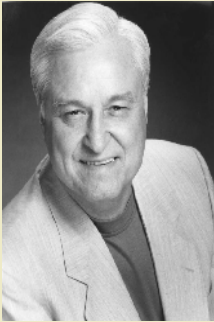


Jesus as the “I Am.”

by Maurice Barnett

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John’s writing of the life of Christ is unique and distinctive. He approaches his subject from a different perspective than that of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Taking all four writers together, we have as complete a picture as God wants us to have. John focuses on the nature of Jesus as God come in the flesh, 20:30-31. John leaves out large sections of Jesus’ activities that are negligible to this purpose. In one section, an entire year of Jesus’ work is passed over. John begins by discussing Jesus’ true nature as Deity and His purpose in coming in the flesh. After introductory remarks to establish His Deity, John immediately goes to John the Baptist and the beginning of the work of Jesus, skipping over the first thirty years of His life. But, from beginning to end, emphasis is on His Deity while he exists in a human body.



One of the statements made in John is regarding the Lord’s being “I Am,” John 8:24, 26 and 8:58. But, what does that mean? In the first two passages, translators have added the pronoun *he* in an attempt to “complete” what they consider to be the intended thought. But, is that justified?

“I am” is translated from *ego eimi*. *Ego* is a *pronoun* that stands for the one speaking. *Eimi* is a present, active, indicative verb that means “I am.” Thus, it is *ego* (I), *eimi*, (I am) and so is literally “I, I am.” Just the verb *eimi* alone can be used to express “I am” and is so found in numerous passages. *Ego eimi* as a double nominative places extra emphasis for some purpose on the person speaking.

Any form of the verb *to be*, as is *eimi*, is a *linking verb*. It does not take a direct object but rather an adjective or predicate nominative that links some idea or characteristic with the subject. Where the context shows it to be appropriate to complete the thought, “I am *he*” is an acceptable translation and is so found in several places. For instance, in John 18:5-8, Jesus says *ego eimi* and it is translated as “I am *he*” three times and that is the correct understanding *in that context*. But, *ego eimi* is a subject and a verb so it *can* stand alone as a complete sentence. *It is not required for I am to be linked to any other term in order to express a complete thought*. Translators have used their own opinion in providing a predicate nominative when it does not necessarily belong. So, let’s investigate this. John 8:58-59—

“Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was born, I am. They took up stones therefore to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.”

The phrase, “*Before Abraham was born*,” is an accurate translation. “Before” is from *prin*, a temporal conjunction. It is *temporal* in that there is a time element involved; something occurs in time before something else happens. “Was born” is from *genesthai*, an *aorist infinitive*. For other uses of *prin* with the aorist infinitive, see Matthew 1:18, 26:34, John 4:49. The construction refers to action that occurs *after* the action of the main verb which, in John 8:58, is *eimi*, I am. So,

"Before Abraham was born, I am." Or, to arrange the sentence in a way that describes the actual temporal order, "I am, before Abraham was born." It isn't "I am the Messiah, before Abraham was born," as some oneness writers insist that "I am he" means. He wasn't the Messiah until He came into the world. The phrase does sound strange because we would think it should be "I was before Abraham was born." But, that does not express the truth of the statement. *Eimi* is present, active, indicative. It refers to continued action at whatever point in time it might be. He was I Am before Abraham, I Am after Abraham and I Am in the first century and is to this day, I Am. At whatever time in history one wants to point to, He is still *I am*, eternal existence, yet, more than that. This preexistence is well said in Philippians 2:5-8—

"Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; 8 and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross."

This portrays Jesus as He was before coming into the world in the flesh as Jesus. It is well said in Colossians 1:16-17—

"...for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; 17 and he is before all things, and in him all things consist."

Both "existing" and "being" in Philippians 2:5 are present active participles and show that it was His constant characteristic to be equal in form with God. He emptied Himself only of the *form* of God when He took the *form* of a servant, when He came with a human body, John 1:14. He retained his eternal nature and changed only His form so that He was still I AM even when He came in the form of Jesus. His nature did not change when He changed from the form of God to the form of man. Oneness writers attack John 8:58 in three ways.

First, by pointing out that *ego eimi* is used 48 times in the New Testament, even by others than Jesus, which is true. They say that this means the phrase could not refer to a claim for Deity or else the Apostle Peter was as much Deity as was Jesus. But, need I point out that both words and phrases can have different meanings in different contexts? The word "church" comes from *ekklesia* but the same Greek word is also used in the New Testament for gatherings of unbelievers. Was the unruly mob of Ephesians, or the city council of Ephesus, Acts 19:32, 39, 41, actually local churches that belonged to Christ just because *ekklesia* is used? Of course not.

