetoric of Changing

“Rhetoric of Changing” is a term I coined to denote units which contain various, distinct worldviews that are clearly differentiated from each other by textual markers.⁴ In Exod 3:1–4:17 there are units that contain sub-

125–26; Epistle to the Romans 11:22. Compare the division of J. Jeremias, “Theophany in the OT,” *IDBSup*, 896–98). Brueggemann presents various divine aspects of God, such as the authoritative figure, the sensitive God attuned to the people’s plight, the God who allows space for human action, but he does not develop these different aspects, and fails to explore the relationship between them. He also omits several additional aspects of God’s character in this episode (*Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008], 23–41; idem, “The God Who Gives Rest,” in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception and Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 565–50). Greenberg focuses on the dialogic nature of the unit and hence discusses the central place Moses occupies in this scene (Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 76–78). Similarly, Fretheim chooses to explore the mutuality of the relationship between the human and the divine in this chapter, thus overlooking the conflicting portraits of God and the tension between them (Fretheim, “Exodus 3,” 153 n. 4; idem, *Exodus* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991], 52–53).

³ On the implementation of literary scholarship in Exodus see, e.g., Dennis T. Olson, “Literary and Rhetorical Criticism,” in *Methods for Exodus*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 15–18. Also see Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1999), 104–5 (Hebrew), who briefly discusses the tension between growing closer and further, and the tension between the different senses that generate a connection between God and Moses. In this article, I have expanded the polarities that the unit vacillates between, as well as the discussion and analysis of the tension of this polarity and its significance. Compare this to how critical scholarship discusses the differences found in the verses, such as Jaeyoung Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story: A Redactional-Critical Study in Exodus 3–4 and 5–13* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 77–158.

⁴ Scholars who place emphasis on other delineations reach other divisions, for example: Sean E. McEvenue, “The Speaker(s) in Ex 1–15,” in *Biblische Theologie und Gesellschaftlicher Wandel für Norbert Lohfink*, ed. Georg Braulik et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 220–36.

sections that significantly differ from each other in their portrayal of God and His attitude towards a human. Each sub-unit reflects a different divine perception, yet they form a single unit, as I will now demonstrate.

1

The root *רא*, pertaining to sight, appears thirteen times in Exod 3–4:17, and is particularly prevalent in vv. 2–10 of chapter 3.⁵ Its appearance expresses the form of relationship between God and a human. The angel appears to Moses in v. 2: *וַיֵּרָא*, he “appeared.” In response, Moses “looked” at the bush, *וַיִּרְא*. In verse 3, the root *רא* appears twice in Moses’s inner dialogue about the sight standing before him: *אָסַרְהָ נָא וְאִרְאֶה אֶת הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל* - “I must turn aside and *see* this great *sight*.” In response to Moses’ “looking,” God Himself is introduced in verse 4 through the double appearance of the same root: *וַיִּרְא* - “when the Lord *saw* that he had turned aside to *see*.” Only then does God speak to Moses.⁶ The dependent clause, “when the Lord saw,” establishes Moses’ sight as a precondition for God’s revelation.⁷

The repetition of this root in vv. 2–4, which makes it the key word in the unit, characterizes God as a deity who maintains direct contact with humanity and crosses the boundary between the divine and human world.⁸ Their connection is mutual – each “sight” prompts the other one’s “sight” in response. Through this verb root, a human is presented as an initiator, whose actions influence God’s. God takes Moses’s actions into consideration, and reacts accordingly: if Moses had not turned to *see* the bush, God would not have *appeared* to him.

⁵ See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus, A Critical Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 70; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 47.

⁶ The root *סוּר*, *turn aside*, in Moses’s and God’s words functions similarly to *רא* in this respect.

⁷ George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 99–100.

⁸ “Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is the distance between the human addressee and the deity so small” (Frank Polak, “Theophany and Mediator: the Unfolding of a Theme in the Book of Exodus,” in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction, Reception, Interpretation*, ed. Marc Vervenne, BETL 126 [Leuven: Leuven University Press], 118).

Immediately after, v. 6 employs three verb roots related to the root רָאָה, which transforms them into a semantic field from a literary perspective. The roots סָתַר, “concealed,” and נִבִּיט, “looked,” are linked to the semantic field of sight, while the verb יָרָא, feared, has a similar sound to רָאָה: וַיִּסְתֵּר מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה מֹשֶׁה כִּי יָרָא מִהִבֵּיט אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” However, while using the same semantic field, this time these roots illustrate a different relationship than the first. These verbs express *distance* between Moses and God, as a result of God’s declaration in verse 5.⁹ While the root רָאָה in vv. 2–4 expresses a mutual connection between a human and God and the eternal presence of God, verses 5–6 convey how a human and God are inherently distanced.¹⁰ These verses express the perception that seeing God may be harmful to a human.¹¹

The verbal root רָאָה, which serves as a key word in vv. 7–10 as it appears three more times in these verses, again serves to express closeness between a human and God and God’s direct intervention in the human world – similar to vv. 2–4, and in contrast to the impression garnered from vv. 5–6.¹² However, the closeness expressed in vv. 7–10 is not between God and

