Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*

Jeffrey D. Oldham

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In a recent Sunday school class for adults at San Jose Wesley United Methodist Church, we explored the meanings of the various names for God found in Exodus 3. The Book of Exodus describes how God cared for the Hebrews by leading them out of oppression in Egypt and giving them a new relationship to God — through the Law.

Exodus 3.14 is the thesis statement for Exodus, but the impact of the verse is frequently lost when reading in English rather than in the more ambiguous and meaningful Hebrew. At the beginning of Exodus 3, God appears to Moses in the burning bush (3.2). Moses questions which god he is, that is, "'What is your name?'" (3.13). God replies with a profound reply, defining himself:

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh

No humans know the exact meaning of this name — much less how to translate it into English or Japanese or any other language. We do know that the Hebrew word "Ehyeh" has an imperfective aspect meaning it has not yet been completed, it might already be completed, or might be completed in the future. Thus, even when frequently translated as "I am who I am," there is a sense that God acts, not just that God is. It can also be translated as "I was who I was" and "I will be who I will be", emphasizing the past or the future.

The two different instances of "Ehyeh" need not has the same tense: "I am who I was" and "I will be who I was" both connote God as unchanging. "I am who I will be" indicates God is defined by how he continues to act in this world.

The slightly more liberal translation "I will be what tomorrow demands" returns us to the theme of Exodus. Despite four hundred thirty years of captivity in Egypt, God has not forgotten the Hebrew people nor has he stopped acting in the world. Not only will he continue to act in the world, he will ensure all the needs of the Hebrew people will be satisfied.

Thus, whenever I see the LORD's name in the Bible or its shortened form "I am", I remember that not only has God declared he still acts in the world but he ensures he will satisfy all our needs.