

“Before Abraham was, I AM”

Introducing the “I AM” sayings of Christ: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

The “I AM” Sayings

This article is intended (God willing) as an introduction to the seven “I am” sayings of Christ as found in John’s Gospel, which I hope to cover in the next seven articles: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35); “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12); “I am the door” (John 10:7); “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11); “I am the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25) “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6); and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1).

In these “I am” sayings Jesus gives us some vital truths concerning Himself; and because knowing the truth about Jesus Christ is so vitally important, we need to listen to what He has to say. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the eternal well-being of each one of us is dependent upon our knowledge of Him. Knowing **about** Jesus Christ isn’t enough: plenty of people know **about** Him without it making the slightest difference to their lives; we need to **know** Him experientially and personally, because knowing Jesus Christ is the essence of eternal life: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3); indeed, John tells us, at the end of chapter twenty, that the reason he wrote his Gospel was, “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ; and that believing ye might have **life through his name**” (John 20:31).

In order to fully understand the meaning of these “I am” sayings, we need to understand the significance to the Jews of those two words – “I am”; and for this, we need to go back to the book of Exodus.

“I AM THAT I AM”

At the end of Exodus chapter 2 we read of the sighing of the children of Israel in Egypt because of the terrible bondage they were suffering at the hands of the Egyptians: “and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them (literally, “God knew”)” (Exodus 2:23-25). Here we see God’s concern for His covenant people, the Jews. He speaks, in human terms, of “remembering” His covenant with them: God, of course, never forgets, but He uses human language to describe His determination to now do something in accordance with His promise to the fathers and act towards them in love (to “know” in scripture often refers to an affectionate attitude of loving concern). In Exodus chapter 3, the angel of Jehovah appears to Moses “in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (verse 2). This angel of Jehovah (the word translated “angel” means “messenger” or “sent one”) is then identified (verse 4) as being none other than God Himself, Jehovah. Jehovah commissions Moses to be the leader of the Israelites and to be their mediator in dealing with Pharaoh with a view to letting the people of Israel, God’s covenant people, go out of Egypt (verse 10). In response to the onerous task that Moses has

been given, “Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM (or, “I AM WHO I AM”): and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:13-14). “I AM THAT I AM” translates the Hebrew “ehyeh asher ehyeh”; the word “ehyeh” (I AM) is from the Hebrew word for “to be”, “hayah”, and it is from this word “hayah” that we get the most frequently used name for God in the Old Testament – “Yahweh”, or, as we tend to anglicise it, “Jehovah” (the KJV, and most other versions, substitutes the word “LORD”, in capital letters, for the name “Yahweh”, or “Jehovah”). The Jews treated this name with such superstitious respect that they would not even pronounce it. This name speaks of God as, among other things, the self-existent, eternal, unchangeable, faithful, covenant-keeping God, who has life and being in and of Himself – the very source of all life.

This name for God, “Yahweh”, or “Jehovah”, is important when we come to the New Testament and Jesus’ use of the words “I am”.

Jesus is “I AM”

In John’s Gospel chapter 8, from verse 2, we have another occasion where the Jews continue to dispute with Jesus, in the temple at Jerusalem, as to exactly who He is, or who He is claiming to be: “Then said they (the Jews) unto him, Who art thou?” (verse 25). This is the great question which we all must face: “ ‘What think ye of Christ?’ is the test to try both your state and your scheme; you cannot be right in the rest, unless you think rightly of Him” (John Newton, hymn no. 608 in Christian Worship).

Jesus answers the Jews’ question, in verses 26-29, by speaking, as He has done previously, of His unique relationship with the Father: He is sent by the Father (verse 26), He speaks the words He has heard from the Father (verse 26), He does nothing of Himself but as taught by the Father (verse 28), the Father is always with Him (verse 29), and He always does what pleases the Father (verse 29). Jesus goes on to explain that the words which He speaks are the truth, and those who abide in His word are His true disciples: “As he spake these words, many believed on him. Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (verses 30-32). To know the truth is to accept the truth as to who Jesus is and the truth concerning the mission which He was sent into the world, by the Father, to accomplish by being “lifted up” upon the cross (verse 28), and there paying the penalty for the sins of His people in order that they might have eternal life through faith in Him. Those who “know the truth” will enjoy true freedom (verse 32), a freedom even greater than that experienced by the Israelites under Moses when they escaped from Egyptian bondage, because this freedom is of a spiritual nature, with life-changing, eternal consequences: freedom from the bondage of sin (verse 34), freedom from the dominion of their spiritual father, the devil, the father of lies, whose lusts they by nature perform (verse 44), and freedom even from the power of death (verse 51). The Jews respond with a reference to their father Abraham, whose children they claimed to be: “Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself?” (verse 53). Jesus replies: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad (cf. Genesis 17:7; Galatians 3:16; Hebrews 11:13 – Jesus is the “seed” of