⁹ In comparison to other instances of shoe-removal, as in Deut 25:9 and Ruth 4:7, Kornfeld suggests that this functions as a symbol of nullifying the ownership of the shoe remover (W. Kornfeld, “qdš- OT use,” *TDOT*, 7:529). On this concept, see Meir Malul, “‘Āqēb “Heel” and ‘Āqab “To Supplant” and the Concept of Succession in the Jacob-Esau Narratives,” *VT* 46 (1996): 194–97. If so, this command emphasizes the authority and distance between God and Moses. Conversely, one suggestion Propp makes is that shoe removal is what one does upon entering someone’s home (Propp, *Exodus*, 200). This would imply that these words show the closeness between God and Moses, as if Moses were a relative or friend entering God’s home. These contradictory readings would present these verses as relevant to the third literary phenomenon I discuss here.

¹⁰ Given their language and content, vv. 5–6 are usually traced to two different sources. Verse 6 is usually ascribed to E, and v. 5 to J; see, e.g., Noth, *Exodus*, 34; Childs, *Exodus*, 52; Propp, *Exodus*, 194. Compare Van Seters, *The Life of Moses*, 36–41, who ascribes both verses to J. And see the suggestion made by Polak, “Theophany,” 120. Despite their differences, which can be traced to broader perceptions, the image of God is presented similarly: God is distant and authoritative, and the disparity between the divine and the human is unbridgeable. For other reasons, Jeon is convinced that verses 5, 6b are from the same hand (*The Call of Moses*, 144–45).

¹¹ For example: Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 45; similarly, Polak, *Biblical Narrative*, 103, who differentiates between the semantic field of perception and the semantic field of becoming closer.

¹² Even if there is only metaphorical descent here (Terence E. Fretheim, “Issues of Agency in Exodus,” in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception and Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B.

Moses, but between God and the nation. God displays awareness not of Moses's state but of the people's state.¹³ Moses is still disconnected from God, avoiding direct contact, which expresses the impossibility of sustaining a direct relationship with Him. This detachment is also reflected on a literary plane; God's reaction to Moses's expression of fear is not mentioned. There is also a fundamental disparity between them, as Moses is unable to comprehend the revelation of the burning bush until God explains it to him, while God is able to look down and perceive Moses' thoughts in verse 4, just as He sees and reacts to Israel's distress in verses 7–9.¹⁴

2

The tension between God's different relationships with humanity can also be demonstrated differently. Verse 5 opens with the word ויאמר, "and he said," which picks up where the dialogue left off in verse 4, creating the impression of a mutual relationship between God and Moses:

4 When the LORD *saw* that he had turned aside to see,
God *called* to him out of the bush,

Dozeman et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 592), it still expresses closeness. On the close relationship between God and human in these verses, see: Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 81; Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 148–49; Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 25–28. See the fundamental debate between José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, trans. John Eagleson (London: SCM Press, 1977), 80–81; and Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*, LHBOTS 428 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 207–8, regarding the figure of God in these verses.

¹³ In this unit one can distinguish the process that marks the progression from the personal to the national: God and Moses's first encounter takes place upon "the mountain of God, Horeb," and the fulfillment of the sign takes place "upon this mountain." The word מקום, "place," in 3:5 describes the place Moses treads as a single individual who encounters God and who then must distance himself. In v. 8 the "place" refers to the ground where God will bring Israel after they will leave Egypt. In 3:1, the wilderness is the place where, as a lone shepherd, Moses tends to the flock, while in 3:18, the wilderness symbolizes the place where all Israel will together worship God upon their exodus from Egypt. What is first a private event that befalls Moses will later befall the entire nation: Moses leaves Egypt for Midian, and the entire people will leave Egypt and come to this place; here, God first reveals Himself to Moses alone, but later, He will appear to the entire nation. This sign is part of a process which marks Moses's transformation from individual to a representative of the nation, and accordingly, God's relationship expands from an exchange with Moses to a connection with the entire nation. See Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), 132–33.

¹⁴ Compare Job 10:4 (Fretheim, *The Suffering God*, 9).

And *said*,¹⁵ “Moses, Moses!”

And he *said*, “Here I am.”

⁵ Then he *said*...

This is also reflected in Moses’s loyal reply to God in v. 4: הֲנִי, “Here I am.”

But the dialogue takes a surprising turn, expressing the exact opposite: in contrast to the closeness implied in v. 4, v. 5 opens with God’s edict to Moses to, “Come no closer!” This conveys the insurmountable gap between them. The sequence of vv. 4–5 generates a sense of paradox that the mutual closeness between Moses and God in vv. 3–4 was calculated to serve as a foil to the distance generated between them in v. 5.

Rhetoric of Turning

The examples brought so far have served to illustrate different, conflicting characterizations that may co-exist within a single unit. Each sub-section presents its own picture, which do not cancel each other out.

I will now discuss a different literary phenomenon, which, following Benjamin Sommer, may be classified as “Rhetoric of Turning.” This means that information provided in a certain verse retroactively changes the interpretation of the preceding verse, so that the meaning of the unit in its entirety differs from the interpretation of individual verses within it.¹⁶

¹⁵ The NRSV omits this “said,” presumably because of the intense Hebrew repetition.

