



# Before Abraham was, I am he

Jesus' self-revelation as Yahweh

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### **Executive summary**

In this book we look at the divine self-revelation in Exodus 3:14, and argue that the key phrase *ehyeh asher ehyeh* fundamentally denotes God’s continuous presence with his people (which implies, as a corollary, his transcendence of time). It is argued that the Septuagint (LXX) accurately translates this phrase into Greek as *ego eimi ho on* (“I am he who is”). These claims are confirmed by other self-declarations of God in the Old and New Testaments, mostly in Isaiah and Revelation. After laying some contextual foundations on Exodus, Isaiah and John (especially showing the profound literary relationship between the three), we then embark on an in-depth study of Jesus’ use of the phrase *ego eimi* (‘I Am [He]’) in the Gospels. A compelling case is made that these sayings echo the self-declaration *ego eimi* used by YHWH in the Old Testament (primarily in Isaiah 40-55, and ultimately in Exodus 3:14) to express His exclusive claim to deity. It is suggested more speculatively that the other part of the exposition of the memorial name in Exodus 3:14 LXX – *ho on* – may also be used of Christ in a continuous, timeless sense in the New Testament. It is concluded that the Scriptures unequivocally teach the absolute, intrinsic deity of Christ. The implications for monotheism are briefly discussed.

## 1. Introduction

In his memorable soliloquy contemplating death, William Shakespeare's Hamlet put forth, "To be or not to be, that is the question." French mathematician Rene Descartes famously philosophized, "I think, therefore I am." The notions of existence and non-existence have always fascinated human thinkers, perhaps owing to awareness of our own mortality. Many people, having realized their own transience (perhaps through a near-death experience or the sudden death of someone known to them), are motivated to ask whether there is anything truly permanent and reliable out there. Pop singer Nelly Furtado voiced the lament of many when she sang, "Why must all good things come to an end?"

A cornerstone of Biblical revelation is that there is a good thing – or a good One – that is truly permanent. Even more important than God's permanent existence is the revelation that, rather than existing distantly and aloofly from the world, he has an enduring vested interest in his creation, which he demonstrates by being actively present within it.

Almost any professing Christian would agree that the historical climax of God's self-revelation and presence within his creation occurred in the person of the man Jesus of Nazareth. However, there is widespread disagreement on the question of Jesus' true identity and nature. Most agree that Jesus was and is human, but whether Jesus was and is also divine is hotly debated. Because of the closeness of this issue to the heart of the Christian faith, emotions tend to run high whenever one's understanding of it is challenged. What I am asking of the reader is – as much as lies within you – to lay aside your presuppositions about this subject and allow the evidence to speak for itself from within its proper context.

Given that we live in the age of rationalism, among the *a priori* assumptions I would ask the reader to lay aside are the idea that it is a logical impossibility for a pre-existent divine being to assume human flesh<sup>1</sup>, and that it is a logical impossibility for the Father and the Son to be distinct persons and yet share a common identity.

Logic is an important, God-given, tool for measuring truth. However, we must recognize that our finite, flawed human minds are not always able to grasp divine truths, which are "unsearchable" and "inscrutable" (Rom. 11:36). If we reject any idea that fails to conform to our own concept of what is possible and proper – if we insist that the gospel be 'sensible' and 'logical' – we may join the many Jews and Gentiles who could not accept the "offensive nonsense" of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:23).<sup>2</sup> Instead, reason must submit to revelation at every turn, for the Scriptures are the product of a divine mind. "The foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25), and, "The natural person does not accept the things of the

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<sup>1</sup> Presuppositions in the form of dichotomies (an 'either/or' mentality) are powerful barriers to the acceptance of Bible truth. For instance, many people assume that Jesus Christ may either be man or God; they exclude from the outset the very possibility that he could be both. If you hold such an assumption you may as well stop reading now, for nothing the Bible could say would persuade you that you are wrong. You will simply go to any length of creative and conjectural interpretation to force the Biblical testimony into line with your presuppositions. I can attest to this because I used to do so myself.

<sup>2</sup> This example is relevant to our present topic. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1 of the objections (both Jewish and Greek) to the preaching of a *crucified* Saviour. The 'offensiveness' and 'nonsense' consisted in the notion that one who was so high could be brought so low. The logical objection to the Incarnation is similar: it objects to the notion that a divine being (one so high) could become human and suffer death (be brought so low). In both cases the human interpreter needs to hear the words of Eccl. 5:2 before declaring what is and is not possible for God to do.

Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Jesus himself, within the Gospel of John, contrasted “judging by appearance” with “judging with right judgment” (John 7:24), and “judging after the flesh” with judging truly (John 8:15-16). We ought to apply these principles to our interpretation of the Gospel of John itself (which is the primary purpose of this work).

Secondly, the reader may well bring to the table a long-standing doctrinal paradigm, which makes it necessary to mention the following principle: we must not allow our presuppositions to drive our interpretation of the Scriptures; we must allow the Scriptures to alter our presuppositions. We must not introduce meaning into the Scriptures; we must draw meaning out of the Scriptures.

I would further request that the reader not read the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union into the argument prematurely. These doctrines were only fully formulated centuries after the New Testament was written, after much reflection. In keeping with our ‘revelation before reason’ approach, metaphysics will not be the driving force in our method of interpretation. We are concerned primarily with the Christology of the teachings of Jesus (especially the ‘I am’ sayings in the Gospel of John). Jesus, John, and most of the early Christians were Jews. For Jews, the single most important tool for interpreting theology was their Scriptures. Rabbinic tradition, Greek logic and other factors, while of some significance, were far behind. Thus, in attempting to interpret Jesus’ words through the lenses of a first-century Jew, our first question should not be how they can be reconciled with first-century Greco-Jewish logic (much less 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western logic). Rather, our first question must be, “How would a first-century Jew have understood this saying in light of the Jewish Scriptures?” Only once we have answered that question can we concern ourselves with metaphysics.

## **2. The meaning of the divine Name**

One of God’s greatest self-revelations was given to Moses at the burning bush in Midian. After having been commissioned by God to return to Egypt to lead the children of Israel out of slavery, the following dialogue occurred between Moses and God:

11 “But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” 12 He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” 13 Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people 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 thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exodus 3:11-15 ESV)

From ancient times down to our own, this revelation of the meaning of the divine name has fascinated and perplexed students of the Scriptures. One modern scholar, Stanley J. Grenz,

states, “Despite its theological importance, [Exodus 3:14] is an exegetical conundrum.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to quote another scholar who refers to it as ‘one of the most puzzled over verses in the entire Hebrew Bible.’

### **2.1. The Name in Hebrew: *ehyeh asher ehyeh***

The key declaration in Ex. 3:14b, translated “I AM WHO I AM” above, appears as *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in the extant Hebrew Old Testament, the Masoretic Text (MT). The verb *ehyeh* occurs again in Ex. 3:14c, and most likely forms the linguistic basis for the so-called Tetragrammaton, YHWH (or Yahweh), revealed in v. 15 (translated ‘LORD’). YHWH is thought to be equivalent to the third-person form of the verb *ehyeh*.

It stands to reason that Moses was asking for more than simply a name to report to the Israelites – he was more interested in the character revealed by that name. In ancient Israel, names were used to reveal attributes and identity (see, for instance, Genesis 25:25), serving a function similar to (but more formal than) nicknames in the modern West; whereas given names in the modern West tend to be little more than distinguishing labels.

What Moses received in Exodus 3:14-15 was the divine Name (YHWH) and its significance (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*).<sup>4</sup> Before we can interpret *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, we must translate it. Grenz outlines the main issues involved in this task:

“As the variety of the proposed translations indicates, the Hebrew text [of Exodus 3:14] involves grammatically unresolvable uncertainties. One of these has to do with the intended meaning of the word ‘asher’ that connects the two verbs. This term is a particle of relation with a wide variety of possible meanings, including ‘who/what,’ ‘he who/that which.’ It also can serve as a conjunction, meaning ‘that,’ ‘so that,’ ‘forasmuch as,’ or ‘because.’...More difficult, however, are the questions surrounding the verb ‘ehyeh’...Because ‘ehyeh’ is in the imperfect tense, it refers simply to incomplete action. Hence, it can carry either a present or a future tense.”<sup>5</sup>

McDonough states that the two most likely explanations of the name YHWH are “He is” and “He causes to be.”<sup>6</sup> Gowan differs, however, asking, “Should the verb *ehyeh* be read as present or future tense? (Some even mix them.) The evidence points toward future, although it cannot be conclusive.”<sup>7</sup> It does appear that *ehyeh* here has some future connotation. God uses it in Ex. 3:12 (“*ehyeh* with you, and this shall be the sign for you”) in a way that clearly points forward, and the ‘incompleteness’ of the Hebrew imperfect implies that God’s self-disclosure is a work in progress which will only be consummated in the future. However, in the immediate context God identifies Himself as active in the past (“the God of your fathers” – v. 13, 15, 16) and into the present (“has sent [Moses]...has appeared unto [Moses]” – v. 12-16). For this reason, Grenz argues:

<sup>3</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-ontology*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have interpreted Exodus 6:2-3 to mean that the patriarchs were already familiar with the name YHWH, but not with the character revealed by that name (see Charles Gianotti, *Christ’s Usage of ‘I am’ in Light of the Divine Name*, pp. 11-13). If that is the case then the entire thrust of Moses’ question in Exodus 3:13 was for new insight into the character of God as revealed in the meaning of the name YHWH.

<sup>5</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *YHWH at Patmos*, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Gowan, Donald E. *Theology in Exodus*, p. 83.

“[T]o focus solely on the future sense of the main verb would be to reduce the meaning of the divine self-disclosure that came to Moses. For this reason, we must invoke the interpretation that has predominated throughout the centuries, namely, the understanding that renders *ehyeh* in the present tense.”<sup>8</sup>

By translating *ehyeh* in the present tense, we are not denying its futuristic aspect. Rather, we are acknowledging that God’s existence, and in particular His presence, is continuous and never-ending – past, present and future:

“The continuous present depicted by the verb is one that enfolds past and future into an ongoing present act of be-ing... Moreover, Yahweh’s continuous act of be-ing entails his active presence in the human realm, above all in the history of Israel.”<sup>9</sup>

In his commentary on Exodus, Donald Gowan outlines the five most prevalent interpretations of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* through history:<sup>10</sup>

- (1) ‘Being’ – “I am.” The phrase expresses the philosophical idea of absolute, timeless existence. This view, popular among Jews such as Philo and Maimonides as well as most of the early church fathers, grew out of the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14 in the LXX, which was interpreted in light of Platonic philosophy.
- (2) ‘Active presence’ – “I am with you, now and forever.” This is the view espoused by Grenz above. Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser expresses a similar view: that God “would be dynamically, effectively present when he was needed and when people called on him.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is the most popular view among modern scholars, although it dates back at least as far as the Talmud.
- (3) ‘Causative activity’ – “I cause to be what I cause to be.” This view understands the phrase to express God’s role as Creator and Sovereign of all things. It can be found in the Targumim (ancient Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament).
- (4) ‘Emphasis on certainty or emotional intensity’ expressed by the repetition of the verb *ehyeh*.
- (5) ‘Deferral of a response.’ According to this view, which Gowan prefers, God used this enigmatic language to express His prerogative not to reveal Himself openly until He desired to do so. Thus the phrase should be understood along the lines of “I will be whatever I mean to be.”

In addition to these we note the traditional Christadelphian view, inherited from John Thomas, which is purely futuristic. In *Phanerosis*, Thomas states, “The memorial, in its simplest form, is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, ‘I will be who I will be.’”<sup>12</sup> This is interpreted as expressing God’s intention to ultimately bestow his name and nature upon the saints.

It should be observed that none of the above six interpretations are mutually exclusive. In fact, I do not see why the memorial name could not be understood, whether directly or indirectly, to express all of the above views. Surely most of these ideas can be found

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<sup>8</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gowan, Donald E. *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>11</sup> Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Promise-Plan of God*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, John. *Phanerosis*, p. 65.

elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>13</sup> It is this author's opinion that (2) is the interpretation best supported by the context – God's certain, active presence within creation and specifically with His chosen people – past, present and future. His creatorship, His absolute and timeless existence, and His ultimate purpose follow as corollaries of this main point.

## **2.2. The reliability of the Greek Old Testament (LXX)**

It is necessary to comment on the reliability of the LXX text as a whole, as well as the LXX text of Exodus 3:14 in particular. The LXX is a Greek translation of the Old Testament by Jews in Egypt, dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. It is so named because of the tradition that 70 (LXX in Roman numerals) scribes were appointed for the task of translation.

How credible is the LXX, and the translation of Exodus 3:14 in particular? This is a question that will have important implications for the present study. There are, in fact, a number of reasons for taking the LXX very seriously (including at Exodus 3:14) as an accurate translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

### **2.2.1. Manuscript evidence**

It may be assumed that because the LXX is in a different language than the original Old Testament autographs, it must be less accurate our extant Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts. There is some validity in this assumption, because there is inevitably a loss or change of meaning in the process of translation. However, another important factor in the accuracy of a manuscript is its age. Meaning is also lost or changed over time by errors introduced by repeated copying.