Abraham, which Abraham and the other prophets saw “afar off”). Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, **I AM**” (verses 56-58: capital letters added). Note: Jesus doesn’t say, “Before Abraham was, I **was**”; Jesus is here claiming much more than mere pre-existence to Abraham: “the thought here conveyed is not only that the second Person [of the Godhead] always existed (existed from eternity),... but also, and very definitely, that his existence *transcends time*” (William Hendriksen: Commentary on the Gospel of John). Jesus is saying, in effect, “**I am Jehovah!**” (cf. John 1:1).

Jehovah Jesus

These two words, “I am”, are “egō eimi” in the Greek; and these two Greek words were used by “The Seventy”, when they translated the Hebrew Old Testament scriptures into Greek (known as “The Septuagint”), to translate the Hebrew word “ehyeh”, “I AM”, in Exodus 3:14. With these words, therefore, Jesus makes it absolutely clear to the Jews just who He is: the one whom they knew from the Old Testament scriptures as “I AM”, Yahweh, Jehovah, “the everlasting God” (Genesis 21:33). And that is just how the Jews interpreted Jesus’ words, as the next verse shows: “Then took they up stones to cast at him” (verse 59). By speaking these words, “I am”, the Jews understood exactly who Jesus was claiming to be: and they considered it blasphemy. A similar thing happened on a later occasion: Jesus said to the Jews, “I and my Father are one. Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him (just as they did in John 8:59). Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father (which prove the truth of my claims); for which of those works do ye stone me? The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God” (John 10:30-33; cf. John 5:18)). The Jews got it spot on; they were **absolutely right**: Jesus was, indeed, claiming to be God; the Jews were also **absolutely wrong**: Jesus’ claim was not blasphemy but was perfectly true: He is, indeed, God.

Apart from the seven “I am” sayings, John 8:58 is **not** the only other occasion on which Jesus referred to Himself as “I am” in John’s Gospel, although this is probably the clearest reference. If we bear in mind that words which are in italics in the King James Version are not part of the original Greek (or Hebrew) text, but have been added by the translators to help clarify the meaning (sometimes unnecessarily), then we have the following scriptures (capital letters added): “I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that **I AM**, ye shall die in your sins” (John 8:24); “Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that **I AM**” (John 8:28); “Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that **I AM**” (John 13:19). A remarkable further occasion is when the officers from the chief priests and Pharisees came to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: “Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth, and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, **I AM**. And Judas also, which betrayed him, stood with them. As soon then as he had said unto them, **I AM**, they went backward, and fell to the ground” (John 18:4-6). This is an amazing demonstration of Jesus’ power; Jesus spoke the words “I AM” to the crowd which had come to arrest Him, and they “**went backward, and fell to the ground**”. Here we catch a brief glimpse (as in the transfiguration) of the divine power and glory of the Son of God, who will one day come again “in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30), and will, with

a word, “smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4).

Yet another “I am” statement of Jesus in the writings of John, is found in the book of Revelation: “And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. **I AM** Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (Revelation 22:12-13; see also 1:8, 11; 21:6; cf. Revelation 1:17; 2:8). “Alpha and Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and, together with the expressions “the beginning and the end” and “the first and the last”, refer to Jesus as the everlasting one, without beginning and without end: “And he (Jesus) is before all things” (Colossians 1:17); “I (Jesus) am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:18). These expressions point back to verses in the Old Testament such as Isaiah 44:6: “Thus saith the LORD (Jehovah) the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD (Jehovah) of hosts; **I am** the first, and **I am** the last; and beside me there is no God” (see also Isaiah 41:4; 48:12). In other words: **Jesus is “I AM THAT I AM”, Jehovah, “I AM”**.

Conclusion

Jesus is I AM, the first and the last, Jehovah, without beginning and without end, the eternal, self-existent God, the one who has life and being in and of Himself, the source and creator of all life; and, as such, He is supremely qualified to be, to those who believe in Him: “the bread of life”, “the light of the world”, “the door”, “the good shepherd”, “the resurrection, and the life”, “the way, the truth, and the life”, and “the true vine”.

As we look in future articles, God willing, at these wonderful “I am” sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ, may those of us who believe in Him as our “all in all” come to know and love Him in a deeper way than we have done hitherto; and may those who are as yet strangers to these things be brought to know for themselves the abundant life which He purchased for, and gives to, all who will come in faith to Him, whom to know is life eternal.

Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM”. Amen.