

# I Am He

John's literary artistry was not limited to the prologue of his Gospel, nor was it confined to the direct assertion of the deity of Christ through calling Him "God" (1:1; 20:28). He found subtle ways of teaching this truth as well. One method that John presented, that the other Gospel writers did not use, is found in Jesus' use of the phrase *I am*.

Look at these passages from the gospel of John:

"Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58).

"From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*" (John 13:19).

They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am *He*." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. So when He said to them, "I am *He*," they drew back and fell to the ground. (John 18:5-6)

In each of these verses a particular Greek phrase appears: ἐγὼ εἰμί (*ego eimi*). The *New American Standard Bible* renders this Greek phrase as "I am *He*." The fact that the word "He" is italicized is very important, for this means the word itself is not found in the Greek<sup>1</sup> and is being supplied by the translators in an effort to smooth out an awkward English phrase. John makes sure, through the use of context, that we do not miss the point he is making by recording these words of Jesus. One might wonder, "Why don't the other gospel writers pick up on this?" Mark does record an example of the phrase (Mark 14:62), but he does not emphasize it the way John does. There might well be a simple answer to the question. When Mark wrote his gospel, it was not his purpose to emphasize the same truths about Christ's nature as John would decades later. It seems quite probable that John, with more time to reflect upon the events of the Lord's ministry, found in these words an insight that later events and developments in the church proved useful and necessary.

The first question that we have to tackle is straightforward: how do you translate the phrase properly? This is not a controversy in most of the instances above. The vast majority of scholarly translations render it the same way: "I am *He*," with the "He" in italics. But when we come to the clearest and most obvious of the passages, John 8:58, a few translations give a different rendering, emphasizing the idea that Jesus is merely claiming *preexistence*. How then should the phrase be translated at John 8:58? Once we consider this, we need to establish some Old Testament background, and *then* we can take all the appearances of the phrase in John as a group and determine what John is communicating to us.

## HOW SHOULD WE TRANSLATE IT?

There are a very small number of translations that avoid a direct translation of the phrase at John 8:58 (in particular). Moffat renders

it, "I have existed before Abraham was born!" *The Twentieth Century New Testament* has "before Abraham existed I was." The Jehovah's Witnesses' *New World Translation* renders *ego eimi* as "I have been."

Allegedly many of these translations are viewing the phrase as what Dr. A. T. Robertson called a "progressive present."<sup>2</sup> There are many instances in historical narrative or conversation where the Greek will use a present tense verb that is best rendered in English by the perfect tense. John 15:27 would be a good example: "because you have been with me from the beginning." The verb is in the present tense, but the context makes it clear that it is in reference to both the past and the present. Robertson notes that this is a common idiom in the New Testament, though he also adds the fact that, in his opinion, John 8:58 is "absolute" and should be rendered as such (which he always does in his works<sup>3</sup>). It should also be noted that it is the deficiency of the English that is to blame for the rendering—to place weight on the meaning of the English perfect tense when rendering the Greek present tense in this way would be in error.<sup>4</sup>

So why should John 8:58 *not* be rendered in this way? Why do so few translations follow this path? Because to translate it that way is to miss the entire context and content of what is being said! The vast majority of translators see, as do many commentators, that there is a clear differentiation being made here between the derivative existence of Abraham and the eternal existence of the Lord Christ. Many scholars rightly point out the same contrasting of verbs as seen in the prologue of John<sup>5</sup> as well as the same kind of differentiation found in the Septuagint Greek rendering of Psalm 90:2. They also recognize that the response of the Jews would be rather strong if this was simply a claim of preexistence. The oft-repeated charge of blasphemy as found in John makes this clear. Rather, the usage of a term used of God himself (as will be shown later) would be sufficient to bring the response of verse 59, where the Jews pick up stones so as to kill Him.