¹⁶ Benjamin Sommer, “Is it Good for the Jews: Ambiguity and the Rhetoric of Turning in Isaiah,” in *Birkat Shalom*, eds. Ch. Cohen et al (Shalom Paul Fs.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:321–45, although Sommer does not draw a distinction between the phenomena as I have. Also see Menachem Perry, “Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meanings,” *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 58–61. Greenstein demonstrates this phenomenon and refers to it as reanalysis. See, e.g., Edward L. Greenstein, “Reanalysis in Biblical and Babylonian Poetry,” in *Birkat Shalom*, 1:499–510. Further references to additional studies in this field can be found in Greenstein, “Reanalysis,” 500, n. 6. Application of this method in biblical narrative can be found in Edward L. Greenstein, “The Firstborn Plague and the Reading Process,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. D. P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 555–68. Greenstein, based on his study of, among others, Iser, also emphasizes the fact that interpretation created from a new perspective of the text cancels out the interpretation generated by reading the text in its previous context: “The acquisition of experience is not a matter of adding on – it is a restructuring of what we already possess” (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* [London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978], 132. I believe that there is importance in distinguishing between the

The overall meaning of the unit in its entirety is what determines the final meaning, but the alternate readings that emerge from different components of the unit contribute to its significance.¹⁷

1

In 4:13 Moses urges God to *שְׁלַח נָא בְיָדְךָ וְתִשְׁלַח*. Moses's Hebrew words are unclear and can be interpreted differently, depending on the context in which the verse is read.¹⁸

A first reading of this verse on its own gives the impression that Moses forgoes his own position, and fully accepts God's authority. Moses is saying, as Durham, for example, translates, "Please send anybody you want to send."¹⁹ This reading presents God as sender and Moses as His obedient, self-effacing messenger. Moses has been chosen as messenger to Egypt, and as God evidently wishes him to go, he will be the one to go. Previous appearances of the root *שלח*, used in conjunction with the word "hand" seem to confirm this meaning.²⁰

However, v. 14 opens with God's anger, so it becomes evident that Moses's words were understood, at least by God, in a different sense – as an expression of defiance, not obedience. The nature of this refusal is clarified over the next few verses: in the continuation of v. 14, God brings the eloquent Aaron into the picture. Based on Moses's previous claims that he cannot become Israel's spokesperson—because he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue"—it seems that Aaron, the perfect man for the job, will be sent to deliver Israel *instead of Moses*—in spite of the solution to the problem offered in vv. 11–12, God's reaction implies that Moses's words in v. 13 can

two readings, which allows both options to be emphasized along with the understanding of their combined meaning.

¹⁷ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 199; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12; Perry, "Dynamics," 355–56.

¹⁸ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 143.

¹⁹ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 47; similarly, see William H. C. Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 1:182.

²⁰ The root *שלח* appears in 3:9, 12, 13, 14, 15, and together with the word "hand" in 3:20, 4:4.

be retroactively understood as a refusal, and a request to send another in his place, in contrast to how the verse is understood on its own.²¹ Changing the messenger's identity characterizes Moses as a person of initiative and influence – had he not opposed, he would have been sent, as God initially intended. This change of plan is conveyed through repetition of the verb roots *רָאָה* and *יָצָא*, “to take out,” in v. 14, which previously served to describe Moses and the people (for example, in vv. 11–17), and now describe how Aaron is being integrated into the original plan.²² On the other hand, this change is implemented with emphasis on divine authority: not only is God angry with Moses, He also presents Himself as one who “knows”: “I *know* that he can speak fluently.”²³ This knowledge expresses control and is parallel to the emphasis on God's control in v. 11: “Who gives speech to mortals? Is it not I, the Lord?”²⁴

Verses 15–16 once again cast God's relationship with Moses in a new light. From these verses, it emerges that Moses and Aaron will work together, and Moses will not be excused from his task, in contrast to what the beginning of v. 14 seems to imply. Aaron is indeed a human of words, but he will not speak alone: Aaron will *join* Moses rather than replace him. As I have mentioned, Aaron's participation was not originally intended, but is rather the direct result of Moses's claims, whether he expressed obedience or defiance in v. 13.²⁵ This change of plan is also evident in the language of the text. In response to Moses's protest that he is not a human of *words*, God replies that, “I will be with your *mouth* and teach you what you are to *speak*” (4:12). When the root *דָּבַר*, “to speak,” appears again in v. 14, it appears in

²¹ For example, in relation to v. 13 alone : Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 61 ; Savran, *Encountering*, 122–23; Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14): God's 'Narrative Identity' among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise,” *Poetics Today* (2010): 336; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 73; and similarly from the translation of Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J.S. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1962), 29. Propp, *Exodus*, 213, grapples with the tension between Moses's statement in v. 13 and God's reaction in v. 14, presenting an alternative solution.

²² On the tension between vv. 11–12 and these verses, see, for example: Childs, *Exodus*, 53.

