

THE "I AM" STATEMENTS OF JESUS

A Paper

Presented to



Grace Research Room

by
Richard Keller
October, 2019

The “I am” statements of Jesus

The purpose of this paper is to briefly show the significance of the “I AM” statements Jesus makes in the book of John. The beginning will focus on the background of the phrase “I AM” in its origination and significance in the Old Testament, and how the Israelites view the nature of the statement. This will be followed by a special emphasis in both content and purpose of the seven “I am” statements and conclude with the significance of some unique “I am” phrases.

The significance of the “I Am” statements made by Jesus cannot be understated, and they are unique in the Gospel of John. Some phrases clearly identify Christ with God, while others, like the seven “I am” statements, are used in conjunction with a metaphor. When Jesus uses the phrase “I am” in this sense, He is not just equating Himself with God, but equating Himself with the attributes of God such as sustainer, redeemer, protector, and guide. “In most instances, Jesus is presented as ‘exegeting’ his own significance in light of Old Testament images.”¹ It will be helpful then to understand the significance of the phrase “I AM” in the Old Testament and then take a look at each of the statements in the New Testament.

I AM - יהוה

In Exodus 3 God gave Himself the title “I AM” (*hayah*); a phrase which literally “means the eternally self-existent being.”² God uses the title several more times in Deut. 32:39, Isaiah 41:4, 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4, and 48:12. The name however, is not merely a title; it is a declaration by God of who He is, His divine nature and eternity. Moses was the first recorded individual to encounter the name. In Exodus 3 Moses was on Mount Sinai where God appeared to him in the form of a burning bush. God had requested that Moses should be the one to lead

¹ David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament. Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 424.

² Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on John* (Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2004), 140.

the Israelites out of the land of Egypt and promised that He would be with Moses and His people.

Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.– Exodus 3:10-12

Moses agreed to do as instructed and then questioned God asking, what should I say to the

Israelites as to who sent me?

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you ' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations. – Exodus 3:13-16

Two things stand out; God declared to Moses and the Israelites who He is, as well as what He would do for them. According to most scholars, there is not consensus as to what exactly the meaning of "I AM WHO I AM" is.³ According to Dr. J.H. Hertz, the meaning of the term is not easily put into words because, as he states, "no words can sum up all that He will be to His people, but His everlasting faithfulness and unchanging mercy will more and more manifest themselves in the guidance of Israel."⁴ In short, God's statement assures the Israelites that they will be delivered. As will be seen, Jesus makes a direct correlation between Himself and God the Father both in action, status, and likeness; and between His listeners and God's chosen people.

"I am the bread of life" – John 6:35

This is the first of the seven "I am" statement by Jesus. Jesus was in Galilee and had fed the 5000. Jesus left early the next morning and the crowd that was still gathered searched for

³ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, H-L (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 238.

⁴ Dr. J.H. Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*. 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1976), 215.

Him only to discover that He had crossed over into Capernaum with His disciples. The crowd asked Him how He had gotten to the other side. He stated to them that they had searched for Him only to fulfill their physical needs as He had done the day before. He instructed them to “not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.”⁵

The crowds then asked Jesus what they must do to get this food and He said that they should believe in Him. Ironically, the crowds asked for a sign, the same crowd who had been miraculously fed just the day before. It is at this point that the crowd recalled the feeding of the Israelites with manna. However, they had a different outlook, which was to assume the manna was provided by Moses. Jesus directly rebutted this idea saying “it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.”⁶ Jesus had effectively related the experience of the Israelites in Moses’ time as a symbol of Himself being the source of sustenance, and it is at this point Jesus utters “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”⁷

Just as God provided for the Israelites, Jesus would provide spiritually. The purpose then is to show how to have eternal life, and that we are held secure. Eternal life is in a person, not in an action. “I am the bread of life.” The first of the “I AM” statements then is centered on salvation. The offer is eternal life that comes by faith in Christ.⁸ The second aspect is security; just as God promised Moses He would be with him and sustain him, so to Christ offers life and

⁵ John 6:27.