The extant Hebrew Old Testament is known as the Masoretic Text (MT). Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947, the oldest Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. – and this was not even a complete manuscript! The earliest fragments of the Hebrew Old Testament date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. By contrast, the oldest complete LXX (Greek) manuscript of the Old Testament dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and the oldest fragments date to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.

Our copies of the LXX are many centuries older than our copies of the MT. Furthermore, Greek is an easier language to copy than Hebrew – there are fewer letters that look nearly identical. Thus the MT is likely to contain many more copying errors than the LXX. This is a significant factor in the relative accuracy of the LXX compared with the MT.

### **2.2.2. The testimony of the Dead Sea Scrolls**

The Dead Sea Scrolls contained many scrolls of Old Testament books in Hebrew dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. They are thus the oldest extant textual sources for the Old Testament. In many passages where the LXX and MT are at odds, the Dead Sea Scrolls have borne out the LXX reading as being correct (although the MT has been borne out over against the LXX in many other passages).

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, modern scholars' intuition told them that in some cases, the LXX reading was more reliable than the MT. The Dead Sea Scrolls served to vindicate this assumption:

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<sup>13</sup> On the futuristic God-manifestation view of John Thomas, see Appendix 2.

“The Qumran scrolls provided the first massive support for the...reconstructing of details in the [parent text of] the LXX by way of retroversion...After all, before 1947 there was little if any external evidence in support of the assumption that a given deviation from MT in the LXX should be reconstructed into Hebrew rather than explained away as the translator’s exegesis...Unique agreements between the LXX and the [Dead Sea] scrolls...abound in all books of the Bible. The reason that a relatively small amount of such evidence is known is that but a limited number of texts have been preserved in the Judean Desert. These agreements with [Dead Sea] scrolls increase our confidence in the procedure of retroverting [from the LXX].”<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the passage in question (Exodus 3:14), there are at least five instances within the same chapter where the Dead Sea Scrolls have supported the LXX reading over against the MT.<sup>15</sup> Actually, the LXX and MT are not at odds in their rendering of Exodus 3:14, as we shall see; but in any case, the Dead Sea Scrolls lend credence to the LXX text of Exodus 3.

### **2.2.3. Popularity in the 1<sup>st</sup> century among Jews and Christians**

The LXX was *the* version of the Scriptures used by Jewish diaspora, proselytes, and Gentile Christians in the first century. It was also likely *a* version of the Scriptures used by Palestinian Jewry at this time:

“There is now a powerful consensus that at least in Galilee, and perhaps elsewhere in first-century Palestine, the populace was at least bilingual, and in some cases trilingual. Aramaic was used for everyday speech. Hebrew may have been used for some formal and cultic occasions, but how many people could *speak* it is uncertain. And judging by the number of Greek coins and the amount of Greek inscriptional evidence uncovered, Greek was a common enough alternative language that linked Jews not only to the Mediterranean world in general but to the Jewish diaspora and (in Galilee) to the Decapolis in particular.”<sup>16</sup>

The LXX ultimately fell out of favour with the Jews, even as it rose in favour with the Christians:

It is worth noting that from the second century BC through the first century AD, believers felt no compelling need for a better Greek translation. The attempt to replace the time-honored LXX came only after the LXX had become the de facto official translation for Christians. Starting in 126 or 128 AD, the Jews attempted to replace the LXX with Aquila’s Greek translation... It would seem that if talking with authority derived in part from quoting Aramaic or Hebrew sources, the NT

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<sup>14</sup> Tov, Emanuel. *The Greek and Hebrew Bible*, pp. 285-289.

<sup>15</sup> These examples are: (1) in Exodus 3:8, the LXX includes “the Gergesites,” which are omitted in the MT. (2) In Exodus 3:15, the LXX reads “the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac”; the MT omits “and.” (3) In Exodus 3:16, the LXX reads “the elders of the children of Israel”; the MT omits “the children of.” (4) In Exodus 3:16, the LXX reads “and God of Isaac, and God of Jacob”; the MT says “of Isaac, and of Jacob.” (5) In Exodus 3:19, the LXX reads “will not let you go, save with a mighty hand”; the MT reads “will not leave you to go, no, not with a mighty hand.”

<sup>16</sup> Carson, D.A. *The Gospel according to John*, p. 75.

quotations would not follow the LXX. Nevertheless, the majority of Yeshua and the apostles' OT quotations follow the LXX.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, as eminent New Testament scholar Everett Harrison wrote, “[T]he general fact is undisputed, that the large use of the Septuagint in the [New Testament] quotations shows its dominant position in the early church and the high regard in which it was held.”<sup>18</sup>

The New Testament writers quoted from the LXX extensively. The Gospel writers placed quotations from the LXX on the lips of Jesus, who “uttered the words of God” (John 3:34). What should we make of this?

“Christ’s use of the Septuagint in no way indicates that He thought that version to be inspired...The fact of the matter is that verbal inspiration relates only to the original autographs and these were not in existence at the time of Christ and thus whenever He does quote from the Hebrew it is from a copy of the original autograph [and not the original itself].”<sup>19</sup>

While the use of the LXX in the NT does not mean the LXX translation was divinely inspired, it does give the LXX credibility as an accurate translation of the Scriptures – perhaps as much authority as the Hebrew copies of the Scriptures that were extant in the first century.

Furthermore, we can view as authoritative those LXX passages that are quoted in the NT. In this regard it is particularly relevant to our present study that, as recorded in Mark 12:26, Jesus quoted from the LXX translation of Exodus 3:6 and Exodus 3:15 – verses in the immediate context of the divine name in Exodus 3:14.<sup>20</sup> Whether he was quoting the actual words of Jesus or a translation thereof, Mark’s use of the LXX text of Exodus 3 “shows clearly that the author knew certain key portions of the Exodus narrative [in the LXX].”<sup>21</sup>

Given that our study is concerned with the origin of the divine name YHWH, it is also noteworthy that the New Testament followed the LXX practice of translating the Hebrew YHWH with the Greek word *kyrios*, rather than transliterating the name.<sup>22</sup>

#### **2.2.4. The influence of Greek philosophy on the LXX translation**

The LXX translation has been roundly criticized by modern scholars as bearing the marks of Greek philosophical influence. We will look closely at the LXX translation of Exodus 3:14 in the next section, but for now suffice it to say that this criticism of the LXX is largely anachronistic. Certain Jewish scholars (most notably Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of

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<sup>17</sup> Natan, Yoel. *The Jewish Trinity*, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, Everett F. *The Importance of the Septuagint for Biblical Studies*, Part I, p. 353.

<sup>19</sup> Lightner, Robert P. *A Biblical Case for Total Inerrancy: How Jesus Viewed the Old Testament*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> That Jesus quoted from the LXX here is attested by Larry Perkins in *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels: The Gospel of Mark*, p. 102. Mark also has Jesus quoting the LXX of Exodus 20:12 (7:10), 20:12-16 (10:19), 21:17 (7:10) and 23:20 (1:2).

<sup>21</sup> Perkins, Larry. *Kingdom, Messianic Authority and the Re-constituting of God’s People – Tracing the Function of Exodus Material in Mark’s Narrative*. In Hatina, Thomas R. *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels*, Volume I, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> There are a few extant LXX manuscripts which either contain the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew, or transliterate it into Greek as *PIPI*. This led George Howard to conclude that the New Testament also originally contained the Tetragrammaton, but this assertion has not gained acceptance in the scholarly community as no evidence for it has been discovered in New Testament manuscripts.

Jesus) *interpreted* Exodus 3:14 LXX in light of Platonic philosophy, but this does not mean that the translators introduced Platonic ideas into the text.

The insertion of one's own ideology into the process of translation may be termed 'theological exegesis.' Commenting on such a practice among the LXX translators, LXX scholar Emanuel Tov states:

"In point of fact, the presence of theological exegesis in standard renderings is rare. The majority of translation equivalents derive from linguistic identifications of a given Hebrew root or word with a Greek equivalent; as such they are of more importance for our understanding of the linguistic knowledge of the translators than for our understanding of their conceptual world...Most of the renderings reflect linguistic and semantic identifications, which as a rule, did not imply further forms of exegesis, such as theological exegesis. While the choice of these translation equivalents certainly had theological implications for generations of LXX readers, as a rule they did not have such implications for the translators themselves."<sup>23</sup>

McDonough further notes that "that the LXX in general exhibits little or no influence from Greek popular philosophy" and that to understand the translation of Exodus 3:14 as philosophically motivated would be "the exception, not the rule."<sup>24</sup>

### **2.3. The LXX rendering of the Name: *Ego eimi ho on***

Having examined the general reliability of the LXX, we now proceed to examine its translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14. This Hebrew phrase is represented in the Greek LXX as *ego eimi ho on*, while the third *ehyeh* in the verse is translated *ho on*. *Ego eimi* is first person present active indicative of the verb to be – "I am", while *on* is the present active participle of the same verb. Lancelot Brenton's LXX translation of 1851 renders Exodus 3:14 thus:

"And God spoke to Moses, saying, I am THE BEING; and he said, Thus shall ye say to the children of Israel, THE BEING has sent me to you."

The New English Translation of the LXX of 2007 renders it thus:

"And God said to Moyses, 'I am the One Who Is.' And he said, 'Thus shall you say to the sons of Israel, 'The One Who Is has sent me to you.'"

It is easy to see how this phrase was widely interpreted by readers of the LXX to express God's absolute existence, which transcends time and space – particularly by those who were influenced by the Platonic notion of 'being.' We have suggested that absolute presence with mankind is the primary meaning of the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in this verse, but these two interpretations are complementary rather than contradictory.

However, the key question is not whether the Platonic notion of 'being' is a valid interpretation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, but whether *ego eimi ho on* is a valid translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (and whether *ho on* is an accurate translation of *ehyeh* later in the verse).

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<sup>23</sup> Tov, Emanuel. *The Greek and Hebrew Bible*, pp. 261-263.

<sup>24</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *YHWH at Patmos: Rev. 1:4 in its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting*, p. 134. See his footnote for a list of studies which have borne out this point.

The translation certainly has its critics who, as we noted, see it as influenced by Greek philosophy. However, McDonough defends the translation:

“[The LXX translation of Exodus 3:14] has met with much criticism...We will argue here that the LXX gives a plausible reading of a very difficult Hebrew text...The criticisms...may keep us from saying that Ex. 3:14 *must* be translated *ego eimi ho on*. The fact remains that it *could* legitimately be translated in this way.”<sup>25</sup>

McDonough defends the translation *ego eimi ho on* by comparing it to verbal constructions in Leviticus 19:36 and 1 Chronicles 21:17 which required the LXX translators to make similar grammatical adjustments because a literal translation would not have made sense in Greek. On the translation of *ehyeh* with *ho on* in Exodus 3:14c, which has been a particular target of criticism for introducing Greek philosophy into the text, McDonough notes:

“[A] first person subject for *apestalken* [‘has sent’ – 3<sup>rd</sup> person perfect active indicative] would have been a grammatical absurdity, and the translators were therefore driven to a participial form...The translators might well argue that they had preserved the essential sense of the text while making some necessary grammatical adjustments.”<sup>26</sup>

He thus argues that Exodus 3:14 LXX represents a plausible translation of the Hebrew, and that it would be anachronistic to accuse the translators of introducing Platonic philosophical speculation into the text simply because later readers of the text such as Philo and Maimonides (and many early Christian writers) *interpreted* it so. Thus, he concludes that “a controlling Greek influence on the LXX translation [of Exodus 3:14] is...not demonstrable, and it is almost certain that the use of *ho on* for deity was a Jewish innovation.”<sup>27</sup>

The LXX translation is thus at least a plausible rendition of the Hebrew; and, as the LXX translators were much closer to ancient Hebrew in both time and space, this is positive evidence for understanding the Hebrew imperfect verb *ehyeh* as a continuous present tense in Exodus 3:14.

#### **2.4. *Ego eimi* and *ho on* as divine titles in the rest of the LXX**

*Ego eimi* is used of God as a stand-alone phrase expressing His exclusive claim to deity a number of times in the LXX, in Deuteronomy 32:39, Isaiah 41:4, Isaiah 43:10 and Joel 2:27, where it is usually translated “I am he.” A double *ego eimi ego eimi* is used in Isaiah 43:25, 45:18, 46:4 and 51:12, which is usually translated along the lines of “I, even I, am he” but might also be translated “I am ‘I AM’”<sup>28</sup> (in which case it would clearly allude to Exodus 3:14). Isaiah 52:6 has *ego eimi* with the predicate *autos* (literally, ‘I am myself’ or ‘I myself am’), which has a tautological similarity to “I am who I am.” A crucial characteristic of most of these passages is that they are using *ego eimi* to declare God’s deity to the exclusion of any other claimant, as in Deut. 32:39a – “See now that I, even I, am he (*ego eimi*), and there is no god beside me”.

<sup>25</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-134.

<sup>26</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> Dodd, Charles H., *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 94; Burkett, Delbert, *The Son of the Man in the Gospel of John*, p. 144.

Negative uses of *ego eimi* occur in at least three LXX passages. Hosea 1:9 has a negative use by God Himself: “And [the Lord] said, ‘Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people and I am not your ‘I am’ (*ego ouk eimi hemen*).”<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 47:8 and Zephaniah 2:15 are two passages in which wicked pagan cities (Babylon and Nineveh respectively) declare, “I am (*ego eimi*), and there is none else” and consequently incur the wrath of God. This implies that *ego eimi* is blasphemous when used in an absolute sense by any entity other than God.