²³ See other appearances of this root in 3:7 and 3:19.

²⁴ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 142. Compare to Psalm 94:9.

²⁵ See: Fretheim, “Exodus 3,” 147; idem, “Issues of Agency,” 599.

relation to Aaron. The repetition of this root over the next few verses redefines the nature of Moses's mission. Moses and Aaron will work together to convey God's message: "You shall *speak* to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall *speak* for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him" (15–16). God will speak to Moses, Moses will speak to Aaron, and Aaron shall be the one to speak to the people. The same is true of the word "mouth," which, of course, belongs to the semantic field of speech; in verses 11–12 the word "mouth" is used in conjunction with Moses alone, while in verses 15–16, it also refers to Aaron. The verb root יר"י, to instruct or teach, undergoes a similar process: in verse 12, God asserts that He will teach Moses what to say (וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ), while by verse 15, Aaron has become part of the plan, and God will teach them both (וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם). God maintains absolute authority, but now, He exercises this authority over Moses and Aaron together. Moses's plea has moved God to amend His plan.²⁶

Verse 17 restores balance to the picture, reaffirming God's authority over Moses.²⁷ The actual instruction, "Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs," presents God's initiative and authority. In answer to Moses' request in v. 13 that God send someone else in his place, "pray send in whose hand you will send," which incorporates the word "hand" and the root של"ח, "send", twice, God replies: "Take in your *hand* this staff." Rather than *send* someone else, Moses himself is bid to *take* the staff. Moses's hand alone, and no one else's, will take the staff. The fact that their

²⁶ At the end of v. 16, it becomes apparent that Moses will not only accompany Aaron during the mission; God deems that Moses will be "a god" for Aaron. If not taken in a metaphoric sense, then being "a god" to Aaron means that not only does Moses have a significant, influential position in relation to God, as arises from vv. 14–15, but the change their relationship undergoes renders God almost superfluous in this context. For this way of thinking see: Savran, *Encountering*, 123; Noth, *Exodus*, 47.

²⁷ Childs, *Exodus*, 79.

discussion does not continue past v. 17 reinforces the concluding impression of this unit – that God exercises authority over Moses.²⁸

A gradual reading of vv. 13–17 yields a shifting interpretation of God’s plan, as each verse reveals new information about the character of God and His relationship with Moses. The possible readings that emerge from each isolated verse makes an important contribution to the overall picture of the unit, even if they are eventually rejected.²⁹

2

The phenomenon of the Rhetoric of Turning can also be recognized in another passage. In Exod 3:2 an angel of God appears to Moses at the burning bush. In v. 4, which, as mentioned above, is linguistically related to the previous events, God initiates a connection with Moses, and He is the One to appear at the burning bush. From a reading of v. 4, it emerges that the angel who appears to Moses is in fact God Himself, and the connection between God and Moses becomes closer.³⁰ This understanding swiftly passes with the reading of vv. 5–6. These verses preclude the possibility that humans can look upon God; there must be distance between them. The content of these verses reinforce the theory that God’s messenger, rather than God Himself, is

²⁸ Thus, for example: Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 73.

²⁹ The significance of the reading does not change even if we adopt the premise posed by, among others, Noth, *Exodus*, 46–47, and Jeon, *The Call of Moses*, 157, which dictates that vv. 10–17 or 13–17 are an independent unit in the episode. Cf. Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003), 124; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 107–8.

³⁰ Propp, *Exodus*, 198; Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52–53 are convinced that the appearance of the angel reflects a perception that God cannot be seen. For a discussion of how translations throughout history have dealt with the transition from angel to God, see Scott M. Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries*, (Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 48–49. Rofé summarizes three prevalent kinds of explanations found in research touching upon the relationship between God and angels in the Bible, and I will include examples. (1) The angel is the form of God’s revelation (as argued, for example, by Propp, *Exodus*, 198; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 58; Durham, *Exodus*, 31; and cf. Jeon, *The Call of Moses*, 140–41); (2) the angel was added at a later stage of redaction in order to mitigate the notion of God’s revelation (e.g., S. A. Meier, “Angel of YAHWEH,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 59); and (3) this is a stylistic change based in the identity of the messenger and the sender (e.g., Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker [London: Westminster Press, 1967], 2:23–25); Alexander Rofé, *The Belief in Angels in the Bible and in Early Israel* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 16–17, 268–69 [Hebrew].

the one who appears to Moses, as it is not in God's nature to be in direct, unmediated contact with humanity. Yet despite the impression garnered from vv. 5–6, the possibility that arises from v. 4 – that there was close, actual contact between God and Moses – serves as a basis for the description of God's close relationship with Moses and the people over the next verses.