The phrase was so understood by the early church as well. Irenaeus showed familiarity with it as "I am,"<sup>6</sup> as did Origen<sup>7</sup> and Novatian.<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom wrote, "As the Father used this expression, 'I Am,' so also doth Christ; for it signifieth continuous Being, irrespective of time. On

which account the expression seemed to them to be blasphemous.”<sup>9</sup> The context of this passage is far too strong to allow this to be rendered as a simple historical narrative, resulting in the conversion of the present indicative into a perfect tense.<sup>10</sup>

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF EGO EIMI

It happens all the time: we are in a hurry to make a point, so we jump from one point to another quickly, skipping a few necessary points in between. There’s always that one person in the bunch who stops you and makes you go back and trace your argument, step by step, rather than allowing you to condense things a bit and make better speed.

When dealing with theological issues, we often condense things and make connections that, in reality, take a little more proof than we have offered. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the connection that is alleged to exist between Jesus’ words in John 8:58 and the words of Yahweh in Exodus 3:14, “I am that I am.” You will find references to Exodus 3:14 in most commentaries on John 8:58, yet those who deny the deity of Christ cry “foul!” and argue that such an immediate connection can’t be made. The strongest argument they can present is that the *ego eimi* portion of Exodus 3:14 isn’t really the assertion of divinity: the *ho ohn* portion is (*ho ohn* being translated as “the Being” or “the One Existing”).

As far as the argument goes, this is true. However, the claim that Jesus’ words in John 8:58 (and the other passages) should be connected to Exodus 3:14 does not exist in a vacuum. There is a line of argumentation, a very solid one, that leads us from John 8 back through Isaiah to Exodus 3. We need to trace that path before we can make the statement that Jesus is, in fact, using a name of deity of himself in John’s gospel.

The closest and most logical connection between John’s usage of *ego eimi* and the Old Testament is to be found in the Septuagint rendering of a particular Hebrew phrase, *ani hu*, in the writings (primarily) of Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> The Septuagint translates the Hebrew phrase *ani hu* as *ego eimi* in Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; and 46:4. In each of these instances the

phrase *ani hu* appears at the end of the clause, and is so rendered (or punctuated) in the LXX (just as in these seven examples in John). The phrase *ego eimi* appears as the translation of a few other phrases in Isaiah as well that are significant to this discussion. It translates the Hebrew *anoki anoki hu* as *ego eimi* in 43:25 and 51:12. Once (52:6) *ani hu* is translated as *ego eimi autos* (basically an even more emphasized form). And once (45:18) we find *ego eimi kurios* for *ani Yahweh!* This last passage is provocative in that it is in the context of creation, an act ascribed to Jesus by John (John 1:3) and other New Testament writers (Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:2–3).

The use of *ani hu* by Isaiah is a euphemism for the very name of God himself. Some see a connection between *ani hu* and Yahweh as both referring to being.<sup>12</sup> That it carried great weight with the Jews is seen in 8:59 and their reaction to the Lord's usage of the phrase. If one wishes to say that Jesus was not speaking Greek, but Aramaic, the difficulty is not removed, for the identification would have been just that much clearer!

There seems to be a direct connection between the *Septuagint* and Jesus' usage of *ego eimi*. In Isaiah 43:10 we read, "In order that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He."<sup>13</sup> In John 13:19, Jesus says to the disciples, "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He."<sup>14</sup> When one removes the extraneous words (such as the phrase that connects the last clause to the first) and compares these two passages, this is the result:

Isaiah 43:10: *hina pisteusete . . . hoti ego eimi*

John 13:19: *hina pisteusete . . . hoti ego eimi*

Even if one were to theorize that Jesus himself did not attempt to make such an obvious connection between himself and Yahweh (which would be difficult enough to do!), one must answer the question of why John, being obviously familiar with the LXX, would so intentionally insert this kind of parallelism.