Most of the places *ego eimi* is found have a predicate nominative as a modifier. But, when *ego eimi* stands alone as a sentence, as in the passages we are viewing at the moment, we must take note of its meaning in that context. Something special is being said.

Second, oneness people insist that the phrase means that the man Jesus only existed in God's mind and plans before Abraham. Graeser, Lynn and Schoenheit in *One God & One Lord*, page 481, say —

"There is no question that Jesus figuratively 'existed' in Abraham's time. However, he did not actually physically exist as a person; rather he 'existed' in the mind of God as God's plan for the redemption of man. A careful reading of the context of the verse shows that Jesus was

speaking of 'existing' in God's foreknowledge."

That's a clever attempt at misdirection. No one has argued nor even believed that the physical Jesus of Nazareth existed before Abraham. The physical Jesus who "dwelt among us" did not appear until born of Mary. It is clear from the text of John 8:58 that Jesus is claiming to have existed before Abraham. Seeing that He could not possibly have been claiming preexistence for His physical body, He must have been referring to His existence as a personal spirit being who answered to I Am. He is revealing His real nature as Deity.

Another statement of this is John 1:1, which says, "*In the beginning was the Word.*" The *imperfect, active verb, een*, a durative imperfect, denotes continued existence from past time *before creation*. That was quite a long time before Abraham. The same verb, *een*, in the same form is also in the following sentence, "*and the Word was with God.*" I John 1:2 also has the same form of the verb and teaches the same thing. That verse refers to the Word as the Word of life, "*the eternal life which was with the Father and manifest unto us.*" The verb implies eternal existence. Jesus is identified by the title, Word, a spirit being who became flesh and dwelt in the world as Jesus, John 1:14. He came down out of heaven and went back to heaven. John 3:13 says—

"And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, *even* the Son of man, who is in heaven."

In John 3:31-32, John the Baptist tells us that Jesus came from above—

"He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh: he that cometh from heaven is above all. 32 What he hath seen and heard, of that he beareth witness; and no man receiveth his witness."

The spirit that inhabited the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth had existed before His birth by Mary. He was thus able to speak of things He knew of in heaven from personal experience whereas John had to rely on being informed of heavenly things by the Holy Spirit. Further, Jesus says in John 17:5—

"And now, Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was."

Jesus had not existed in the *physical body* of Jesus of Nazareth before the world was created. It is thus obvious that the one who was in the beginning with God is the preexistent person known as *the Word*. It should also be obvious that there are two distinct persons spoken of in this passage. Was God a deceiver, attempting to leave the impression with the disciples, and us, that there was just one person that was both Jesus of Nazareth and God, Himself? To use such deceit amounts to a lie and that makes God a liar and consequently not worthy to be trusted on anything.

But, let's see how *I Am* connects with the related statement in Exodus 3:14 –

"And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."

Jehovah's Witnesses, as do others who deny the Deity of Jesus, insist that the phrase here, "I am that I am" (*heyeh asher heyeh*), should be understood as, "I shall become what I shall become" or "I shall prove to be what I shall prove to be." Others are even further off base. That's playing loose with word usage to prop up a doctrinal

theory. God is eternal and does not change. Malachi 3:6 says, "*For I, Jehovah, change not.*" Of Jesus it is said, Hebrews 13:8, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day, yea and for ever.*" He isn't talking about the human form of Jesus but rather the spirit person who inhabited that body. The statement of yesterday, to-day and forever simply declares what "I Am" says elsewhere. "I shall become what I shall become" is directly contrary to that.

In Exodus 3:14, the Hebrew verb of *being* shows action. The fact that it is *imperfect* shows action from past time that continues. "That," (*asher*), can be translated as *that* or *who*. So, the phrase, "I am that I am," or even "I am who I am," wrapping up past, present and future in one present tense statement, *I am that I am*. It does not matter about the point of time in eternity. At whatever time it may be, He is. It is not "I was," nor "I will be," nor "I shall become" but *I AM*.