Polysemy

In this context, I use the term “polysemy” to refer to defined textual units which can be understood in two different senses, so that a subsequent reading may yield a different interpretation than the meaning that arises from a first reading.³¹

Unlike the first two phenomena I have mentioned, this time multiple meanings arise from a reading of the same text; multiple facets of God, I will demonstrate, emerge from a repeated reading of the same unit of verses.³² The method of the reading process and comprehension of the unit's meaning differ, as well. These shifting interpretations are based on hints in the text, such as special words that have two different meanings, the unit's structure, and other details, which invite repeated readings, showing that the overall unit, its structure, and even certain details within it, can be interpreted in different ways. These double readings do not depend on the reader's perspective, but are embedded in the text itself.³³

Although this article is concerned with a literary text, its objective is ultimately theological, and therefore the polysemy I will demonstrate will pertain to the question of God's characterization, rather than the chain of events in this episode.

³¹ E.g., Jonathan Grossman, “Ambiguity in the Biblical Narrative and its Contribution to the Literary Formation” (Ph.D. diss., Bar Ilan University, 2006); Sommer, “Is it Good,” 321–22, 324–30, with references. See also: Olson, “Literary and Rhetorical,” 21–22; V. Ramos, “Ambiguity,” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*⁴, 44 .

³² Grossman, *Ambiguity*, 170.

³³ E.g., Grossman, *Ambiguity*, 6; Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan, *The Concept of Ambiguity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 12.

1

I will begin with an example that involves the same verses I discussed previously: as I have shown, 3:2–4 presents a close, mutual relationship between Moses and God through the plot and the formulation of these verses. At the same time, however, these verses also reflect a profound disparity and distance between Moses and God. How is the second relationship expressed? There is a double inconsistency between vv. 2–3: in v. 3 Moses gets closer to the vision before him to explore “why the bush *is not burned up*,” while in v. 2, it explicitly states that Moses sees the bush burning: “the *bush was burning up*, yet it was not consumed.”³⁴ In v. 2 the narrator asserts that an angel of God appears to Moses at the bush, but Moses’s words in v. 3 depicts a different scene: Moses does not identify the angel, only the bush, and he attempts to go near what he refers to as “this great sight.”³⁵ The double disparity between Moses’s knowledge in v. 3, and the narrator’s words in v. 2, reflects, in a literary sense, Moses’s failure to understand what is happening to him. While he does cause an encounter between himself and God, as I demonstrated before, he does not know who he is meeting or how exactly this revelation occurs.³⁶ This inconsistency demonstrates a completely different relationship between God and Moses, emphasizing the distance between them, within the very same verses.

2

In 3:13, it seems that Moses has already consented to take on this mission, but, in an attempt to clarify its feasibility, asks God to reveal His name.

God’s revelation to Moses, based on divine authority, generates anticipation of absolute obedience on Moses’ part; nonetheless, Moses is still given the opportunity to express himself repeatedly. Their ongoing dialogue presents the picture of a close relationship between God and a human,

³⁴ Jeon, *The Call of Moses*, 139.

³⁵ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 126.

³⁶ Savran, *Encountering*, 64; and see the implications of this analysis for the various divine names in these verses in Hamilton, *Exodus*, 48.

wherein the former is attentive to the latter's concerns and questions.³⁷ A more precise picture arises from the language of the unit. God's response in vv. 14–15 incorporates words from Moses's request in v. 13:

A (13) But Moses *said* to God, "If I come to the Israelites

B and say to them, '*The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,*'

C and they ask me, '*What is his name?*' what shall I say to them?"

A (14) God *said* to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

B He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM *has sent me to you.*'" (15) God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, '*The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:*'

C *This is my name* forever, and this my title for all generations.

God's use of Moses's words in His own speech suggests closeness, God's careful attention to Moses, Moses's initiative within their relationship, and the special place God grants him. Moses's words affect God's words and actions, inviting God's response in its particular form. This dynamic is the opposite of the expected attitude of a messenger appointed by divine authority.³⁸

As mentioned, Moses asks God to reveal His name. Knowledge of a name is not mere information; it has an aspect of closeness, and even

³⁷ Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 76, describes God as "anthropotropic, (i.e. turned toward man), as concerned with, accessible to, and considerate of men"; later on, he claims that, "the human partner has a say in shaping the direction and outcome of the events." Similarly, see Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 147; idem, *Exodus*, 52, 68; and compare: Gregory Yuri Glazov, *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 52–53.

³⁸ Cf. Fretheim, "Issues of Agency," 598 n. 30.

control.³⁹ This is an unexpected request within a relationship based on obedience and divine authority, and, should God reply, His answer will have significant implications on the character of their relationship. Not only does God reveal His name in vv. 14–16, His reply reveals information that presumably would not have been exposed were it not for Moses's question, as Fretheim claims.⁴⁰ God's response completely changes the conventional relationship between a human and God, generating closeness and almost suggesting human control over the divine.

As stated, Moses asks God for His name, and God answers. But does revelation of God's name really express Moses's control over God, as I have just suggested? A synchronic reading of the unit presents the knowledge revealed to Moses in an almost ironic light.

The name revealed to Moses in v. 15 is used by the narrator from v. 2, and is not actually used for the first time following Moses's request. This establishes that Moses cannot actually change reality, and cannot control God. What briefly seems to be a reversal in their relationship in fact maintains God's control and authority over humanity.⁴¹ This reading shows that knowing God's name does not lead to any control over God on Moses's part; it only reveals His name and nature.⁴² In fact, the gap created between Moses and the narrator, who knows God's name all along, only serves to emphasize Moses's lack of knowledge. Thus, the revelation of God's name can be read as an exchange that emphasizes the distance between a human and God, rather than their closeness. The repetition of the root שלח, "to send," in vv. 13–15 reinforces this impression.