In the MT, Deuteronomy 32:39, Isaiah 41:4, 43:10, 43:13, 46:4, 48:12, and 52:6 all use the Hebrew *ani hu* (“I am he”) in an absolute sense, while Isaiah 43:25 and 51:12 have the more emphatic *anoki anoki hu* (“I, I am he”). Isaiah 52:6 associates the phrase *ani hu* with the name *YHWH*. In fact, according to Gianotti, “An analysis of Isaiah 40-66 leads one to conclude that *hu* is a surrogate name for the name *YHWH*, and the phrase *ani hu* is equivalent in meaning to the phrase *ani YHWH*.”<sup>30</sup>

Unlike *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14, it is not semantically possible to translate these Isaianic phrases in the future tense; they are definitely present tense. If they do echo God’s self-declaration to Moses in Exodus 3:14 – as the LXX translators seem to have thought they did – this reinforces the translation of *ehyeh* in the present tense in Exodus 3:14. We shall see later on that Isaiah 40-55 is full of allusions to Exodus, which further substantiates this argument.

As for *ho on*, it is used as a stand-alone title of God four times in Jeremiah LXX: 1:6, 4:10, 14:13 and 39:17(32:17). In Jeremiah 1:6, for instance, we have:

“And I said, ‘You that are (*ho on*), Sovereign, Lord! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am rather young.’” (Jeremiah 1:6 LXX, New English Translation of the Septuagint)

In the MT God is addressed *ahah adonai YHWH* (“Ah, Lord God!”), so the LXX has either paraphrased the Hebrew in this case, or else the LXX’s Hebrew source differed from the MT. It should be noted that Jeremiah differs greatly between the LXX and MT.

This usage of *ho on* in Jeremiah LXX does little to enlighten our understanding of Exodus 3:14, as it does not reflect extant Hebrew manuscripts<sup>31</sup>, and quite possibly depends on the LXX translation of Exodus 3:14 (as the prophets were translated into Greek some time after the Pentateuch). However, it does mean that first-century hearers of the LXX (including most first-century Christians) would have been familiar with *ho on* as a divine title.

## **2.5. *Ego eimi* and *ho on* as divine titles in the New Testament**

If we have appreciated the centrality of God’s self-revelation in Exodus 3:14 to the message of the Old Testament, we ought to be puzzled if the New Testament contained no reference to it; especially since the New Testament tells of God’s *ultimate* self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word. In fact, there are a number of allusions to Exodus 3:14 in the New Testament. The main thesis of this study is that the *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus in the Gospels

<sup>29</sup> The Hebrew of this verse has the verb *ehyeh*. In discussing this passage, Grenz claims, “The Masoretes (like the translators of the LXX) did not consider the word *’hyh* in Hosea 1:9 to be a simple verb but saw it as a repetition of the divine name (I AM) disclosed in Exodus 3:14” (*The Named God and the Question of Being*, p. 158).

<sup>30</sup> Gianotti, Charles. *Christ’s Usage of ‘I Am’ in Light of the Divine Name*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>31</sup> The text of these passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls is not known to this author.

reflect Exodus 3:14 (via Isaiah 40-55). As we are still laying the foundation upon which this claim will be based, we cannot yet regard it as proven, but can at least introduce it in the words of a couple of scholars:

“John carried the identification of Jesus with God the Father one step further, in his use of *ego eimi*, ‘I am,’ in ways that clearly echo the explanation of the divine name in Ex. 3:14 and [Isaiah 40-55’s] use of ‘I am Yahweh.’”<sup>32</sup>

“The *ego eimi*, replete with its Old Testament overtones, is found repeatedly in John. In fact, the inclusion of the *ego eimi* is a characteristic feature of the style of the revelatory speeches that constitute the major portion of Jesus’ preaching in the Fourth Gospel. In this manner, John elevated a phrase, which in everyday language is quite commonplace, into a [dominant theme] of his Gospel. In the Fourth Gospel, the *ego eimi* becomes the manner in which Jesus not only identifies himself, but in which he does so by associating himself with the God of the story of Israel.”<sup>33</sup>

“[I]n the New Testament, Jesus utters the absolute *ego eimi* which was the Septuagint translation of *ani hu*. By partaking of this exalted theme Jesus boldly claims to be YHWH Himself, the Saviour of man. This majestic continuity progresses through the span of Scripture to demonstrate the existence of its Author present with man.”<sup>34</sup>

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether these divine titles are used with reference to Jesus in the New Testament, we will consider their use with reference to God.

The most obvious appropriations of Exodus 3:14 LXX in the New Testament occur in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 1:8, we read, “**I am** the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “**who is** and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” The Greek of the bolded phrases is, “*Ego eimi...ho on*.” Similar language is used of God in Revelation 1:4 (which McDonough calls “the clearest exegesis of the name of YHWH in the New Testament”<sup>35</sup>), 4:8, 11:17 and 16:5. Revelation 11:17 is noteworthy because it states that the Lord God Almighty is He “who is and who was.” The omission of the future aspect shows that *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14 was not understood as entirely or even primarily futuristic, and thus militates against the “I will be” translation.

One interpretation of Exodus 3:14 found in the Targumim (Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament) is, “He who said, and the world was.” On this reading, McDonough comments:

“It seems likely that the two-fold temporal reference has been inspired by *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. If so, the first *ehyeh* is taken to represent God’s creative activity at the world’s beginning, and the second to represent the creation of the world-to-come.”<sup>36</sup>

This suggests the possibility that the double use of *ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14 may also be reflected in God’s declarations in Isaiah along the lines of “I am the first and the last” (Isaiah 41:4;

<sup>32</sup> Gowan, Donald E. *Theology in Exodus*, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *The Name of God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-ontology*, p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> Sherwood, John. *The Relationship of ‘I Am’ in Exodus 3:14 to Jesus’ ‘I Am’ Statements*, abstract.

<sup>35</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>36</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, p. 180-181.

44:6; 48:12; two of which are in the immediate context of an absolute *ego eimi* saying). Grenz definitely sees the connection:

“On several occasions in [Isaiah 40-55] Yahweh declares, ‘I am he’ (*ani hu*) and ‘I am the first and I am the last’ (*ani ri’shon wa’ani ’aharon*)...the addition of these two descriptions to Israel’s ongoing reflection on the divine name constitutes Second Isaiah’s chief contribution to the saga of the I AM.”<sup>37</sup>

This declaration “I am the first and the last,” or its parallels “I am Alpha and Omega” and “I am the beginning and the end,” are used by God in Revelation 1:8 and 21:6. In the direct sense, these titles reflect Isaiah and perhaps other sources<sup>38</sup>, but Exodus 3:14 is likely in the background. It is used by Jesus in Revelation 1:17, 2:8 and 22:13 – an important point to which we shall return.

A similar idea is expressed by Paul in different language in passages such as Romans 11:36: “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (ESV). God did not come into existence; He simply is (past, present and future). He is the efficient cause of all existence, the intermediate cause of all existence, and the destiny of all existence. McDonough also notes the possibility that Romans 4:17 alludes to the divine name.<sup>39</sup>

## **2.6. Summary**

To summarize the findings of this chapter, a strong case can be made that the divine self-declaration in Exodus 3:14 ought to be translated in the present tense, along the lines of “I am who I am.” It is primarily an assertion of God’s continuous presence among His people, but this does not rule out other complementary interpretations, such as His timeless self-existence, His role as first cause of all things, and His prerogative to withhold a full self-revelation until the time He appoints.

This interpretation is supported by the LXX rendering of Exodus 3:14, which is a plausible translation of the Hebrew. It finds further confirmation in the rest of the Old Testament (particularly Isaiah 40-55) and even more so in the New Testament (particularly Revelation). It is an exclusive claim to deity that is blasphemous when used in any comparable way by a being other than God Himself.

## **3. Some contextual foundations for understanding the Gospel of John**

Before looking at the relationship between these three books, we would like to briefly comment on some general points of context regarding the Gospel of John.

### **3.1. The Jewishness of John**

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<sup>37</sup> Grenz, Stanley J. *The Named God and the Question of Being*, p. 164.

<sup>38</sup> Mathewson sees Greek philosophical tradition as the background to ‘the beginning and the end,’ noting its use with reference to God in Philo and Josephus. He sees ‘Alpha and Omega’ as reflecting “the vocalization of the divine name written in Greek magical texts” (*Isaiah in Revelation*, in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, p. 193). This appropriation of Greek divine titles should not be seen as a corruption, but rather as an assertion of YHWH’s deity over against the false deities of paganism. In a similar vein, the reference to Jesus as “prince of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5) is probably an appropriation of a designation of Roman emperors.

<sup>39</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Whereas John was previously seen as heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and distant from Jewish thought and culture, this view has been abandoned by scholars in the past century, as the following quotations show:

“We have slowly come to recognize that in many ways the Gospel of John is the most Jewish Gospel in the Christian canon.”<sup>40</sup>

“It could well be said that John actually represents the most Jewish of all the gospels, as opposed to being Hellenistic in its framework.”<sup>41</sup>

“To us Jews, the Fourth Gospel is the most Jewish of the Four.”<sup>42</sup>

This realisation has led to renewed interest in the ways John’s Gospel draws on the Old Testament.

### **3.2. John’s use of the LXX**

The diction of John’s Gospel is reminiscent of the LXX: “[T]he Greek of John’s Gospel is...with little exception, the language of the Septuagint.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the book contains “biblical quotations and especially allusions to the Old Testament that presuppose considerable familiarity with the Greek Old Testament.”<sup>44</sup>

On John’s Old Testament quotations, Menken writes:

“A few observations strongly suggest that John drew from the LXX [in his OT quotations in John 10:34, 12:13, 12:38, 16:22 and 19:24]...There are also, as will appear below, some quotations which differ only slightly from the LXX, and where it can be shown that the slight difference is due to John’s redaction of the LXX (1:23; 2:17; 15:25). So we may safely conclude that John knew the LXX and did not see reasons to change the LXX text in the case of the three quotations mentioned above.”<sup>45</sup>

Renowned Johannine scholar John A.T. Robinson argued persuasively that the Gospel of John was written primarily for the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora<sup>46</sup>. Carson agrees: “[T]he Fourth Gospel was written to evangelize diaspora Jews, proselytes and God-fearers.”<sup>47</sup> This audience would have been familiar with the LXX and largely ignorant of Hebrew. Thus, if Robinson and Carson are correct, we should not be reluctant to look for textual and literary references to the LXX in the Gospel of John – the Gospel’s earliest readers certainly would not have been!

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, Dwight M., R. Alan Culpepper & C. Clifton Black. *Exploring the Gospel of John*, p. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Matson, Mark A. *Current approaches to the priority of John*. *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7 (2004), p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> Israel Abrahams, Reader in Rabbinics at University of Cambridge. Quoted in Kruse, C.G. *The Gospel according to John*, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Carson, D.A. *The Gospel according to John*, p. 75.

<sup>44</sup> Carson, D.A. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>45</sup> Menken, Maarten J.J. *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form*, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> See John A.T. Robinson, *The Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel*, in *Twelve New Testament Studies*.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, *Ibid.*, p. 54.

### 3.3. The importance of the Prologue to understanding the Gospel of John

Opinions are varied on precisely what relationship John’s Prologue (John 1:1-18) has to his Gospel narrative. For some (including myself previously), the Prologue is a general introduction about the purpose of God and divine revelation, and the person of Christ does not appear until v. 14. For others, however, the Prologue speaks of Christ right from v. 1, and is in fact the key to understanding what the Gospel narrative says about him. Hooker writes of the Prologue that “without it the chapters which follow are [as] incomprehensible to us, as to the Jewish opponents in the story.”<sup>48</sup> She explains its significance thus:

“The idea of the Logos is as central – and as hidden – in John as the idea of Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah is central in Mark. Just as the Messianic identity of Jesus is a secret in Mark, so the identity of Jesus with the Logos is a secret in John – not deliberately hidden, but certainly not known to those who oppose Jesus, and never spelt out specifically in his debates with them...in John there are many mysterious passages, incomprehensible to those who think only in terms of the flesh, which make sense to those who have believed in Jesus...and recognize in him the Logos of God.”<sup>49</sup>

The following chart illustrates that most of the statements in the Johannine Prologue are informed by what is said about Jesus in the Gospel narrative.

Prologue reference	Prologue clause	Narrative reference	Narrative clause
John 1:1a	<b>In the beginning</b> was the Word	John 17:5	The glory that I had with you <b>before the world existed</b>
John 1:1a	In the beginning <b>was</b> the Word	John 1:30	He <b>was</b> before me
John 1:1a	In the beginning was <b>the Word</b>	John 3:34	He whom God has sent utters <b>the words of God</b>
John 1:1b	And the Word was <b>with God</b>	John 8:38; cf. 17:5	I speak of what I have seen <b>with my Father</b>
John 1:1c	And the Word <b>was God</b>	John 20:28	Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and <b>my God</b> ’
John 1:3, 10	All things were <b>made</b> through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.  The world was made through him	John 5:17-19; 4:46; 6:5-11; 9:11	My Father is working until now, and I am working...whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise <sup>50</sup>  He... <b>made</b> the water wine <sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Hooker, Morna D. *The Johannine Prologue and the Messianic Secret*, p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>50</sup> “In the prologue, where Jesus is credited with creative power, he is called theos, or ‘God’ (1:1-3). In 5:1-16, the focus is initially on Jesus’ creative ‘working,’ in which context Jesus is alleged to be ‘equal to God’ (5:18). Theos/‘God,’ then, is the appropriate name for Jesus when he exercises creative power...Creative power is not only claimed but demonstrated (1:1-18; 5:1-9, 19-20), and so Jesus is rightly called ‘God’/theos” (Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, p. 110).