To add to the facts of the case, note in the same verse that God says that Moses is to tell Israel "I AM (*heyeh*) hast sent me unto you." Remember now, *heyeh* is on both ends of the sentence I AM that I AM. He did not say that Moses was to tell Israel that "I AM that I AM has sent you" nor "I shall become has sent you" nor "I was" nor any other like combination. It is just "I AM," *heyeh*—past, present and future wrapped up in one declaration. Seeing that this statement is made by Jehovah God about Himself, why would any believer in God want to explain away the force of this declaration of His eternal existence? Well, they do that because they recognize the association of the language with Jesus in John 8:24, 58 and they don't want to accept that Jesus is Deity!

In Exodus 3:6, in the same context as verse 14, God told Moses, "*I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*" "I am" in this passage is from another Hebrew word, *anokiy*, a first person, personal pronoun. This statement from Exodus is quoted by Jesus to the Sadducees in Matthew 22:32. The three patriarchs mentioned were already dead when God said that to Moses at the burning bush. It is not, "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Jesus used our familiar phrase, *ego eimi*, in Matthew 22:32 to express it. It is an inspired translation of Exodus 3:6 by the Lord, Himself. It is used by Jesus to educate the Sadducees about the nature of spirits that continue to exist after death. Just so, John 8:58 declares that *I Am* referred to Jesus, not just before the death of Abraham, but *before the birth* of Abraham. So, we must understand the continuous, present tense nature of the phrases in Exodus 3:6, 14, a declaration of Jehovah's eternal being and consequently, Jesus' as well.

Oneness advocates then shift the argument to the *Septuagint*, a translation from Hebrew to Greek before the first century. The *Septuagint* translates the phrase in Exodus 3:6 as *ego eimi* and in verse 14, first, as *ego eimi ho on*, I am the one who is, or I am the being one and then as just *ho on*, the being. No one knows why they did this. They first translated *heyeh* as *I am* and in the same sentence translated the *same term as the being one*. Though there is no grammatical *necessity* for doing it that way, *it still presents God as the eternal one*. Oneness advocates do not have a case here.

Let's switch now to the other end of the Bible, Revelation 22:13 and then verse 16—

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

"I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright, the morning star."

Jesus identifies Himself as the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. In Revelation 20:11-15, John saw a great white throne and one who sat on it judging all mankind and having control over death and Hades committing the ungodly to the lake of fire, the second death. The identity of the one on the throne is clear from the fact that Matthew 25:31ff, Acts 17:30-31, and other passages, show that it is Jesus who will be that judge. Then, Revelation 21:3 says that John heard a great voice out of the throne before mentioned. In verse 6, the voice says, **"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."** Now slip back first to Revelation 1:17-18 and then to 2:8—

"And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, 18 and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived *again*."

It is the resurrected and glorified Jesus. He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Yet, this is the same claim made for Lord God, the Almighty, chapter 1, verse 8! In these passages where it is said **"I am..."**, the phrase is *ego eimi*. Predicate nominatives are supplied in the text but do not detract from the present tense of *ego eimi*. It is a claim for Deity in both the Old and New Testaments, for God in the Old and Jesus in the New. Keep that in mind as we continue the investigation. First, Isaiah 44:6 and then 48:12-13—

"Thus saith Jehovah, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts: I am the first, and I am the last; and besides me there is no God."

"Hearken unto me, O Jacob, and Israel my called: I am he; I am the first, I also am the last. 13 Yea, my hand hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spread out the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together."

Here is Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, who is the first and the last. Take note also that His hand laid the foundation of the earth and spread out the heavens. It is the one who became Jesus who was the agent for the Godhead in creation, John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:13-18, Hebrews 1:6-13.

The Jews understood what Jesus was claiming in John 8:58 because they took up stones to kill Him. Why did they do that? They did it for the same reason as in chapter 5:17-18 when He called God His own father, making Himself equal with God and in 10:30-33 when He said **"the Father and I are one."** The Jews saw only a human standing before them and did not understand His true nature. Jesus asked them why they wanted to stone Him. They answered, **"...for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God."** That is exactly what the Jews thought in John 8 when He said that before Abraham was born, I am, and took up stones to throw at Him. They understood it to be a claim that He was Deity, and **they were correct in that conclusion.**

Jesus said it in John 8:24, **"Except ye believe that I am, ye shall die**

in your sins." In verse 28, this declaration of identity is made again. If some insist on adding someone's opinion of a predicate nominative to that sentence, instead of being ambiguous about it with supplying just the pronoun, "he," let's use the predicate nominatives *the Bible uses*. ***"Except ye believe that I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the creator of all things, the eternal one, Jehovah of hosts, equal with God, you will die in your sins."*** Now, that clearly states the truth and is what we are to believe about Jesus. Jesus was not the Father but He was as much God as the Father.