⁶ John 6:32b-33.

⁷ John 6:35.

⁸ John 6:40.

security of it. “and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.”⁹ Jesus is the “satisfier and sustainer of life.”¹⁰

“I am the light of the world.” – John 8:12

This is the second of the seven “I am” statements. Jesus was speaking in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles¹¹ to a group of Jewish people and religious leaders. Jesus spoke and said “I am the Light of the world, he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”¹² The Jews would have been very familiar with Light being a metaphor for any number of attributes of God; particularly His presence,¹³ righteousness, salvation, and guidance.

His presence is illustrated in Psalm 44:3, His righteousness is expressed in Isaiah 59:9 and His guidance is shown in Exodus 13:21 when the Israelites were led through the desert via a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In addition, God Himself is the source of light; “O LORD my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and majesty, Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak, Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.”¹⁴

The Jews would also be familiar with God as the Shechinah glory that illuminated the tabernacle as seen in Exodus 40:34-35¹⁵. “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”¹⁶ Light plays a significant role during the feast as Dr. Fruchtenbaum notes:

The second key ceremony was the kindling of the lights. There were

⁹ John 6:36.

¹⁰ Dr. Constable, 109.

¹¹ John 7:14.

¹² John 8:12.

¹³ Dr. Constable, 136. See Also Gen. 1:3, 14-19; Ezek. 1:4, 13, 26-28; Hab. 3:3-4.

¹⁴ Psalm 104:2.

¹⁵ Also seen in Exodus 24:15-18, when Moses was given instructions from the Lord on Mount Sinai.

¹⁶ Exodus 40:34-35.

huge, golden lampstands set up in the Temple Compound. Each lampstand had four golden cups, which were lit toward sundown. Because there were so many lamps and the light was so great, the rabbis said that there was not a house in Jerusalem which was not lit by the light coming from those huge lampstands. In Judaism, this was a symbol of the Shechinah Glory light.¹⁷

The significance of Jesus' claim as "the Light" becomes even more significant, as His claim occurs at the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. Thus, the purpose of Jesus' statement is that He is equating Himself as the Light of God who shuns the darkness.¹⁸ However, I believe His statement has further significance in regards to the Feast of Tabernacles, which has a very unique aspect, unlike any other festivals the Jews celebrate. Dr. Fruchtenbaum notes:

All together, a total of seventy bulls are offered during this period. According to Judaism, these seventy bulls represent the seventy Gentile nations of Genesis 10. What is significant about this is that Judaism has connected this feast with the Gentiles, something that is not true with the other festivals.¹⁹

All this adds to the significance of Christ's claim to be the "Light of the *World*" and not just a light unto the Jews. Jesus has come to shed sin's darkness for all those who follow Him.²⁰

"I am the door." – John 10:7, 9 and "I am the good shepherd." – John 10:11, 14

These are the third and fourth of the seven "I am" statements that follow a parable in John 10:1-6 about a shepherd and his sheepfold. The parable Jesus uses illustrates and develops metaphors for His two "I am" statements which are directly related to the lesson.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. "But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. "When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. "A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers. – John 10:1-6

¹⁷ Dr. Fruchtenbaum, *The Feasts of Israel*. (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries), 27.

¹⁸ Note that in the immediate context in John 8, Jesus is dealing with honesty or truthfulness, v. 13.

¹⁹ Dr. Fruchtenbaum, 26.

²⁰ This is clearly a discipleship passage in context, not a salvation passage.

The people present with Jesus do not understand what He means, so He must explain further; “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”²¹ Followed by “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”²²

The first illustration Jesus uses is that He is the door. In other words, anyone who enters through Him will be saved and find satisfaction in Him. This is emphasized a few verses later when He says “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”²³ In verse 8 He contrasted Himself with thieves and robbers, which represented the Jewish leaders of His day. Jesus is the way unto salvation whereas, the Jewish leaders were misguiding the sheep.