³⁹ Propp, *Exodus*, 224; Gowan, *Theology*, 78–79. Contrast Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 152. Elsewhere he presents the call in God's name as the basis for human-divine communication (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 65).

⁴⁰ Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 147; idem, *Exodus*, 62. A reading of vv. 13–15 demonstrates the repetition of the formulation in the verses, which generates a sense of divine deliberation regarding the extent of the revelation to the people. See Rendtorff, *Canonical Hebrew Bible*, 40.

⁴¹ For a different synchronic reading of these verses, see Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 151.

⁴² This is the meaning initially asserted by Childs, *Exodus*, 75.

With this in mind, we can return to v. 14, which is part of the unit itself, and see how, when read on its own, it is antithetical to the first interpretation I proposed. While God does respond to Moses, His words are ambiguous, retaining the wide disparity between the human and the divine: “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, *I am* has sent me to you.’”⁴³ Is this God’s name? What is the meaning of a name explained in the form of *idem per idem*? How does this name relate to other instances of the verb אהיה in the unit? The form of the name conceals more than it reveals, retaining the unbridgeable gap between God and a human, with the former clearly retaining the upper hand. The literal form of the name Moses is told emphasizes God’s supremacy over humanity: God can be whatever He wants to be.⁴⁴

If so, then vv. 13–15 reflect closeness and affinity between God and Moses, portraying Moses as a source of authority over God. At the same time, however, they present God as the ultimate authority, as well as the unbridgeable chasm separating Moses, who represents humanity, from God. The very same words, read from different perspectives, reflect completely different relationships between humanity and God, and, through this, present different facets of God Himself. The impression of acknowledgement and response is retained despite the emphasis upon the unbridgeable gap that does not diminish during their encounter.

⁴³ For a reading that this name blurs God’s identity, see, e.g., Gowan, *Theology*, 84–85; Brueggemann, “Exodus 3,” 164; Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 52; Sonnet, “Eheyeh asher ehyeh,” 335ff.; Childs, *Exodus*, 76; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 67–68. This position is opposed by, e.g., Durham, *Exodus*, 38. See also Langston, *Exodus*, 61, and Propp, *Exodus*, 226. A clear summary of various ways of understanding God’s name in this verse can be found in Gowan, *Theology*, 81–83.

⁴⁴ See Sonnet, “Eheyeh asher ehyeh,” 336; Gowan, *Theology*, 84. Durham, *Exodus*, 33–39, believes that God’s authority is emphasized through the content of the information given to Moses in v. 14. Those who read God’s name in the sense of “I cause to be what I cause to be” connect this to God’s figure in 4:11, and use this to emphasize God’s authority. Cf. Hamilton, *Exodus*, 66: “For God is an ‘I-will-be-what-I-will-be’ God and an ‘I-will-be-what-I-need-to-be-for-you’ God.”

3

At the beginning of chapter 4, Moses's reaction is directly related – semantically and syntactically – to God's previous words: in 3:18, God promises that "they will *listen to your voice*," whereas Moses voices his concerns that, "suppose they do not believe me or *listen to my voice*?" God tells Moses to "Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, *has appeared to me*'" (3:16), while Moses voices his fears that they will not heed him: "suppose they...say, 'The Lord *did not appear to you*'" (4:1). The senses of sight and hearing employed to express God's connection with humanity and His involvement in the human world continue to accompany the story at this stage as well.⁴⁵

Accordingly, God's answer in the next verses is a direct response to Moses's question: reacting to Moses's concern that "suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you'" (4:1), God's response contains the verb נֶאֱמַנִי, "believe," three times (5,8,9); the verb נִרְאָה, "appear" (5); and the combination of the root שָׁמַע, "listen" and the word "voice" (8,9).

This echoing response paints a mutual relationship between God and Moses. Each side uses the other's words, expressing a sense of putting themselves in the other's place. The significance of God using Moses's words is consistent with the previous instances of this phenomenon in the unit; once again, God is portrayed as attentive to the people's needs; once again Moses is portrayed as influential – had Moses not voiced his concern, God would not have incorporated these signs as part of Moses's mission to Egypt.⁴⁶ Moses's use of God's words in his own speech testifies to his refusal to accept God's authority and his undermining of God's determinations.

More precisely, however, does God's use of Moses's words in His response show His consideration for Moses's situation, as claimed above?

⁴⁵ Cf. Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 146.

⁴⁶ Cf. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 132.

While Moses's words result in the addition of signs, it is ultimately the people's dire situation and the disparity between them and God's original plan that move God to add signs. God's actions are undertaken in order to guarantee the people's salvation, and through these adaptations God is presented as being deeply attuned to the people's situation; the people, and not only Moses, the chosen one, have bearing upon God. God's connection with humanity expands from a relationship with Moses to a relationship with the entire people.