Another parallel between the usage of *ego eimi* in John 13:19 and its usage in Isaiah has to do with the fact that in 13:19 Jesus is telling

them the future—one of the very challenges to the false gods thrown down by Yahweh in the passages from Isaiah under consideration (the so-called “trial of the false gods.”) This connection is direct in Isaiah 41:4, “Who has performed and accomplished *it*, calling forth the generations from the beginning? ‘I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last. I am He.’” Here the “calling forth” of the generations—time itself—is part of the usage of *ani hu*. The same is true in John 13:19. In the same chapter of the book of Isaiah referenced above, in verse 22 we read, “Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former *events*, declare what they *were*, that we may consider them and know their outcome. Or announce to us what is coming.” That this reference to knowledge of the future would appear in the same section that uses *ani hu* as the name for God, and that this would be introduced by the Lord himself in the same context in John 13:19 is significant indeed.

Hence, though some would easily dismiss the *ani hu/ego eimi* connection,<sup>15</sup> or ignore it altogether,<sup>16</sup> the evidence is overwhelming that this connection is intended by John himself.

## UNDERSTANDING JOHN'S MESSAGE

It is not hard to understand why there have been many who have not wished to make the connection that John makes between Jesus and Yahweh. One cannot make this identification outside of a Trinitarian understanding of the Gospel itself, as one can certainly not identify Jesus as the Father in John's Gospel. If Jesus is identified as *ego eimi* in the sense of the Old Testament *ani hu*, then one is left with two persons sharing the one nature that is God, and this, when it encounters John's discussion of the Holy Spirit, becomes the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity!<sup>17</sup> An interpreter who is unwilling to dismiss the words of Scripture as simply “tradition” (and hence nonauthoritative) or to interpret Scripture in contradiction with itself (as in a violation of strict monotheism in the positing of a being who is quasi-god, mighty, but not “almighty”) will be hard-pressed to avoid the obvious conclusions of John's presentation. Lest one should find it hard to believe that John would identify the carpenter from Galilee as Yahweh himself, it might

be pointed out that he did just that in John 12:39–41 by quoting from Isaiah's temple vision of Yahweh in Isaiah 6 and then concluding by saying, "These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory and he spoke about Him." The only "Him" in the context is Jesus; hence, for John, Isaiah, when he saw Yahweh on His throne, was in reality seeing the Lord Jesus. John 1:18 says as much as well.<sup>18</sup>

It is self-evident that such a far-reaching and in reality astounding claim as is made by the Lord Jesus in John 8:24, 58 is hard to accept outside of the highest estimation of His person. Indeed, Augustine wrote,

Weigh the words, and get a knowledge of the mystery. "Before Abraham was made." Understand, that "was made" refers to human formation; but "am" to the Divine essence. "He was made," because Abraham was a creature. He did not say, Before Abraham was, I was; but, "Before Abraham was made," who was not made save by me, "I am." Nor did He say this, Before Abraham was made I was made; for "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth;" and "in the beginning was the Word." "Before Abraham was made, I am." Recognize the Creator—distinguish the creature. He who spake was made the seed of Abraham; and that Abraham might be made, He Himself was before Abraham.<sup>19</sup>

But can the usage of *ego eimi* withstand that much weight? A large number of believing Christian scholars certainly think so. Leon Morris has written,

"I am" must have the fullest significance it can bear. It is, as we have already had occasion to notice . . . in the style of deity.<sup>20</sup>

B. B. Warfield has written concerning this,

. . . and again, as the most impressive language possible, He declares. . . : "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am," where He claims for Himself the timeless present of eternity as His mode of existence.<sup>21</sup>

The great expositor J. C. Ryle noted,

Let us carefully note what a strong proof we have here of the pre-existence and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. He applies to Himself the very name by which God made Himself known when He undertook to redeem Israel. It was "I AM" who brought them out of the land of Egypt. It was "I AM" who died for us upon the cross. The amazing strength of the foundation of a sinner's hope appears here. Believing on Jesus we rest on divinity, on One who is God as well as man. There is a difference in the Greek verbs here employed which we should carefully notice. The Greek for "was" is quite different from the Greek for "am." It is as if our Lord said, "Before Abraham was born, I have an existence individual and eternal."<sup>22</sup>

