

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	58		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE GREAT I AM

We have been examining the seven *I am* sayings found in John's gospel. Erickson points out that: "In addition to these predicative or attributive *I am* sayings, there are passages where John uses the verb *to be* (*eimi*) to express Jesus' absolute existence. While some see allusions to Exodus 3:14 in the various attributive statements we have listed, that is debatable. Where John uses the verb *to be* to express absolute existence, however, we have direct references or parallels to that Old Testament passage. In John 8:24 Jesus calls on his hearers to believe that *I am*, and in verse 28 he predicts that when they have lifted up the Son of man, they will know that *I am*. The most impressive statement, however, is found in 8:58, *Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am*. The Greek here is much stronger than the English translation. What Jesus actually said was, *Before Abraham was born (genesthai) I am (egō eimi)*. Whatever significance we may attach to Jesus' words, it is instructive to observe the reaction of the Jews: *So they took up stones to throw at him* (v. 59), evidently regarding his statement as a blasphemous claim to equality with God or, in other words, a claim to deity. Guthrie says, 'There seems little doubt therefore, that the statement of 8:58 is intended to convey in an extraordinary way such exclusively divine qualities as changelessness and pre-existence. The divine implication of the words would alone account for the extraordinary anger and opposition which the claim immediately aroused.'¹

I. **THE I AM IN JOHN'S GOSPEL.** "Jesus refers to Himself as *I AM* no less than 23 times in the book of John: 4:26; 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5, 6, 8. From 13 of these 23 references seven categories emerge:

1. I AM the Bread of Life (6:35, 41, 48, 51);
2. I AM the Light of the World (8:12);
3. I AM the Door of the Sheep (10:7, 9);
4. I AM the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14);
5. I AM the Resurrection and the Life (11:25);
6. I AM the Way, the Truth, the Life (14:6);
7. I AM the True Vine (15:1, 5).

The above list covers 13 of the 23 verses in the book of John that refer to Jesus as Jehovah, the great *I AM*. The remaining ten verses reveal Jesus as Jehovah when He addresses His listeners:

- When talking to the woman at Jacob's well, Jesus says, *I AM the Messiah* (4:26);
- When the disciples row across the sea of Galilee and a storm begins, Jesus appears walking on the water and says, *I AM, don't be afraid* (6:20 – literal translation from the Greek);
- In His discussion with the Pharisees Jesus says, *I AM and I bear witness of Myself* (8:18 – literal translation from the Greek);

- In another discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus says, *Unless you believe that I AM you shall die in your sins* (8:24, NASB);
- Speaking to the Pharisees about His death and resurrection Jesus says, *When you lift up the Son of Man you will know that I AM* (8:28, NASB);
- Jesus tells the Jews, *Before Abraham was born, I AM* (8:58, NASB);
- Jesus tells the disciples, *Believe that I AM who I say I AM* (13:19, NASB);
- Three times, to identify Himself, Jesus tells the Roman soldiers who He is: *I AM* (18:5, 6, 8).²

II. **THE LARGER CONTEXT.** Ridderbos has helpfully observed, “In the extreme succinctness of the transition we again come to know the character and purpose of the Fourth Gospel. It does not aim to give a complete account of the life of Jesus. As a rule the chronological viewpoint has only marginal significance. The author assumes that the reader has sufficient general knowledge of the tradition as background for understanding the events that he has selected.”³

III. **THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE.** “After a brief stay in Capernaum (John 2:12), Jesus returned to Jerusalem and drove the money changers out of the temple (John 2:13-14), the first of two such *temple cleansings*, the second occurring during the Passion Week. By this *act of zeal* (John 2:19), He provoked opposition from the religious leaders, whose antipathy would follow Him throughout His ministry and at whose instigation He would finally be crucified by the Roman procurator. It is interesting to note that even at this first temple cleansing, at this early stage of His ministry, He refers to God as *My Father* (John 2:16), indicating His awareness of His unique sonship.”⁴