<sup>51</sup> “[I]n turning water into wine, Jesus demonstrates his creative power, thus identifying himself with the creator who alone can change matter” (Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and concealment of Christ*, p. 106).

			This man called Jesus <b>made</b> mud and anointed my eyes and...I...received my sight <sup>52</sup>
John 1:4a	<b>In him was life</b>	John 5:26; cf. 14:6	The Father...has granted the Son also to have <b>life in himself</b>
John 1:4b	<b>The light of men</b>	John 8:12; cf. 3:19; 9:5; 12:46	I am <b>the light of the world</b>
John 1:5a	The light shines <b>in the darkness</b>	John 12:46	I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me will not remain <b>in darkness</b>
John 1:5b	<b>The darkness has not overcome it</b>	John 12:35	Walk while you have the light, lest <b>the darkness overtake you</b>
John 1:7c	That all men <b>might believe through him</b>	John 11:42	That they <b>might believe that you sent me</b>
John 1:8a	He <b>was not</b> the light	John 3:28	I <b>am not</b> the Christ
John 1:8b	Came to <b>bear witness</b> about the light	John 1:34	I have seen and have <b>borne witness</b> that this is the Son of God
John 1:9a	The <b>true</b> light	John 7:18	The one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is <b>true</b> , and in him there is <b>no falsehood</b>
John 1:9	The true light... <b>was coming into the world</b>	John 3:19	The light <b>has come into the world</b>
John 1:10a	He was <b>in the world</b>	John 9:5	As long as I am <b>in the world</b>
John 1:10c	The world <b>knew him not</b>	John 9:29	As for this man, we <b>do not know where he has come from</b>
John 1:11b	<b>His own</b> received him not	John 18:35; cf. John 4:44	<b>Your own nation...</b> have delivered you over to me
John 1:11b	His own <b>received him not</b>	John 3:11	You <b>do not receive</b> our testimony
John	All...who <b>believed in his</b>	John 2:23	Many <b>believed in his name</b>

<sup>52</sup> "Jesus now turns his attention to the man born blind and on his own initiative proceeds to heal him. Jesus spits on the ground, forms mud from the dust of the earth and smears the man's eyes with it (v. 6). The reader is already aware of the fact that, as the Word of God, not only is Jesus the one through whom all things in the created world were made (1:3), but also that, as the only Son of the Father, he shares in the creative power of God which he exercises in his ongoing ministry (5:17, 19-30). Thus, the mention in the present context of Jesus making clay and smearing the blind man's eyes with it suggests to the reader that Jesus is here engaged in a creative act. The mention in v. 1 that the man was blind from birth already alludes to this interpretation of Jesus' gesture as an act of creation. Just as in the beginning, the human person was shaped from the dust of the ground (see Gen. 2:7), so does Jesus grant sight to the man born blind by a symbolic application of mud to his eyes" (Martin Asiedu-Peprah, *Johannine Sabbath conflicts as juridical controversy*, pp. 124-125).

1:12b	<b>name</b>		
John 1:12c	He <b>gave the right</b> to become children of God	John 17:2	You <b>gave him authority over all flesh</b> , to give eternal life to all whom you have given him
John 1:12c	To <b>become children</b> of God	John 12:36	That you may <b>become sons</b> of light
John 1:13	<b>Who were born...of God</b>	John 3:8	<b>Who is born of the Spirit</b>
John 1:14a	The Word <b>became flesh</b>	John 6:51 (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3)	I am the <b>living bread</b> that came down from heaven...And the bread...is my <b>flesh</b>
John 1:14b	And did <b>tabernacle</b> among us (Young's Literal Translation)	John 2:21	He was speaking about the <b>temple</b> of his body
John 1:14c	We have <b>seen his glory</b>	John 2:11	Jesus... <b>manifested his glory</b>
John 1:14d	The <b>only Son</b> from the Father	John 3:16	God...gave his <b>only Son</b>
John 1:14e	Full of... <b>truth</b>	John 14:6	I am... <b>the truth</b>
John 1:16a	From his <b>fullness</b> we have all <b>received</b>	John 16:24	You will <b>receive</b> , that your joy may be <b>full</b>
John 1:18a	No one has ever <b>seen God</b> ; The only God, who is <b>at the Father's side</b>	John 6:46; 16:28	Not that anyone has <b>seen the Father</b> , except <b>he who is from God, he has seen the Father</b>  You have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I <b>came from the Father</b> and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and <b>going to the Father</b>
John 1:18c	He has <b>made him known</b>	John 14:9; 15:15	Whoever has seen me has seen the Father  All that I have heard from my Father I have <b>made known</b> to you

This table ought to remove any doubt that the language of the Prologue applies to Jesus throughout, and not merely from v. 14 on. If, as Hooker claims, the Prologue is the key to understanding the narrative of John's Gospel, then we ought to have it as a ready reference when we study Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings in John later on.

### 3.4. Symbolism and double meaning in John

The Gospel of John is rich in symbolism. Calling it the “Gospel of the symbolic,” Quast continues:

“A literalistic, superficial reading of John will leave you with an odd sense that you are missing something in the otherwise apparently insignificant descriptive details, numbers, dualisms, ambiguous statements, and peculiar stylistic features...Seven signs, seven ‘I am’ sayings, six stone waterpots, three denials and a threefold restoration for Peter, 153 fish; these numbers all have meaning. Jesus uses words with double-meanings to reveal his message to the discerning listener...All the actions and words of Jesus point to something deeper, so the reader is drawn into the mysteries that lie behind the words.”<sup>53</sup>

One form of symbolism found in the Gospel of John is that of numerology. The fact that there are seven signs<sup>54</sup>, seven predicated ‘I am’ sayings<sup>55</sup> and seven absolute ‘I am’ sayings<sup>56</sup> in John is no coincidence, according to Richard Bauckham. He notes, “In ancient Jewish literature, the number seven is never insignificant. It is the number of completeness.”<sup>57</sup> He also counts seven absolute ‘I am’ sayings of YHWH in the LXX and seven in the MT.

A second form of symbolism that is of particular interest to this study is the well-documented phenomenon of double meaning in John, especially in the words of Jesus. The Gospel contains two basic classes of double meanings. One is irony, in which a saying has an incorrect surface (literal) meaning and a correct deeper (symbolic) meaning. Often John draws attention to Jesus’ irony by recording the confused response of his listeners. Some examples of this:

<b>Text</b>	<b>Incorrect surface (literal) Interpretation</b>	<b>Correct deeper (symbolic) Interpretation</b>
John 2:19-21	Jesus says he will destroy and reconstruct Herod’s temple	Jesus says his body will die and rise again
John 4:31-34	Jesus must have obtained food from a mysterious source	Jesus is nourished by his commitment to the task ahead of him
John 3:3	One must enter his mother’s womb a second time	One must be born of water and Spirit

<sup>53</sup> Quast, Kevin. *Reading the Gospel of John: an introduction*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> These signs are found in John 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-14; 6:16-21; 9:1-7; 11:38-45. The discerning reader will note an eighth sign in John 21:4-11. However, this sign was “for the disciples alone and forms a postlude to the Gospel” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, p. 209). Some scholars believe this epilogue was added in subsequent editions of the Gospel (see Puskas and Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts*, p. 167). Symbolically, the first seven signs may be taken to represent the seven days of God’s original creation, and the eighth sign, the abundant life of the new creation (see Stephen K. Ray, *St. John’s Gospel*, p. 252).

<sup>55</sup> The seven predicated ‘I am’ sayings consist of the Greek words *ego eimi* followed by a noun or nouns. They are found in John 6:35, 41, 48; 8:12 cf. John 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; and 15:1.

<sup>56</sup> The seven absolute ‘I am’ sayings are found in John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 8:28; 8:58; 13:19; and 18:5-8 (this last one being an ‘I am’ saying that is first stated and then twice repeated).

<sup>57</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Monotheism and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 153.

John 6:51-53	Jesus promotes cannibalism	Jesus teaches that believers will be sustained eternally by the atoning death of Christ's flesh
John 7:33-35	Jesus intends to go abroad and teach the Greeks	Jesus will ascend to heaven after his resurrection
John 8:21-22	Jesus is suicidal	Jesus will ascend to heaven after his resurrection
John 8:32-33	Jesus says the truth will free people from physical slavery	Jesus says the truth will free people from spiritual slavery
John 11:11-14	Jesus says Lazarus is only asleep	Jesus says Lazarus' death is only temporary

A second class of double meaning in John is that of double entendre, which Resseguie defines thus:

“Double entendres are words that have twofold meanings and both meanings are intended. The reader selects one meaning, which he or she believes exhausts the meaning of the vehicle (double entendre), while on further reflection a second meaning surfaces...the one adds an additional dimension to the other that is not immediately apparent.”<sup>58</sup>

In the case of irony, a surface reading leads to a *wrong* interpretation, whereas in the case of double entendre, a surface reading leads to an *incomplete* interpretation. The Johannine double entendres identified by Resseguie are summarized in the following table:

<b>Text</b>	<b>Double entendre term</b>	<b>Dual meaning</b>
John 1:5	<i>katalambanein</i>	‘comprehend’ and ‘overcome’ – the darkness is both <i>ignorant</i> of the light and <i>hostile</i> to it
John 3:3	<i>anochen</i>	‘again’ and ‘from above’ – the birth spoken of is both a <i>rebirth</i> and a <i>heavenly birth</i>
John 3:8	<i>to pneuma</i>	‘wind’ and ‘spirit’ – the dual meaning of the word is drawn upon to illustrate what life in the Spirit is like
John 7:8	<i>anabanein</i>	‘go up’ and ‘ascend’ – Jesus’ time has not yet come to go up to Jerusalem for the feast, or in a greater sense, to ascend to the Father
John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32 cf. Isaiah 52:13 LXX	<i>hyphothenai</i>	‘to be lifted up’ and ‘to be exalted’ – refers to Jesus’ means of death (being lifted

<sup>58</sup> Resseguie, James L. *The Strange Gospel*, p. 51.

		up on a cross), which is paradoxically the means of his exaltation <sup>59</sup>
John 11:50	<i>apothane hyper tou lasu</i>	‘one man die <i>for</i> the people’ – Caiaphas means for as ‘instead of’, while John in his explanation intends also the meaning ‘on behalf of’
John 19:13	<i>ekathisen epi bematos</i>	Verb ‘to sit’ could be understood as intransitive (Pilate sat upon the tribunal) or transitive (Pilate sat Jesus upon the tribunal). <sup>60</sup>
John 19:30	<i>tetelestai</i>	‘It is finished’ – refers in the immediate sense to the end of Jesus’ earthly life, and in a greater sense to the completion of his Father’s work

The double entendre phenomenon in John is important because in the next chapter we will suggest that some of Jesus’ *ego eimi* sayings (John 4:26; 6:20; 18:5-8) are double entendres:

“In three of the seven absolute ‘I am’ cases...an ordinary meaning is possible and may even be superficially the obvious meaning...Since [in the other four cases], ‘I am’ cannot be given an ordinary meaning, it is best to take all seven occurrences as a set – understanding those cases where an ordinary meaning is possible as instances of double entendre. The Fourth Evangelist is fond of double meanings. In many such cases, Jesus’ hearers take his words in a superficially obvious sense, and so miss his real meaning. They fail to catch the symbolic or otherwise more profound significance of his words.”<sup>61</sup>

### 3.5. The Exodus-Isaiah-John connection

The New Testament writers’ view of Jesus’ identity drove them (under divine inspiration) to see Messianic references throughout the Old Testament. They saw the Scriptures as saturated with prophecies fulfilled in him and symbols illuminated in him – even in obscure passages which were not obviously Messianic (see, for instance, Matthew’s Messianic application of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15, and Paul’s assertion in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that the rock from which the Israelites drank in Exodus 17:6 “was Christ”).

<sup>59</sup> As Richard Bauckham explains, “Such Johannine enigmas tease the reader into theological enlightenment. In this case, the key is the double meaning of the word. It refers both literally to the crucifixion as a lifting up of Jesus above the earth...and figuratively to the same event as Jesus’ elevation to the status of divine sovereignty over the cosmos. The cross is already his exaltation” (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, p. 48).

<sup>60</sup> See James L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel*, p. 57, for a discussion of this intriguing but uncertain potential case of double entendre.

<sup>61</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John*, pp. 155-156.

This thirst for Messianic texts flowed in both directions. First, Christians found new meaning in their reading of the Old Testament Scriptures because of what they now knew of Jesus Christ. Secondly, Christians interpreted the life, works and words of Jesus in light of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus himself motivated these practices (cf., for instance, Matthew 5:17, Luke 24:27 and John 5:39).