Luther, like Augustine before him, wrote in no uncertain terms,

The Lord Christ is angry below the surface and says: "Do you want to know who I am? I am God, and that in the fullest sense. Do as you please. If you do not believe that I am He, then you are nothing, and you must die in your sin." No prophet, apostle, or evangelist may proclaim and say: "Believe in God, and also believe that I am God; otherwise you are damned."<sup>23</sup>

A. T. Robertson certainly did not see any linguistic problems here:

I am (*ego eimi*). Undoubtedly here Jesus claims eternal existence with the absolute phrase used of God. The contrast between *genesthai* (entrance into existence of Abraham) and *eimi* (timeless being) is complete. See the same contrast between *en* in 1:1 and *egeneto* in 1:14. See the contrast also in Psa. 90:2 between God (*ei, art*) and the mountains (*genethenai*).<sup>24</sup>

And finally, William Hendrickson put it rather bluntly:

The "I am" here (8:58) reminds one of the "I am" in 8:24. Basically, the same thought is expressed in both passages; namely, that Jesus is God!<sup>25</sup>



There simply is no way that John could have been any more obvious in his intention to invest in *ego eimi* a significance far beyond the simple function of identification that it can, and does at times, perform. In 8:58 the Jews pick up stones to stone Jesus. The other two times this occurs are right on the heels of claims to deity as well—first in John 5 where Jesus has just claimed equality with the Father both by calling God His own Father in very special terms as well as claiming the same right to work on the Sabbath as the Jews understood to be God's in upholding the universe; secondly in John 10 after Jesus claims that He and the Father are one in their role of bringing salvation to God's elect—His "sheep." In both instances John spells it out clearly that these claims were understood to be claims to equality with God—can 8:58 then be different?

In John 13:19, the introduction of the phrase in the context of the revelation of future events, just as is found in Isaiah, even to the point of nearly *quoting* the LXX rendering, is far too specific to be overlooked. And in 18:5–6, John even *repeats himself* just to make sure no one can possibly miss the reason why the soldier fell back upon the ground:

They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am *He*." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. So when He said to them, "I am *He*," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Twice John repeats the phrase *ego eimi*, emphasizing that it is the uttering of these words that causes the soldiers to draw back and fall down. Some have tried to say that the soldiers were simply amazed that Jesus would so boldly identify himself and that they stumbled in the darkness.<sup>26</sup> But such is far beyond the realm of meaningful interpretation, for it not only reads a good bit *out of* the immediate text, but it also isolates this passage from the rest of John's gospel. When 8:24, 8:58, and 13:19 are allowed to speak their peace, as well, the reason for the soldiers' discomfort and humiliation is all too obvious. John's meaning cannot be mistaken.

If each of these instances were examined solely in a vacuum, sep-

arated from the others, without any thought of the entire book of John, one might see how their collective significance could be missed. But this is not the way of scholarly interpretation. These statements are not made in a vacuum—they are placed in a book that is rich with meaning and purpose. We have asserted that John intends the entire Gospel to be read through the “interpretive window” of the prologue of 1:1–18. Given the teachings of that passage, can one seriously doubt the meaning of *ego eimi* in the above examined passages? It would seem not.

We might do well, then, with this understanding in mind, to look at Jesus’ words at John 8:24: “Unless you believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins.” Jesus here gives us the content and object of saving faith—real faith is that which focuses on the real Jesus. A faith that demands a change in *Jesus* before a commitment is made is not real faith at all. The Jews standing around Him during this conversation most assuredly would not have denied that He was a man—but that was not sufficient for faith. Some had only recently proclaimed Him as Messiah—but that was not sufficient for faith. Some might hail Him as a prophet or a miracle worker, blessed by God—but that was not sufficient for faith. Some today say He was a great moral teacher and philosopher—but that is not sufficient for faith. Some call Him “a god” or a great angel—but that is not sufficient for faith. No, Jesus himself laid down the line. Unless one believes Him for who He says He is—the *ego eimi*—one will die in one’s sins. There is no salvation in a false Christ. If we are to be united with Christ to have eternal life, then we must be united with the true Christ, not a false representation. It is out of love that Christ uttered John 8:24. We would do well to heed His words.