Jesus, in saying He is the shepherd, is making an illustration of the way God dealt with the Israelites; how God provided a way unto salvation from Egypt and protected and provided for them. God is a shepherd as well, Isaiah 40:11 says; “Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.”²⁴ These are clear illustrations of Christ as the only way unto salvation, and our security and safety as His sheep.²⁵ It is also a clear parallel between Jesus and God.

This “I am” culminates in verse 28, “and I will give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ... and no one will snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the father are one.”²⁶ Jesus is again claiming to be God in that He is our “entrance into security and fellowship.”²⁷

²¹ John 10:9.

²² John 10:11.

²³ John 8:10b.

²⁴ See also Jeremiah 23:3 and Ezekiel 34:11-16.

²⁵ Note also that we are sheep who rebel, Isaiah 53:6.

²⁶ John 10:28-30.

²⁷ Dr. Constable, 109.

“I am the resurrection and the life.” – John 11:25

This passage is particularly significant because of its setting. Jesus was speaking to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, who was grieving her brother’s death of four days prior. Jesus says to her, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die, Do you believe this?”²⁸ Jesus’ claim then is that He has the power to raise people from the dead, the power of life both physically and spiritually. It is a clear claim of Christ’s power and authority given to Him by God, and shows His purpose here on earth.

This “I am” purpose then, is to convince the reader that Christ is the Messiah, the One who was promised by God since the time of Adam, and to show what one must believe in order to obtain the promise. The key is that life, both physically and spiritually, is in a person, not in a doctrine. The question Jesus posed is confirmation of this fact. Jesus did not ask her to believe in anything other than Himself; not by any act or by any effort of her own, only that her faith was placed in the correct object. Simply put, Jesus asked Martha if she was convinced that He was the Messiah who could give her life. Without placing her faith in the proper object she would never receive eternal life or be raised up in the last day as Jesus promised.

Jesus also affirmed that anyone who believed as Martha did would receive eternal life and never lose it. Dr. Dillow notes: “He says we have eternal life now and as a result (1) we will rise from the dead in resurrection, and (2) we will never die. For Jesus, at least, the gift of eternal life meant far more than sharing the life of God now. It was a virtual guarantee of endless existence with Him. We will never die!”²⁹

²⁸ John 11:25-26.

²⁹ Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of The Servant Kings*. (Haysville, NC: Schoettle Pub. Co.), 2006, 509-510.

This “I AM” by Christ is the highlight of all the “I AM” statements because it summarizes the purpose statement of the gospel of John. “”But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”³⁰

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.” – John 14:6

Contrary to popular belief, there are not many paths to heaven. This “I am” statement by Christ could not make it any more clear.³¹ Jesus did not say that He was “a way” as if there were possible options. His emphasis, as seen previously, was in Himself and that no one other than He could deliver on His promise.

The context of this “I AM” was when Jesus was with His disciples in the upper room before His death. Jesus was comforting them saying “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.”³² Jesus continued and assured them of a place of residence with Him, and told them that they knew the way where He was going. Thomas responded, “we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” Jesus replied, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.”

This “I AM” illustrates the fact that there is only one way unto truth and life, and it is through the person and work of Christ. Dr. Constable summarizes the statement;

Jesus is the way to God because He is the truth from God and the life from God. He is the truth because He embodies God's supreme revelation (1:18; 5:19; 8:29). He is the life because He contains and imparts divine life (1:4; 5:26; 11:25; cf. 1 John 5:20). Jesus was summarizing and connecting many of the revelations about Himself that He had previously given the Eleven.

“I am the true vine.” – John 15:1

This is the last of the seven “I AM” statements recorded in John and occurs in the

³⁰ John 20:31.

³¹ With the exception of Acts 4:12.

³² John 14:1.

same context as the previous “I AM.” Jesus is speaking to His disciples and encouraging them to abide in Him. The word “abide” in this section is used ten times in six verses as a clear indication that Christ is speaking of fellowship with Him, not salvation through Him.³³ Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.”

Jesus now draws a relationship between Himself and God the Father, and sets up a dichotomy between Himself and Israel. The Old Testament spoke often of Israel as the vine; “Israel is a luxuriant vine; He produces fruit for himself. The more his fruit, The more altars he made; The richer his land, The better he made the sacred pillars.”³⁴ In all cases, when the vine is compared to Israel in the Old Testament, it’s useless and bears no fruit. This is why Christ said, “I am the *true* vine.” Christ is the one that will produce fruit because He is being cultivated by His Father in Heaven. This is the thought that Christ carries over to His disciples; that if they remain in fellowship with Him, they will produce fruit just as Christ has done.

“Before Abraham was born, I am.” – John 8:58

There are other uses in the Gospel of John regarding the “I am” statements that are not used with metaphors as used in the seven “I am” statements. Some “I am” statements are more or less affirmations of who He is,³⁵ but some strongly suggest that Jesus is God. In John 8, Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees clearly shows He claims to be God when He says “before Abraham was born, I am.”³⁶ The claim was so clear that the Pharisees attempted to stone Him. In John 8:24 and 28 the phrase “I am He” is used, although this could be a simple affirmation. In light of John 8:58 however, it seems to be more than that. Jesus said, “Therefore I said to you that you

³³ John uses the word “believe” 98 times in the Gospel of John for what one must “do” in order to obtain eternal life. John uses the term “abide” when speaking in regards to fellowship as seen in 1 John.

³⁴ Hosea 10:1-2. See also Ps. 89:9-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 15:1-8; 19:10-14.

³⁵ John 8:22, 14,15, 16, et. al..

³⁶ John 8:58.

will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins....When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.”³⁷ Jesus had just been discussing how He was not of this world and if they did not believe His claims they would perish. Roy Zuck notes that “At stake in this context is the urgent necessity of believing in Jesus for salvation and the need for forgiveness of sins.”³⁸

In 13:19 Jesus uses the phrase “I am He” again. “I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He.”³⁹ In the context, Jesus is with His disciples and refers to his impending death on the cross, so that when His death does occur, they will know for sure that He is the Christ, the son of the Living God.

Conclusion

The “I am” statements made by Jesus overarches the past, present, and the future history of the children of Israel, as well as all believers; and suggests “that what God is in the present, he was in the past, and will be in the future to this people.”⁴⁰ Some phrases clearly identify Christ with God, while others provide insight into who Christ is and what He has done as Son, Savior, and Redeemer, thereby showing us who God is. When Jesus uses the phrase “I am”, He is not just equating Himself with God, but equating Himself with the attributes of God such as sustainer, redeemer, protector, and guide.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. – Titus 3:4-7

³⁷ John 8:24, 28.

³⁸ Roy Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 181.

³⁹ John 13:19.

⁴⁰ *Pictorial Encyclopedia*, H-L, 237.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bock, Darrell L. *Jesus according to Scripture. Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.
- Constable, Dr. Thomas L.. *Notes on John*. Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2004.
<http://www.soniclight.com>.
- DeSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament. Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Dillow, Joseph C. *The Reign of The Servant Kings*. Haysville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Company, 2006.
- Dillow, Joseph C. "Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:585 (January-March 1990): 44-53.
- Fruchtenbaum, Dr. Arnold G. *The Feasts of Israel*. San Antonio: Ariel Ministries.
- Hertz, Dr. J.H. *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*. 2nd ed., London: Soncino Press, 1976.
- Holman Bible Publishers, e d. *Holman Illustrated bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.
- InterVarsity Press, e d. *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982.
- Tenney, Merrill C., ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Vol. 2, *D-G*, by Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977.
- Tenney, Merrill C., ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Vol. 3, *H-L*, by Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977.
- Zuck, Roy B. *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994