In this section we will be looking at evidence for a close connection between three particular books of the Bible: Exodus, Isaiah and John. The main premise of this essay is that the stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus should be understood as expressions of absolute deity reflecting the stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings of YHWH in the Old Testament, which are found primarily in Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 40-55. As a sub-premise it is claimed that the *ego eimi* sayings of YHWH in Isaiah 40-55 reflect Exodus 3:14. These claims will receive a significant boost in credibility if we can show that the Gospel of John depends heavily on Isaiah 40-55 as well as on Exodus, and that Isaiah 40-55 depends heavily on Exodus. In so doing we will establish a 'big picture' contextual framework which vindicates our practice of interpreting Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings in John in light of Isaiah 40-55 and ultimately in light of Exodus 3:14.

### 3.5.1. Isaiah in John

The Book of Isaiah has been so crucial to Christians' understanding of Christ through history that it has been called the Fifth Gospel<sup>62</sup>. There is no question that Isaiah, and chapters 40-55 in particular, played a pivotal role in the Gospel of John's portrait of Jesus:

“Isaiah occupies a prominent, if not the highest, position among the scriptural texts that have contributed to the shaping of John's gospel...Several expressions, themes and motifs point to the profound influence of Isaiah, especially [chapters 40-55], on John's narratives and discourses...allusive modes of verbal and thematic scriptural reference attest the deeply embedded and thoroughly absorbed character of John's use of Isaiah, and reflect the extensive process of christological reflection on scripture from which this gospel emerged.”

The key passage in John which justifies us in interpreting Isaiah 40-55 as fulfilled in the mission of Jesus Christ is John 1:23. Here, emissaries from the Pharisees inquire of John the Baptist as to his true identity. He replies that he is not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet (of Deut. 18:15), but rather, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.”

This quotation is a paraphrase of Isaiah 40:3 LXX, which functions as a prologue to the whole section of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) with which we are concerned. This prophecy is quoted to introduce Jesus' ministry (and John's preparation thereof) in all four Gospels (cf. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6), which demonstrates the significance of Isaiah 40-55 to interpreting Jesus' mission and identity. Writing on the significance of this quotation in John, a commentator writes:

“As in the other canonical Gospels, the use of Isaiah 40:3 with reference to the Baptist is...foundational to the gospel story, signalling the impending epochal intervention of God in and through his Messiah, Jesus.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Sawyer, John F.A. *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity*.

Indeed, this quotation sets the stage for a high christology in the narrative that follows, because, understood in context, it implicitly identifies Jesus as the YHWH and God of Isaiah 40:3:

“What is strongly implied by the exclusive focus on Jesus in the depiction of the Baptist’s testimony and activity (cf. 1:6-8, 15, 26-27, 29-34, 35-36) is that Isa. 40:3 is here subjected to christological interpretation: the way of the Lord proclaimed by John the Baptist is none other than the coming of Jesus...[Jesus is] the referent of the title ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*) in the scriptural quotation...This concentration on the single way of the Lord (rather than on his plural ‘paths’) helps explain further why John has truncated the two parallel clauses of Isa. 40:3 LXX into one.”<sup>64</sup>

Just as John’s Gospel draws on Isaiah in introducing Jesus’ public ministry, so he draws on Isaiah to conclude it. In John 12:36, we are told that Jesus went into hiding, for “Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him” (v. 37). John then explains their unbelief by quoting from Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 6. If John opens his narrative of Jesus’ public ministry with reference to Isaiah 40 and closes it with reference to Isaiah 53, then we should not be surprised to find allusions to this portion of Isaiah *within* the narrative of Jesus’ public ministry. The quotation of Isaiah 6 has interesting Christological implications of its own which cannot be discussed in detail here.<sup>65</sup>

There is one other direct quotation of Isaiah in John’s Gospel – Jesus quotes from Isaiah 54:13 in John 6:45:

“It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me – not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father.”

This quotation follows the LXX, and not the Hebrew MT. This demonstrates Jesus’ (or at least John’s) familiarity with the Greek translation of Isaiah, which lends credence to our thesis that Jesus’ *ego eimi* sayings allude to the LXX text of Isaiah.

Besides these four direct quotations, John contains numerous allusions to, or verbal parallels with, the prophecy of Isaiah.<sup>66</sup> Among the most notable is that of God’s Word (John 1:1-14 cf. Isaiah 40:8; 45:23; 55:10-11). Of these, only 45:23 has *logos* in the LXX (and 45:23 is clearly Messianic as per its quotation by Paul in Phil. 2:10-11). However, 55:10-11 (where the

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<sup>63</sup> Kostenberger, Andreas J. *John*, in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, pp. 427-428.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, Catrin H. *Isaiah in John’s Gospel*. In Moyise, Steve and M.J.J. Menken, *Isaiah in the New Testament*, p. 104.

<sup>65</sup> In Isaiah 6, Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, and the seraphim declare to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of **his glory**” (v. 3). This distresses Isaiah because, being “a man of unclean lips,” his “eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (v. 5). The portion of the chapter quoted by John is about the Israelites’ unbelief (v. 9-10), but John further explains, “Isaiah said these things because he saw **his glory** and spoke of him” (John 12:41), where the ‘him’ is clearly Jesus (cf. v. 36-37). John thus identifies Jesus with ‘YHWH of hosts’ in Isaiah 6.

<sup>66</sup> John’s allusions to Isaiah (not counting stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings) include John 1:29, 36 cf. Isa. 53:6-7; John 3:14 cf. Isa. 52:13; John 4:14 cf. Isa. 12:3; John 4:22 cf. Isa. 2:3; John 7:38 cf. Isa. 58:11; John 8:12, 9:5 cf. Isa. 9:1-2, 49:6; John 10:16 cf. Isa. 56:8; John 12:32 cf. Isa. 52:13; John 15:1 cf. Isa. 5:1-7; John 16:22 cf. Isa. 66:14; John 19:18 cf. Isa. 22:16; John 19:38 cf. Isa. 53:9.

LXX has *rhema*) contains even stronger parallels with John: the Word “comes down from heaven” like the rain and snow, and “is sent” by YHWH, both of which are ideas applied to Jesus extensively in the Fourth Gospel.

### 3.5.2. Exodus in Isaiah

Isaiah 40-55 has been described as the second Exodus. The prophecies in these chapters evoke the imagery of Exodus to describe how YHWH will restore His people and ultimately glorify His name among all nations. Bernard W. Anderson writes:

“While there are numerous linguistic echoes of the Exodus tradition throughout the poems of Second Isaiah<sup>67</sup>, the theme of the new exodus is the specific subject in several passages.”<sup>68</sup>

The long list of Exodus allusions in Isaiah 40-55 includes the following: YHWH’s deliverance from bondage by his strong arm (40:10, 42:7, 49:9, 51:9, 52:10 cf. Exodus 6:6, 13:3, 20:2); the exodus from an unclean land (Babylon, Egypt, etc.) (48:20-21, 52:10-12 cf. Exodus 12:41); Israel goes out in joy and peace (55:12-13 cf. Exodus 12:36); the lack of need to depart in haste (52:12 cf. Exodus 12:11, a contrast); the preparation of a highway in the wilderness (40:3-5, 42:14-16, 43:14-21 cf. Exodus 13:18, 23:20); YHWH as the front and rear guard of Israel (52:12 cf. Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-20); the turning of darkness into light (42:16 cf. Exodus 13:21); YHWH leads the people as a compassionate shepherd (40:11 cf. Exodus 15:13, Psalm 77:20, 78:52-53); passing through the waters (43:1-3, 51:10 cf. Exodus 14:21-22); YHWH goes out like a man of war (42:13 cf. Exodus 15:3); provision of food and water in the desert (41:17-20; 43:19-20, 49:9-10 cf. Exodus 16:31-35, 17:6); revelation of YHWH’s glory (40:5; cf. Exodus 16:7); the new entry into the Promised Land (49:8-12 cf. Exodus 12:25, 13:5, 32:13).

The obvious and extensive relationship between Isaiah 40-55 and Exodus bolsters the claim that YHWH’s stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings in Isaiah 40-55 also reflect Exodus – the memorial name given in Exodus 3:14, to be precise. As McDonough states:

“The motif of the ‘second Exodus’ permeates Isaiah 40-55, as is universally recognized by commentators. We would not be surprised, then, to find [in Isaiah 40-55] some reference to the divine name as revealed in the burning bush episode.”<sup>69</sup>

We already observed Grenz’s assertion that such reference can be seen in God’s declarations, “I am he”, “I am ‘I AM’” and “I am the first and I am the last” in this portion of Isaiah (even in Hebrew). This latter declaration will be discussed again later because Jesus appropriates it for himself in Revelation.

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<sup>67</sup> Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah is a scholarly term for Isaiah 40-55 reflecting the fact that it is a distinctive section of the book, supposed by liberal scholars to have been composed by a different author than the earlier portion of the book.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, Bernard W. *Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah*. In Anderson, Bernard W. & W. Harrelson, eds. *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in honor of James Muilenburg*, p. 181.

<sup>69</sup> McDonough, Sean M. *YHWH at Patmos: Rev. 1:4 in its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting*, p. 138.

### 3.5.3. Exodus in John

Having observed how John depends on Isaiah and how Isaiah depends on John, we will finally consider ways in which John depends directly on Exodus. The only direct quotation of Exodus in John is in John 19:36, which quotes the description of the Passover lamb (“Not one of his bones will be broken”) from Exodus 12:46 LXX (along with Numbers 9:12 and Psalm 34:20) and applies it to Jesus’ death. However, there are a number of other allusions to Exodus (or more precisely *the exodus*) in the Gospel. Consider John 1:14-18:

“14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) 16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

This passage is packed with references to Exodus, especially the divine revelation in chapters 33-34. The Greek verb translated ‘dwelt’ in v. 14, *skenoō*, literally means “to pitch tent; encamp; to tabernacle, dwell in a tent; to dwell, have one’s abode”<sup>70</sup>. Thus we have here an allusion to YHWH conversing with Moses at the “tent (*skene* in LXX) of meeting” (Exodus 33:7-11) as well as filling the tabernacle with his glory (Exodus 40:34). In this case, the tabernacle or temple was not a building but a body of flesh (cf. John 2:19-21). Michael Brown explains:

“[J]ust as God ‘pitched his tent’ in the midst of his people Israel through the Tabernacle and Temple – while remaining God in heaven and filling the universe with his presence – so he pitched his tent among us through his Son – while remaining God in heaven and filling the universe with his presence...Jesus is the replacement of the ancient Tabernacle.”<sup>71</sup>

“We have seen his glory” reflects Moses’ request of YHWH, “Please show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18), which was granted in part (v. 21-23). “Full of grace and truth” reflects the character of God which was proclaimed when he showed Moses his glory (Exodus 34:6-7). “From his fullness we have all received” may reflect God’s promise, “I will make all my goodness pass before you” (Exodus 33:19). “Grace upon grace” may reflect God’s declaration, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Exodus 33:19), or it may reflect Moses’ request, “If I have found favour in your sight, please show me your ways, that I may...find favour in your sight” (Exodus 33:13). “The law was given through Moses” is an obvious reference to Moses’ receiving of the law over a forty-day period in Exodus 34.

Walter Kaiser makes an interesting point on the contrast between Moses and Jesus in John 1:17:

“Jesus [*sic*] said, ‘The law through Moses was delivered...’ (John 1:17). The verse does not go on to say, ‘but grace and truth...’ as I’ve heard people say frequently. That is not in the Greek or the English text at all. It is rather, ‘The law through Moses was delivered; grace and truth in Jesus Christ happened.’ Happened. The

<sup>70</sup> Mounce, William D. *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, p. 416.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, Michael L. *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Theological Objections*, p. 23.

difference is in the verbs; it is not in the quality. It is a major faux pas in understanding the Old Testament not to make the distinction between Moses and Jesus. For John was saying, Here's Moses: he was a servant who merely delivered the law; but here is Jesus who embodied it."<sup>72</sup>

"No one has ever seen God" reflects God's refusal to let Moses see his face – "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). "The only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Interpreting the verb *exegesato* ("made him known"), Spiros Zodhiates writes:

"[I]ts basic meaning is 'to lead out.' The idea is that of God, the invisible God, in a hiding place. He was inaccessible to man. Jesus Christ, who has always been with the Father, who is God Himself, brought Him out and made Him visible to all."<sup>73</sup>

This clause reflects, and in fact surpasses, the manifestation and proclamation of God which was given to Moses in Exodus 34. It is textually debatable whether John 1:18 should read *ho monogenes theos* ("the one and only God") or *ho monogenes huios* ("the one and only Son"), though the majority of modern commentators and translators agree that *theos* is the reading supported best by the manuscript evidence. The main objection to this rendering is that it reads awkwardly. However, in Exodus 34:5 we read that "YHWH...proclaimed the name of YHWH." It is possible that the construction "God...made [God] known" in John 1:18 reflects this.

It is noteworthy that the divine name, YHWH, played a central role in the revelation in Exodus 33-34:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'YHWH'... YHWH descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of YHWH. 6 YHWH passed before him and proclaimed, 'YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'" (Exodus 33:19, 34:5-6).

What John has basically done in John 1:14-18 is present the earthly life of Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise in Exodus 33 to reveal his glory. In Exodus, the most emphatic aspect of this revelation was the divine name. This leads us to an important question: where does the divine name appear in John's testimony about the greater divine revelation that came through Jesus? Given its centrality in the Exodus revelation, it would be incongruous if it did not appear at all in John. Indeed, Jesus claims in John 17:26, "I made known to them your name." How and when did he do so?