IV. **BEFORE ABRAHAM.** “Jesus gives us His supreme self-disclosure, as He designates Himself by this title, *I am*. It is a title with a sacred history. When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses asked what he should say when he told the people God had sent him and they asked, *What is His name?* In one of the great moments of revelation in the Old Testament, God replies: *I Am who I am* and instructs Moses to tell them that *I AM has sent me to you* (Ex. 3:13-14). It is a title that signifies the eternity of God. The Hebrew word for *I am* is an *imperfect* tense, meaning I was, I am, and I shall always be. It also signifies that God is complete in Himself. He is the source of all being and all other attributes are contained in this title that represents the eternal and mighty nature of God. There is a revealing incident where Jesus met enraged hostility by the Jews. They charged Him as being demon-possessed and in response to Christ’s statement, challenged Him: *Are You greater than our father Abraham? . . . Who do You think You are?* (John 8:53). To these literalists and legalists, Jesus responded: *I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I Am* (8:58). There is here a dramatic contrast between the verbs *was* and *am*. Jesus in effect was saying, *Before Abraham came into history, I have been in eternal existence.*”⁵ Kruse explains that, “In Exodus 3:14 God says to Moses, *I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.* The *I AM WHO I AM* is translated as *egō eimi ho ōn* in the LXX. In Isaiah 43:25; 51:12 *egō eimi* on its own functions as the divine name. Thus when Jesus said to ‘the Jews,’ *before Abraham was born, I am*, he was identifying himself with God. He was not only pronouncing the name of God, which Jews normally did not dare to utter, but, even worse, he was claiming to be God.”⁶ Commenting on the text in Exodus, Robert Alter writes: “*Ehyeh-‘Asher-‘Ehyeh.* God’s response perhaps gives

Moses more than he bargained for – not just an identifying divine name (the implication of offering one such name might be that there are other divinities) but an ontological divine mystery of the most daunting character. Rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection on and philological analysis of this name. The following brief remarks will be confined to the latter consideration, which in any case must provide the grounding for the former. *I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be* is the most plausible construction of the Hebrew, though the middle word, *‘asher*, could easily mean *what* rather than *who*, and the common rendering of *I-Am-That-I-Am* cannot be excluded. (*Will* is used here rather than *shall* because the Hebrew sounds like an affirmation with emphasis, not just a declaration.) Since the tense system of biblical Hebrew by no means corresponds to that of modern English, it is also perfectly possible to construe this as *I Am He Who Endures*.⁷ A comparison of the use of the phrase, *I am*, with self-revelation of Jehovah in the Old Testament shows that much the same terminology was employed. God, in commissioning Moses (Ex. 3:14), said: *Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you*. When the Jews heard Jesus say, *Before Abraham was born, I am*, they took the statement to mean not priority to Abraham, but an assertion of deity. To them it was blasphemy, and they picked up stones to cast at Him (59).⁸

CONCLUSION: The response from the people was to try and stone Jesus. James Boice said: “The strange thing about this is its folly. For Jesus Christ cannot be so easily gotten rid of. If he is God, he is eternal. He is the Ancient of Days. How can one eliminate the Ancient of Days from one’s days? He is the Lord of life. How can one exclude the Lord of life from one’s life? Imagine trying to dislodge the Rock of Ages with a handful of stones! The Lord Jesus Christ is the Rock of Ages yet, and you will not get rid of him by throwing things at him. He is inescapable. He is planted in life. Thus, you must either come to terms with him now, or you must do so on the day of judgment. You have one of two choices. You may destroy yourself by pounding yourself against him, just as you can destroy a piece of wood by pounding it upon an anvil. Or you may build upon him. Why not build upon him? The Rock of Ages makes a great foundation. Jesus said that the one who builds upon him will be like a house founded upon a rock upon which the rains descended and the floods came but which fell not. Why not try him? Why not put him to the test?”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Baker, 1991), p. 28.

² This section is taken from Robert Spearman, *The God-Man: A guide to understanding the Godhead, A look at the two natures of Jesus the Christ, Exploring His absolute deity and His absolute humanity, God and Man working together to save mankind* (P and P, 2006), p. 117. He goes on to point out that, “Paul, an Old Testament Jew, knew God by His Old Testament name, Jehovah. When he was stricken on the road to Damascus by a blinding light he didn’t know what happened. When he realized he had been hit by a divine visitation he asked, ‘Who are you, LORD?’ As a devout Jew Paul knew it was God. In other words Paul asked, ‘Who are you, Jehovah?’ The LORD answered and said, ‘I AM Jesus’ (Acts 9:5),” p. 115.

³ H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 114.

⁴ R. L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (P&R, 1990), p. 94.

⁵ Henry Garipey, *100 Portraits of Christ* (Victor Books, 1987), p. 45.

⁶ C. G. Kruse, *John: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 1997), p. 138.

⁷ R. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses* (Norton, 2019), p. 222.

⁸ M. C. Tenny, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Eerdmans, 1948), p. 150.

⁹ J. M. Boice, *The Gospel of John II* (Baker, 1999), p. 677.