The significance of one of these signs has the power to change the meaning of the entire unit, however, as it serves to testify that God is presented as an authoritative figure who demands absolute obedience from humanity: The *צרת* described in 4:6–8 appears later in the Bible as a punishment for Miriam in Numbers 12; for Gehazi in 2 Kings 5; and for Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26. In each episode, the person is afflicted with *צרת* as a punishment for challenging and disobeying God's authority. The most striking example is that of Gehazi, who is afflicted with *צרת* after he tarnishes Elisha's presentation of God as the healer of Naaman's *צרת*.⁴⁷ It is therefore reasonable to claim that out of all possible signs that could have been used, Moses is temporarily afflicted with *צרת* in order to assert that he must recognize God's authority. The sign in question, which is intended for Moses, emphasizes the obedient attitude Moses is expected to display towards God, which he frequently challenges; there is no accusation of sin or explicit punishment. When Moses repeatedly objects to his mission, not only is he failing to fulfil God's word; he is refusing to recognize God's authority. Moses focuses on his own role instead of recognizing God's authority from

⁴⁷ And see, e.g., Yair Zakovitch, *Every High Official Has a Higher One Set Over Him: A Literary Analysis of 2 Kings 5* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 142–45 (Hebrew), who believes that episodes of *צרת* are an indication of the failure to recognize various kinds of authorities, and Exodus 4 concerns the people's lack of recognition of Moses's authority. See also Judith Z. Abrams, "Mezora(at) Ksheleg: *צרת* Challenges to Authority in the Bible," *JBQ* 21 (1993): 41–45, who believes that *צרת* episodes reflect disbelief in prophetic authority. In this context, the verses of Deut 24:8–9 are interesting; there, *צרת* is not presented as a punishment for challenging authority, but is related to accepting the authority of the Levitical priests. Compare Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 60.

the beginning; this is evident from his frequent use of the first person in his arguments. For example, here, at the beginning of chapter 4, he protests, “But suppose they do not believe *me* or listen to *me*, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to *you*.’” The fact that the sign of צרעת does not appear later on, as the other two signs do, supports the premise that the sign of צרעת plays an interpretative role within the unit.⁴⁸ The sign of צרעת infuses the unit with unique significance, allowing the episode of the signs to be understood in a contrasting light.

This reading illuminates the fact that each and every sign reflects God’s ultimate, unassailable authority. This is so even though the signs ostensibly result from God’s reaction to Moses and the people’s situation, thus pointing to a mutual relationship of divine attentiveness and human influence. The signs are a triple display of natural paradoxes, transforming an inanimate staff into a living snake; a healthy hand into a diseased limb and back again; and water, the symbol of life, into blood, a symbol of death. The extreme nature of each transformation will convey to the people that Moses’s display exhibits powers that transcend human capabilities, and that God has indeed revealed Himself to him.⁴⁹ Moreover, the signs testify to God’s power to transform reality – hinting to His ability to transform a mass of slaves to a free nation.⁵⁰ The signs themselves represent God’s authority over the world, on scales both cosmic and human. God responds to Moses and the people’s needs through a display of His ultimate authority; one divine aspect is manifest through another.

Putting It All Together

An analysis of representative examples from Exod 3:1 – 4:17 has demonstrated three different literary phenomena: Rhetoric of Changing, Rhetoric of Turning, and Polysemy.

⁴⁸ This premise serves as an alternative explanation for discussion of the text’s historical formation, see, e.g., Dozeman, *Exodus*, 104–6.

⁴⁹ See also Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 59; Durham, *Exodus*, 44.

⁵⁰ Cf. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 105, 140–41.

These literary phenomena allow for the expression of different divine facets that comprise the final picture of the scene.⁵¹ This design of the unit allows for the deconstruction of the multi-dimensional portrait of God into elements that would not necessarily emerge from the final, complete picture alone. The plot is limited by the need to describe events in a certain sequence, which creates a uni-dimensional picture of God and His connection with humanity. Sometimes, even limitations of worldview prevent the final text from expressing various facets of God. The literary phenomena discussed above allow for expression of God's complexity without compromising narrative sequence or explicitly deviating from theological norms. The final picture, which reflects the sequence of plot, is flat. The discernment of literary features exposes the reader to the complexity that comprises the seemingly one-dimensional image. If we were only to witness, for example, Moses appearing in Egypt as God's emissary, which is the result of the whole plot that demonstrates God's absolute authority over Moses's character, we would not know of the influential, initiative place Moses is allowed in his debate with God, which is expressed over the course of the unit.

Through these literary phenomena, God emerges as an Authority who demands obedience—as a God whose initiatives prompt human action. At the same time, however, He is presented as a God who allows the possibility of mutual communication with humanity, to the extent that His words and even actions are influenced by human words and actions. God is characterized as transcendent, distant and unreachable, who prevents human closeness and emphasizes the gap between them.⁵² At the same time, God is presented as a deity deeply involved with humanity, who encourages closeness, starting with Moses and eventually reaching out to the

⁵¹ Gowan, *Theology*, 28, claims that multiplicity of divine facets is the main message of this unit, which is concerned with God's character. Sommer, "Is it Good," 32, assumes that the extent of repetition within the defined unit shows that this repetition is intentional.

⁵² The distant figure of God also arises from 3:1; in order to meet with humanity, a person must be cut off from human society (Savran, *Encountering*, 14–15, 31–48).

entire people. The deity is described as a sensitive God who is attuned to people's emotions and plight; but He is also a deterministic God who acts without consideration of the human situation. Through the variegated presentation of God, the verses describe a bi-directional relationship between a human and God: God initiates and instructs; but also takes cues from a human.

There is a fundamental contradiction among these characterizations; what is reflected in this unit is not merely a variety of different characteristics. An authoritative relationship between humanity and God is based on clear hierarchy and the former's obedience,⁵³ unlike a mutual relationship, where a human's actions and words influence God's own actions and words, sketching an entirely different portrait of God. A relationship between humanity and a God of unwavering opinion is not compatible with one between humanity and a God who is willing to change His plan for various reasons, and verses like Numb 23:19 or 1 Sam 15:29 can testify to the tension between these two portraits. A transcendent God who is clearly removed from the world is not consistent with the concept of a God who is deeply involved with the world, who descends towards it or allows the cry of the people to rise up towards Him, thus breaking the boundaries between the sublime and the human.

These different images of God, and His different relationships with Moses, cannot be the result of different situations, as only one scene is presented in this unit. The very same situation – and sometimes, even the very same words – reveal a multifaceted God who simultaneously conducts different relationships with humanity.

Does the way that these paradoxical facets are presented in the unit testify to the suppression of either of them, or to one facet's eclipsing of the other? The unit opens with the description of a God far-removed from the

⁵³ E.g., Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 75–120, 217–44.

human environment,⁵⁴ who initiates an encounter with Moses and forms a relationship based on human obedience and concludes with a divine command which illuminates His authority. Does this attest that a certain figure of God is presented as the ideal God? It seems that this is not the case.⁵⁵ The flickering images of God reflected through the different levels of the text, as revealed through various literary devices, show that this shifting portrait of God is the picture that emerges from the overall design of the unit. Moreover, one facet of God serves another; for example, when God turns to Moses and takes his concerns into consideration, this testifies to God's awareness and heed of Moses's human needs on one hand, even as this facilitates Moses's execution of the divine mission God intends him to fulfill on the other.⁵⁶ And in turn, the divine mission Moses must embark on is for the sake of the people; its fulfillment will serve as an expression of human obedience to God even as it conveys God's compassion for human plight.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The literary design of the unit creates the impression that the unit contains contradictory divine faces, and in parallel, two systems of communication between God and humanity that apparently contradict each other. The simultaneous expression of these contradictory characteristics is garnered from the multiple interpretations of the text, which is already evident on the level of individual verses.

The different divine facets are not to be dissected and dichotomized. Rather, they constitute the central theological principle of the unit, which dictates that God is authoritative, but this does not preclude a potentially close connection with humanity. God will fulfill His own plans and promises, but at the same time, He is attuned to, and willing to accommodate, human will. God initiates and commands, but also allows human initiative, and grants people a decisive, influential platform of their own.

⁵⁴ See: Savran, *Encountering*, 14–15, 31–48.

⁵⁵ Cf. Savran, *Encountering*, 27 (only in the Hebrew edition); Childs, *Exodus*, 73

⁵⁶ See Fretheim, "Exodus 3," 146.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, 149.

Together with its depiction of various divine facets, this unit describes a process that sees Moses's transformation from a private individual to the people's representative. Similarly, the definition of God's relationship with "humanity" expands from an exchange with Moses to the entire nation. As part of this process, the plan of Israel's salvation progresses from an abstract idea to a detailed, practical plan of action (3:7–10, 16–22). The process that unfolds over the course of the unit, which is reflected, for one, through repeated expressions and verbs (such as *שמ"ע*, *יד"ע*, *רא"י*) clarifies that not only Moses is able to influence God's plan, but the people themselves have bearing on divine decisions. This process demonstrates one side of God's relationship with humanity, and comprises one aspect of God's characterization in this unit.

On the level of plot, God's characterization in this unit is addressed to Moses. Here Moses encounters God for the first time and is exposed to His multiple, conflicting, harmonizing facets. Moses realizes that despite God's authority, he has his own place. He understands that he has the power to modify divine will and be an initiating, active figure, though his influence is limited, and cannot counter God's authority (see, for example, Exod 8:8–9, 24–27; 9:33). In a wider sense, the story of the burning bush is placed before the Exodus from Egypt, so the introduction of God's character is intended as His first point of contact with the nation. God will deliver the Israelites from Egypt, and act as their patron from here on in. While some biblical theologians, such as Brueggemann, hold that the fundamental, default definition of the biblical figure of God is conflicting and multifaceted, this does not hold true. Different facets of God are manifest in different biblical scenes, and other places reflect tensions between different divine aspects that cannot be reconciled. Here, however, God is characterized as a complex, composite, multi-faceted figure, and different, conflicting divine aspects come into play. This integration is unique, if not exclusively so.