The answer to this question, we will suggest, is that the divine name appears in John's Gospel explicitly in the *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus:

"In Exodus 34 the divine name, Yahweh, heads the list of divine attributes, all of which are concerned with God's dealings with his people; in the rest of John's

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<sup>72</sup> Kaiser, Walter C. *The Christian and the Old Testament*, p. 168.

<sup>73</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *Was Christ God?*, p. 32.

gospel the divine name, 'I am', will be used repeatedly by Jesus in making various claims".<sup>74</sup>

It is also worth noting that the expression *ho on* ("who is"), which is the explication of the divine name in Exodus 3:14c LXX, is used of Jesus right in John 1:18. This point will be discussed in greater detail later.

Further references to Exodus or, more precisely, the exodus, include the reference to Jesus as the [Passover] Lamb (John 1:29 cf. Exodus 12:21); the prominence of signs and wonders (numerous, but especially the turning of water into wine, cf. Exodus 7:17-20); the 13 references to Moses by name; the allusion to the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14 cf. Numbers 21:7); the 'bread of life' saying and its allusion to manna (John 6:31-41, 49-51 cf. Exodus 16:12-31); deliverance from slavery (John 8:32-34 cf. Exodus 2:23, 3:7-10); and the 'good shepherd' saying (John 10:11-18, 25-30 cf. Exodus 15:13, Psalm 77:20, 78:52-53<sup>75</sup>).

The many subtle allusions to Exodus in John serve to emphasize that the 'new exodus' theme expressed in Isaiah 40-55 was fulfilled (and will be fulfilled) in Jesus Christ. As Brunson writes:

"The main strands of New Exodus thought – the return from exile, defeat of Israel's enemies, and return of Yahweh – are at the core of the Fourth Gospel."<sup>76</sup>

### **3.6. Summary**

We have found that the Gospel of John is very Jewish in character and content, and that in the immediate sense it was likely written for diaspora Jews and proselytes, who read the Scriptures in Greek (the LXX). Moreover, we have found that the author of the Gospel of John uses LXX language and regularly quotes from the LXX. Furthermore, we found that the Prologue of the Gospel of John functions as a key to understanding the narrative, with most of the statements in the Prologue speaking to the identity of Jesus as reflected in the things he does and says in the narrative.

Finally, we have discovered abundant evidence of thematic links between the three books of Scripture which most prominently present stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings: Exodus, Isaiah and John. This intertextual relationship means we ought to interpret the *ego eimi* sayings in all three books consistently. Nevertheless, in case the reader is not persuaded by this 'big picture' approach, we will examine the many parallels in the *immediate context* between Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings and those of YHWH in the Old Testament.

## **4. *Ego eimi* and *ho on* as expressions of Christ's deity in the New Testament**

In the NT we find that repeatedly and emphatically, the very term which God used in the OT to express His exclusive claim to deity (*ego eimi* in the LXX) is used by Jesus Christ in speaking about himself. The question this raises may be formulated thus:

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<sup>74</sup> Hooker, Morna D. *The Johannine Prologue and the Messianic Secret*, p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> The shepherd imagery also reflects other parts of the Old Testament, such as Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 and Zechariah 11-13.

<sup>76</sup> Brunson, Andrew C. *Psalm 118 in the Gospel of John*, p. 155.

“*Ani hu* expressed the belief that there is only one God, that no other being than Yahweh, the Lord, can properly be regarded as God. We have seen that [Isaiah 40-55] is very careful to limit the self-predication *ani hu* to Yahweh alone. How then could John attribute the absolute *ego eimi* to Jesus and still remain within the framework of biblical monotheism?”<sup>77</sup>

Thus Jesus’ absolute use of *ego eimi*, understood against its Old Testament background, is evidence for his deity. Before looking more closely at this evidence, we wish to make a comment on interpreting the Gospels. When studying the Gospels, it is important to ask why a particular account or detail was included. The Gospel writers were not concerned merely with relating interesting anecdotes about Jesus. They wrote with a specific agenda in mind; in John’s case, to persuade the reader that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). They had volumes of material to draw on (cf. John 21:25) but had very limited space (the bottleneck was probably the size of a single scroll). They were forced to make difficult decisions about what to include and what to leave out. Thus they only included the material that they believed best substantiated their thesis about Jesus’ identity. This means there is nothing mundane in the Gospels. If a detail or incident seems superfluous, there may be a deeper meaning that we have not grasped.<sup>78</sup>

#### **4.1. The *ego eimi* sayings in the Gospels**

The Gospels – most notably John – contain a number of important ‘I am’ sayings (*ego eimi* in the Greek), which can be broadly grouped into two categories: those that carry predicates, and those that stand alone. The main focus of this study will be the stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings, but we will first examine the seven *ego eimi* sayings in John that carry predicates and attempt to interpret them in light of the Old Testament imagery they evoke.

##### **4.1.1. The *ego eimi* sayings with predicates**

We will see that the *ego eimi* sayings with predicates point to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the incarnate Word, a man in whom YHWH himself is present. As a preliminary, it may be observed that in making declarations which open with “I am...”, Jesus departed sharply from the practice of Old Testament prophets, who always placed all of the focus on YHWH in the third person. Similarly, Jesus prefaced many of his sayings with “Amen I say unto you”, which is in stark contrast with Moses and the prophets, who tended to preface their sayings with “Thus says YHWH.”

Like Moses and the prophets, Jesus sought God’s glory rather than his own, and spoke on God’s authority rather than his own (John 7:16-18 cf. Deuteronomy 18:18-19). However, unlike Moses and the prophets, Jesus had YHWH’s sanction to speak on his own behalf (Moses was severely punished for doing so – see Numbers 20:10 cp. Psalm 106:32-33<sup>79</sup>). He stressed the necessity of believing in his name (John 3:18 cf. 1:12). He positioned himself alongside God as an object of faith: “Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1).

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<sup>77</sup> Harner, Philip B. *The ‘I AM’ of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Some seemingly superfluous details are provided for the sake of contextualization (e.g. Luke 2:2) or reconciling the Gospels with each other (e.g. John 3:24).

<sup>79</sup> It was inappropriate for Moses to declare himself to be the quencher of Israel’s thirst even in a temporary sense; yet Jesus boldly declares himself to be the eternal quencher of thirst (John 4:14; 6:35), a sentiment echoed by Paul with reference to the Mosaic account in 1 Corinthians 10:4, and also in Revelation 22:1 where the river of the water of the life flows from “the throne of God and of the Lamb.”

Reflecting the words of YHWH in Isaiah 55:1-3, he invited anyone who thirsted to “come to me and drink...believe in me” (John 7:37-38 cf. Isaiah 55:1-3). In the Old Testament, YHWH’s reveals that His “name is Jealous” (Exodus 34:14), and that His people are forbidden from putting their trust in men (Psalm 60:11; 118:8-9; 146:3-4; Jeremiah 17:5-7). With this in mind, it is truly astonishing (Matt. 7:28-29) that Jesus’ teaching focused on his own identity, and that he presented himself as a legitimate object of faith. This unprecedented development is difficult to fathom if Jesus was a mere man, with an identity completely distinct from YHWH’s. As the Jewish leaders’ officers aptly reported in John 7:46, “No one ever spoke like this man.”

#### 4.1.1.1. “I am the Bread of life” (John 6:35)

In this case the primary Old Testament allusion is clear from the context: Jesus is comparing himself to manna, the bread from heaven with which YHWH fed the Israelites in the wilderness (cf. Exodus 16:4-35; Psalm 78:24-25; Psalm 105:40). This comparison consists of three main points: two similarities and one difference. The similarities are that the bread was a gift of God (John 6:32 cf. Exodus 16:15) and that the bread came from heaven (John 6:33, 38, 41-42, 58, 62 cf. Exodus 16:4). This ‘coming from heaven’ did not merely refer to falling from the sky, nor is it merely a metaphor for having been provided by God. *The bread literally came from God’s presence in heaven.*<sup>80</sup> In the case of manna, this can be seen from Psalm 78:25, where it is revealed that manna was “the bread of the angels.” Similarly, in John 6:38, 62 Jesus speaks of his own personal, self-aware pre-existence in heaven. The difference between the two breads is that those who ate manna still died, while those who eat the bread of life will live forever (John 6:49-51, 58).

There are several other Old Testament references to bread which may also figure in the background of Jesus’ discourse in John 6. One of these is Deuteronomy 8:3 (which was definitely well-known to Jesus – cf. Matthew 4:4). In this text Moses reminds the people of the provision of manna, saying:

“And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Following Morna Hooker’s suggestion that the Prologue is the key to understanding the Johannine narrative, Jesus’ identity as the revealed Word in the Prologue makes it likely the self-appellation “the bread of life...that came down from heaven” reflects this text from Deuteronomy about the life-giving Word coming from YHWH.

Secondly, the bread of life saying reflects the symbolism of the Passover (cf. John 6:4). The Passover motif (later to be echoed in the Lord’s Supper) is definitely behind Jesus’ assertion, “And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). This saying may also reflect Jesus’ role as priest. In Leviticus 21:6, the priests were commanded to “offer YHWH’s food offerings, the bread of their God.” In Jesus’ case, the food offering and the “bread of God” was his own flesh (John 6:55; 33).

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<sup>80</sup> In quoting from Psalm 78:24b LXX, the words *ek tou* (‘out of’) are added. Kostenberger explains, “The reason for the addition of *ek tou* probably is christological: for John, Jesus is not merely the ‘bread of heaven,’ but rather the ‘bread from heaven,’ accentuating more keenly Jesus’ provenance from God” (*Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, p. 446).

Thirdly, it is quite likely that the “Bread of the Presence” from the Mosaic tabernacle (Exodus 35:13; 39:36) is also in view in this whole passage. Just as YHWH was present in the tabernacle, so he was present in the flesh of Jesus. We have already seen that this theme occurs elsewhere in John (1:14; 2:19-21).

A further, but more oblique, possible parallel is to Psalm 34:8-10:

“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.”

Psalm 34 is invoked as Messianic in John 19:36, and Psalm 34:8 is quoted by Peter in 1 Peter 2:3, where ‘the Lord’ likely refers to Christ (cf. 1 Peter 1:3).

Other Old Testament passages of note include Psalm 63:1-5; 65:9; 81:10; 107:1-9 (which refer to YHWH as the satisfier of hunger); 119:103 (which compares YHWH’s words to honey); and Isaiah 30:20 (a text which may carry Messianic overtones). To summarize, the “bread of life” saying points to Jesus’ identity as the divine Word who came down from heaven and became flesh in order to give eternal life to the world.

A corollary of the ‘Bread of Life’ saying is that Jesus is also the Well or Fountain of Life. This can be seen in John 6:35 – “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me **shall never thirst.**” It is even more explicit in John 4:9-14, although there is no *ego eimi* saying there:

“9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and **he would have given you living water.**" 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but **whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**"” (John 4:9-14)

These sayings are plainly reminiscent of Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13, where YHWH identifies himself as “the fountain of living waters,” and Isaiah 12:2-3, where YHWH is (implicitly) identified with the “wells of salvation.”

#### 4.1.1.2. “I am the Light of the world” (John 8:12)

One of Jesus’ most memorable sayings was delivered as part of a discourse at the Feast of Tabernacles. There, he declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). In order to understand what Jesus meant by this saying, we will look at the significance of light in the Old Testament.

Light in the Scriptures is primarily a metaphor for divine revelation. God Himself “is light” (Psalm 18:28; 27:1<sup>81</sup>; Micah 7:8; cf. 1 John 1:5). He is “the light of Israel” (Isaiah 10:16), but He is too brilliant to be seen by His people (Exodus 33:20; cf. 1 Timothy 6:16). He can only be known when He reveals Himself, which He has done “in many times and in many ways” (Hebrews 1:1). These revelations (referred to variously as His word, law, commandments, testimonies, etc.) are, therefore, His light (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23). Besides being revelatory of His nature and glory, God’s light also protects His people from darkness (cf. Exodus 13:21-22) and gives them life (Job 33:28-30; Psalm 36:9). The close relationship between word, light and life is seen especially in the creation account in Genesis 1, where God had to introduce light before His creation could be called good, and before life could be created. He did so by simply speaking the words, “Let there be light.” As the Psalmist declares, “By the word of YHWH the heavens were made...for he spoke, and it came to be” (Psalm 33:6, 9).

Spiritual blindness is a common theme in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah (cf. 6:9-10; 29:10; 43:8; 44:18; 56:10; 59:9-10). It is a problem YHWH promised to remedy by means of a great light to come. This light would be “the Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2). He would bring words to the deaf and light to the blind (Isaiah 29:18). The most detailed prophecies about this coming light are in Isaiah:

“1 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined...6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father<sup>82</sup>, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:1-2, 6 ESV)

“1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness...13 The LORD goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes...16 And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.” (Isaiah 42:1, 5-7, 13, 16 ESV)

[To Zion] “1 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon

<sup>81</sup> Other interesting passages about YHWH and light Psalm 44:3; 97:4-6; 139:11-12; Habakkuk 3:3-4.

<sup>82</sup> Some translate ‘Father of eternity’.

you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising...19 The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. 20 Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.” (Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-20)

In these passages we find that the coming light would be the servant of YHWH, a specially chosen human child. However, at the same time we find that the YHWH Himself would be the light. Indeed, Isaiah 60:19 is modified in Revelation 21:23, where new Jerusalem “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” This parallel includes Jesus within the identity of YHWH.

The New Testament, especially the writings of John, draws on the Old Testament theme of light (and the related themes of word and life) in order to explain Jesus’ identity. In an allusion to Genesis 1, John introduces Christ using the metaphors of Word and Light in the Prologue of his Gospel (John 1:1-18). Like God’s Word, he existed in the beginning, and is both God and yet distinct from God (John 1:1). Like God’s Word, he was instrumental in creation, and brought life and light (John 1:3-4). As the Light, he came into the world, fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, but his own people did not receive him (John 1:9-11) due to their blindness, which also fulfilled Isaiah (John 12:37-41). For John, Jesus was God made visible and audible. In him the Father’s glory was seen (John 1:14); the invisible God became visible (John 1:18).

John’s use of ‘word’ and ‘light’ imagery to introduce the person of Christ in his Gospel may ultimately derive from the Old Testament, but more immediately it derived from his personal experience of Jesus Christ.

Jesus affirmed that no one had seen God’s form (John 5:37) except for himself (John 6:46). However, he claimed that to see him was as good as seeing God (John 12:45; 14:9). He claimed to be God made visible, and so identified himself as the light of the world on several occasions during his ministry. Once, he indicted his contemporaries because “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19). Once, he demonstrates that he is the light emphatically by healing a man who was blind from birth:

“1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.”

Later, at the conclusion of his public ministry, Jesus reiterates that he has “come into the world as light” and appeals to the people to “believe in the light” (John 12:35-36, 46). Finally, there is the *ego eimi* saying which formed the title of this section: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John

8:12). By this saying, Jesus claims to be the apex of divine revelation; the perfect reflection of God's glory. These ideas are found in the other writings of the New Testament (cf. Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15). As the true light, Jesus is the only fully legitimate representation of God. He is the only visible being who can be worshipped without it being idolatry (cf. John 20:28). Thus, while 'light of the world' is not intrinsically a claim to deity (it can be applied to mere men who bear God's light to others – Matthew 5:14; John 5:35; Acts 13:47; Ephesians 5:8), the way the title is used in John's Gospel does indicate his deity.

#### **4.1.1.3. “I am the Door of the sheep...I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:7, 11)**

Shepherd-and-sheep imagery is used extensively in the Old Testament in a number of ways (often several ways in a single passage), including:

- To describe the relationship between YHWH and Israel (Genesis 48:15; Psalm 23; 28:9; 74:1; 79:13; 80:1-3; 95:7; 100:3; Eccl. 12:11; 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10; Ezekiel 34:11-17, 31; Micah 7:14)
- To describe the relationship between the coming Davidic Messiah and Israel (Genesis 49:24; Jeremiah 23:1-5; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24; Micah 5:2-4 cf. Matthew 2:6; Zechariah 13:7 cf. Matthew 26:31)
- To describe the relationship between various temporal leaders (both good and evil) and Israel (2 Samuel 5:2; 2 Samuel 7:7; Psalm 78:70-71; Isaiah 44:28; 56:11; 63:11; Jeremiah 2:8; 3:15; 10:21; 17:16; 23:1-4; 25:34-36; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:1-10; Micah 5:5-6 cf. Matthew 2:6; Nahum 3:18; Zechariah 10:3; 11:3-17)
- To describe the helplessness of men when they lacked strong leadership or failed to respond to it (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 50:17)

The New Testament – particularly the Gospel of John – portrays Jesus as transcending the shepherd-sheep relationship. He is the good shepherd (John 10:11) and he is the lamb of God (John 1:29, 36). He also serves as the door of the sheep (a mediatory role between shepherd and sheep). This is appropriate because, as both shepherd and sheep himself, he has a 'foot in both camps' as it were.

An important question for the present study is, how should we classify Jesus' Messianic office as shepherd, foretold in the Old Testament and expounded in the New? Was the Messiah to be the greatest of the YHWH-appointed human shepherds? Or was the Messiah to fill YHWH's own office as the ultimate shepherd (which would require that the Messiah be YHWH)? The correct answer, we believe, is *both*.

In the first case, the Messiah's being called 'David' in Ezekiel 34:23-24 and 37:24 shows that he is a greater fulfilment of David's role as shepherd over Israel (which imagery was derived from David's original occupation as a literal shepherd – see Psalm 78:70-71). He is called a man in Zechariah 13:7, and described as a brother to the people of Israel, born in Bethlehem, in Micah 5:2-4. He is described in Jeremiah 23:5 as a righteous branch whom YHWH raises up for David. Yet, as surely as these prophecies foretell the Messiah's humanity, they also imply that he is not to be merely human. In Ezekiel 34:15 YHWH declares that He Himself would be the shepherd of the sheep, yet in v. 23-24 YHWH intends to share the shepherding role with the Davidic Messiah; yet there will be but one shepherd. In Zechariah 13:7, the Messiah is a man who stands next to YHWH. This should astound us – in light of YHWH's frequent assertions that there is none beside Him, what human being can stand beside Him?

In Micah 5:2, even as the Messiah's earthly roots in Bethlehem are prophesied, we are told that his "coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (some translations – from everlasting). In Jeremiah 23:6, the righteous branch is to be called by the name, "YHWH our righteousness." Finally, in Genesis 49:24, the Messiah is described as "the Stone of Israel," which is close to "the Rock of Israel," a divine title used in 2 Samuel 23:3 and Isaiah 30:29.

Several prophetic texts – some in the context of shepherd-imagery – identify YHWH Himself with the one who was to suffer. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Zechariah 12:10, which reads:

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (ESV)

We can say with certainty that this verse is Messianic, because it is quoted as such in John 19:37. Although John simplifies the text to 'they will look on him whom they pierced', the Old Testament text (both MT and LXX) has the people looking both "to me" (i.e. God) and "to him." This implies that the one pierced is God and yet distinct from God (which is exactly what John's Gospel teaches about Christ – John 1:1).

Two other passages which suggest YHWH's identification with the suffering Messiah are Isaiah 59:16-17 and Isaiah 63:1-2, 5, 8-9:

"16 [YHWH] saw that **there was no man**, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then **his own arm brought him salvation**, and his righteousness upheld him. 17 He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak." (ESV)

"1 Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? '**It is I**, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.' 2 Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?... 5 I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; **so my own arm brought me salvation**, and my wrath upheld me... 8 For [YHWH] said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.' And he became their Saviour. 9 **In all their affliction he was afflicted**, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and **carried** them all the days of old." (ESV)

Isaiah 59:16-17, at first glance, appears to concern only the final judgment of the wicked. However, that it has applications to the salvation effected by Christ on the cross is clear from context. The imagery of YHWH's arm bringing salvation opens the obviously Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53. Furthermore, Paul quotes Isaiah 59:17 with reference to the present dispensation in Ephesians 6:14, 17, and paraphrases Isaiah 60:1-2 (which is part of the same thought) in Ephesians 5:14, applying it to Christ. Thus this prophecy strongly suggests that the Messiah had to be YHWH Himself, because no mere man was righteous enough to make intercession!

Isaiah 63:1-2 is clearly Messianic, but in verses 5, 8-9 it is YHWH who declares that He became His people's Saviour for want of another. 'Saviour' is a title used frequently of both God and Christ in the New Testament (often in close proximity – see Titus 3:4, 6). Furthermore, YHWH's being 'afflicted' and 'carrying them' echoes the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53:4 – "Surely he has borne our griefs and **carried** our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and **afflicted**."

For another passage which may foretell YHWH's identification with the suffering Messiah, see Isaiah 49:16 which will be discussed later in connection with Luke 24:39. This passage occurs within a Messianic context (Isaiah 49:6-7) and contains shepherd imagery (Isaiah 49:9).<sup>83</sup>

The Old Testament prophets therefore strongly imply that the Shepherd-Messiah would be identified with YHWH Himself – even in his sufferings. However, there are also New Testament reasons for identifying Jesus' "I am the good shepherd" saying as an identification with YHWH.

Firstly, Jesus in John 10 and elsewhere teaches about his own role as shepherd in ways which reflects the Old Testament's shepherd imagery *concerning YHWH*. Jesus leads his sheep (John 10:3, 27); YHWH leads His sheep (Psalm 23:3; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11, which is clearly Messianic given the application of the previous verse to Christ in Revelation 22:12). Jesus' sheep know him (John 10:4, 14) and hear his voice (John 10:27); YHWH's sheep know Him (Psalm 100:3) and hear His voice (Psalm 95:7). Jesus enables his sheep to find pasture (John 10:9); so does YHWH (Isaiah 49:9; Jeremiah 50:19; Ezekiel 34:14; Micah 2:12). Jesus' sheep will never perish or be snatched from him (John 10:28); YHWH's sheep likewise dwell securely (Ezekiel 34:25, 28). Jesus sought out lost sheep in order to save them (Luke 15:1-10; 19:10; 1 Peter 2:25); so did YHWH (Psalm 119:176; Jeremiah 50:6, 19; Ezekiel 34:16). Jesus judges between sheep and goats (Matthew 25:32); so does YHWH (Ezekiel 34:17). Jesus is one shepherd (John 10:16), together with the Father (John 10:28-30); so is YHWH (Ecclesiastes 12:10), and so are YHWH and the Davidic Messiah together (Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:23-24).

Secondly, the New Testament describes Jesus' office as shepherd in superlative ways. He declares himself to be "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11), yet elsewhere he cautioned a certain ruler that the title "Good Teacher" could only rightly be applied to God (Luke 18:18-19)<sup>84</sup>. The epistles call him "Great Shepherd" (Hebrews 13:20) and "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4). Peter also declares, in 1 Peter 2:21-25:

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<sup>83</sup> A further, but questionable text in this regard is Psalm 96:10. Justin Martyr claimed that the verse originally began, "Say among the nations that the Lord reigns from the wood", which he understood to be a Messianic reference to the cross, but that the words 'from the wood' had been removed by the Jews because of this interpretation. No evidence of Justin's reading has been uncovered to date so it must be viewed with some scepticism. However, it should be noted that "the trees of the wood" are mentioned in v. 12, so his claim is at least contextually plausible.

<sup>84</sup> This passage is frequently cited as a disavowal of deity on Jesus' part; but if so, why did he appropriate a nearly identical title in John 10:11? While the Scriptures declared that among men there was "none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10 cf. Psalm 14:3), the earliest Christians had no qualms about calling Jesus "the Righteous One" with reference to the days of his flesh (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). In light of this, a more plausible explanation of Luke 18:18-19 is that Jesus was not uncomfortable with being called 'Good Teacher,' but that he wanted the man to think carefully about the implications of what he was saying and not use the word

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Peter draws extensively on Isaiah 53 here, but the Shepherd in Isaiah 40-55 is YHWH (Isaiah 40:11). Furthermore, can anyone other than YHWH be called the Shepherd and Overseer of souls (cf. Matthew 10:28)?

In summary, then, the use of shepherd-imagery with respect to Jesus reflects his identity as the greater David, the human Messiah whom YHWH appointed to lead His people Israel to salvation. However, it also reflects his inclusion in YHWH's own unique identity, fulfilling YHWH's promise that He Himself would ultimately be His people's shepherd (Ezekiel 34:15).

#### **4.1.1.4. "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25)**

In John 11 we have recorded the following dialogue between Jesus and Martha, whose brother, Lazarus, has died:

"21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Having spoken these words, Jesus went on to raise Lazarus from the dead, demonstrating that he is indeed "the resurrection and the life." Old Testament antecedents for this saying are few because the resurrection is not a prominent idea in the Old Testament. The doctrine can be found there, however, and Martha (along with most Jews of her day) believed in the latter-day resurrection.

The author of Hebrews inferred Abraham's belief in the resurrection from his willingness to offer up Isaac (Hebrews 11:19), and Jesus inferred it from YHWH's self-declaration, "I am the God of Abraham" (Exodus 3:6) in the present tense even after Abraham was dead (Matthew 22:31-32). Here is a survey of other Old Testament references to the resurrection (with New Testament passages that may depend on them).

The following Old Testament references apply primarily to the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

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'good' frivolously. In this way, Jesus' response may actually be seen as a veiled claim to deity. If only YHWH is truly good, and Jesus is truly good, then truly Jesus must be YHWH!

“8 I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. 10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” (Psalm 16:8-10 ESV; cf. Acts 2:25-31)

“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.” (Isaiah 53:10 ESV; cf. Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:22-24)

“1 Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” (Hosea 6:1-2 ESV; cf. Luke 24:45-46)

The following Old Testament references seem to be more general in application:

“14 If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. 15 You would call, and I would answer you; you would long for the work of your hands.” (Job 14:14-15 ESV; cf. John 5:25; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16)

“25 For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. 26 And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, 27 whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19:25-27 ESV)

“13 Arise, O LORD! Confront him, subdue him! Deliver my soul from the wicked by your sword, 14 from men by your hand, O LORD, from men of the world whose portion is in this life. You fill their womb with treasure; they are satisfied with children, and they leave their abundance to their infants. 15 As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.” (Psalm 17:13-15 ESV)

“15 But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” (Psalm 49:15 ESV)

“24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:24-26 ESV; cf. 1 Timothy 3:16)

“[YHWH of hosts] will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:8 ESV; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:54)

“19 Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. 20 Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. 21 For behold, the LORD is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for

their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.” (Isaiah 26:19-21 ESV)

“12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.” (Ezekiel 37:12-14 ESV; cf. John 5:28-29)

“1 At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt...13 But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days.” (Daniel 12:1-2, 13 ESV; cf. Matthew 25:46)

“4 But I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior... 14 Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.” (Hosea 13:4, 14 ESV; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55)

A common denominator between all of these resurrection texts is that YHWH God is the one doing the raising. This makes Jesus’ claim “I am the resurrection” that much more astounding! Jesus’ longest discourse on his own future role in the resurrection is found in John 5:19-29:

“19 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. 21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. 22 The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. 25 "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

Jesus claims that he will call to the dead and open the graves, which is precisely what Job 14:14-15 and Ezekiel 37:13-14 say YHWH will do. Job quite clearly expects that his redeemer will be the living God, “and not another” (Job 19:27). Furthermore, Jesus declares here that the Father will judge no one but has given the full prerogative of judgment to the Son. Since the Old Testament consistently and emphatically teaches that judgment – especially the final judgment – is the exclusive prerogative of YHWH<sup>85</sup> – this would be incomprehensible and blasphemous unless the Christ, the Son of God, is himself YHWH<sup>86</sup>. Thus, in claiming to be “the resurrection” and the judge who has the right to give life or take it away, Jesus unmistakably makes a claim to deity.

#### 4.1.1.5. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)

“1 Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:1-6 ESV)

The Way:

The notion of ‘the way’ has a rich Old Testament pedigree.

The way of the tree of life was barred after the fall in Eden (Genesis 3:24); thus, one implication of Jesus calling himself “the way, the truth, and the life” is that he is the solution to that problem – he is the sole means of reconciliation to divine favour. In this respect, the saying again reflects his identification with the Word, since in the Old Testament the Word/Wisdom is referred to as the way (Psalm 86:11; Proverbs 3:17-18).

YHWH dwelt in a pillar of cloud (Exodus 13:21) and put His Name in an angel (Exodus 23:21-22) in order to guide the Israelites’ way in the wilderness. As was already discussed, this ‘Exodus’ theme occurs in Isaiah 40:3 (“Prepare the way of YHWH”), which is a foundational text to Jesus’ earthly mission in all four Gospels. The Greek word translated ‘way’ in John 14:6 (*hodos*) occurs in Isaiah 40:3 LXX and its the quotation in John 1:23. Thus, this saying reflects Jesus’ position as the way in the new Exodus (cf. also Isaiah 43:16-19, 48:17 on this theme).

‘Way’ in the Old Testament is also used commonly with respect to righteousness, using the imagery of walking in the right way (God’s way) and the wrong way; in truth or in falsehood (cf. Deuteronomy 5:33; 1 Samuel 12:22-23; Psalm 37:23-24; 119:30, 128; 139:24; Proverbs 6:23; 15:24; Isaiah 35:8; Jeremiah 6:16; 21:8; 32:39). So this saying may also reflect Jesus’

<sup>85</sup> On judgment being a divine prerogative, see Genesis 16:5; 18:25; 31:53; Deuteronomy 32:35; Judges 11:27; 1 Samuel 2:10; 1 Chronicles 16:33; Psalm 7:8-11; 50:4-6; 67:3-4; 75:7; 82:8; 94:1-2; 96:10-13; Ecclesiastes 3:17; 12:14; Isaiah 2:3-4; 3:13; 33:22; 51:4-5; Jeremiah 25:31; Ezekiel 7:27; 33:20; 34:17; Daniel 7:22. Saints and angels may participate in the execution of a sentence (Psalm 149:7-9; Matthew 13:41-42), but they have no right to sit in judgment or pronounce judgment (Matthew 7:1; Romans 12:10; Jude 1:9).

<sup>86</sup> The prophets foretold that the Messiah would judge the earth (Isaiah 11:3-4; possibly Micah 5:1). Judgment rightfully belongs to him (Ezekiel 21:27) and, in fulfilment of this, Paul declared that Christ will sit on God’s judgment seat (Romans 14:10-11 cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10, Philippians 2:10-11).

position as the means by which righteousness can be imputed to sinful humans (cf. Romans 4:23-25; 1 Corinthians 1:30).

Finally, the saying reflects the character attributes of YHWH as revealed in the Old Testament: “The LORD is your mighty defender, perfect and just in all his ways; Your God is faithful and true” (Deuteronomy 32:4 GNB); see also Psalm 1:6; 18:30.

A final interesting passage is Amos 8:14, where God himself is called the Way – “Those who swear by the Guilt of Samaria, and say, 'As your god lives, O Dan,' and, 'As the **Way** of Beersheba **lives**,' they shall fall, and never rise again” (ESV). This parallel would not have been identified by LXX readers, since the Hebrew word *derek* (translated ‘way’ here) was translated into the LXX as *theos*, matching the earlier clause. However, this does not rule out the possibility that it lay in the background of Jesus’ saying.

The Truth:

As we observed earlier, John 1:14-17 says that Jesus Christ was “full of grace and truth” and that grace and truth “happened” in Jesus Christ. This reflects YHWH’s declaration of his character in Exodus 34:6 as “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Truth is an essential divine attribute (Psalm 43:3, where it is personified along with light; Isaiah 65:16)<sup>87</sup>, so for Jesus to call himself ‘the Truth’ is a lofty claim indeed. He is called “the faithful and true witness” in Revelation 3:14 (possibly reflecting Jeremiah 42:5), and is “the one...called Faithful and True” who judges in righteousness in Revelation 19:11 (possibly reflecting Deuteronomy 32:4), immediately prior to being addressed as ‘the Word of God’ (Revelation 19:13). Truth is an essential attribute of the Word (Psalm 119:160 cf. John 17:17), so we again see Jesus’ identification with the Word implied in this *ego eimi* saying.

The Life:

This is now the third *ego eimi* saying in which Jesus associates himself with ‘life.’ Jesus (or perhaps the message about Jesus) is termed “the Word of life” in 1 John 1:1. Jesus possesses life as an intrinsic attribute, just as the Father does (John 1:4; 5:26<sup>88</sup>), and he is called the Living One in Revelation 1:18. He is the “Author of life” (Acts 3:15). Just as the oath “As YHWH lives” was used to express certainty in the Hebrew Scriptures (Judges 8:19; Ruth 3:13; etc.), it might equivalently be said, “As Jesus lives.”

In summary, Jesus’ declaration that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” points to his identity as the divine Word, the extension of God’s being which reveals God to man and allows man to know and access God.

#### **4.1.1.6. “I am the True Vine” (John 15:1)**

“1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

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<sup>87</sup> Isaiah 45:19 is another passage where YHWH declares truth as one of his essential attributes (“I YHWH speak the truth”); this will be discussed under the *ego eimi* sayings of John 18:5-8 as this text is reflected in Jesus’ testimony at his trial.

<sup>88</sup> Jesus’ self-existence is not lessened by the fact that (paradoxically) it derives from the Father (cf. John 6:57).

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1-5 ESV)

In this saying, by portraying the Father as the vinedresser and himself as the main stem of the vine, Jesus stresses the vital, sustaining connection between himself and his disciples. This metaphor therefore emphasizes his humanity more than the other predicated *ego eimi* sayings.

Vine imagery is not overly common in the Old Testament, but when it does occur the subject is usually Israel. Isaiah 5:1-7 discusses “the vineyard of YHWH of hosts, which is the house of Israel,” a vineyard which did not bring forth fruit despite being carefully tended, and was therefore dug up and burned (cf. Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10-13; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 17:5-10; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1-2). Yet Isaiah 27:2-6 foretells a day when “Israel shall blossom and bloom, and fill the face of the world with fruit” (cf. Hosea 14:5-7).

A key Old Testament text which probably helps to explain the origin of Jesus’ ‘I am the true vine’ saying is found in Psalm 80:8-19:

“8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. 11 It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. 16 They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face! 17 But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! 18 Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!”

The immediate application of this passage is plainly to Israel, but there is good reason to see a secondary Messianic application. Jesus was also brought out of Egypt (see Hosea 11:1 cp. Matthew 2:15; Daniel 7:13 for similar ‘Israel’ passages which are Messianic), and the ‘son’, ‘right hand’ and ‘son of man’ language in verses 15 and 17 strongly suggest a Messianic reading.

Similarly, plant and root imagery is applied to “the servant of YHWH” in Isaiah 53:2, which is obviously Messianic – so obviously, in fact, that the immediate identity of “the servant of YHWH” as Israel is often forgotten (cf. Isaiah 44:1-2, 21; 49:3; etc.) Isaiah 11:1, 10 and Jeremiah 23:5-6 are two other important prophecies which describe the Messiah with plant imagery, stressing his descent from David.

The overriding message of the ‘I am the true vine’ saying seems to be that citizenship of the true Israel of God is achieved, not by fleshly descent from the patriarchs (as natural Israel had failed), but by faith in him:<sup>89</sup> “Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, fulfils Israel’s destiny

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<sup>89</sup> This is not to suggest a total replacement theology – see the grafting analogy of Paul, in which “the natural branches” will be “grafted back into their own olive tree” (Romans 11:24).

as the true vine of God.”<sup>90</sup> This interpretation fits well into the message of John’s Gospel, in which the Jews have set their hope on their natural descent from Abraham and Moses (5:45; 6:31; 8:33, 39, 53; 9:28) and missed the real message of faith (3:10; 5:39-40; 8:43-44, 56; 9:41).

This saying does not reveal Christ’s deity per se. However, the words “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4) in the discourse that follows reflect Old Testament covenant theology, in which YHWH promises to dwell with His people (Exodus 25:8, 29:45-46; Leviticus 26:11-12; Ezekiel 37:27-28) and they promise to dwell in Him (Psalm 23:6; 61:4; 91:1-2, 9).

#### **4.1.2. The stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings**

It must be stated from the outset that a stand-alone *ego eimi* is not intrinsically a claim to deity or even a remarkable claim. This can be seen from John 9:9, where the healed blind man used *ego eimi* as a simple affirmation that he was, in fact, the blind man who used to sit and beg. At the other end of the spectrum, just a few verses earlier, we have the most striking *ego eimi* of all from the mouth of Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am (*ego eimi*)” (John 8:58). Even a cursory glance at this saying reveals that it is no ordinary statement. Firstly, Jesus begins it with his famous “Amen, amen, I say...” formula, which always prefaces a particularly profound declaration. Secondly, the words ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ leap out at the reader as highly unusual – it is an enigmatic and grammatically awkward statement. Thirdly, the saying made the Jewish leaders want to execute him on the spot (v. 59).

Thus, when attempting to correctly interpret the significance of the stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus, we should neither leap *a priori* to the conclusion that they represent a claim to absolute existence and deity, nor should we rule out such a possibility. By avoiding knee-jerk interpretations we will be applying the words of Jesus from within this Gospel: “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (John 7:24).

One aspect of judging with right judgment is context. We have suggested that the immediate audience of this Gospel consisted of Greek-speaking diaspora Jews and proselytes. For these people, the LXX Scriptures were the standard against which all religious teaching was measured. Thus, we would do well to look for LXX texts which may serve as sources for the *ego eimi* sayings, or in which the Gospel’s first-century audience would have seen parallels to the *ego eimi* sayings. Moreover, we have seen that double meanings are common in John’s Gospel, so we should not be quick to limit the *ego eimi* sayings to their superficial meaning.

##### **4.1.2.1. “Before Abraham was, I am [he]” (John 8:58)**

We begin with John 8:58 because, as mentioned above, it is the most striking of the stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings, and sets the tone for interpreting others. John 8:58 in its immediate context reads thus (ESV):

53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" 54 Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' 55 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56

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<sup>90</sup> Kostenberger, Andreas J. *John*, in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, p. 491.

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.<sup>91</sup> 57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.**" 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

As we have already stated, the *amen* preface to the saying, its odd grammatical construction, and the violent response it engendered all point to the fact that it is a bold and profound claim. A couple other points to note from the context: firstly, we see in v. 53 that an explicit concern of the dialogue is Jesus' identity – *who he makes himself out to be*. Secondly, some have interpreted v. 58 in terms of rank – i.e. (to paraphrase), "Prior to what Abraham ever was (in rank), I am." This interpretation can be ruled out for two reasons. First, claiming to be greater than Abraham did not violate Jewish blasphemy laws, and thus would not have elicited the response of trying to stone Jesus. Secondly, the Jews' question in v. 57 is a temporal one, which requires us to understand 'before' in a temporal sense in v. 58. Thus, we have a strong contextual basis to claim that this saying addresses both the questions of *who Jesus is*, and *since when he has existed* (relative to Abraham) – which of course are closely related issues (cf. John 1:15, 30).

Rolf Furuli, in his exegesis of John 8:58, remarks that "the question is whether [the words *ego eimi*] are used in an everyday sense...or whether they are used in a mystical, theological sense".<sup>92</sup> While it is not clear what he means by 'mystical', we can be quite certain from the context that there is nothing 'everyday' about this saying of Jesus. He is certainly making a remarkable theological statement.

Often discussions of controversial passages like John 8:58 get bogged down in questions of grammar and translation. