



The Reminder

Westside church of Christ
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Understanding the Bible - 16 “I Am” - Part One

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, John 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 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, but not the last, 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,

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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 pre-existence is well said in Philippians 2:5-8—

“Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; 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; 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?

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 before Abraham. The physical Jesus who “dwelt among us” did not appear until born of Mary; that much is true. But, 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 manifested 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. 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. 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.”

--Continued Next Week--

TODAY

PRAYERS

John Wilson
Terry Jackson
Tom Baker

SONG LEADER

Michael Banks

LORD'S TABLE

Wayne Clark
Christian Wilson
Michael Baker
Doug Fenn

SCRIPTURE READING

Matt Allen

SERMON

Maurice Barnett

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tom Baker

WEDNESDAY

PRAYERS

Michael Banks
Jerry Acosta

SONG LEADER

Jim Williams

TEACHER

Skeet Franklin

NEXT WEEK

PRAYERS

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Steve Johnson
Maurice Barnett

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John Wilson

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Brent Haugen
Joe Davis

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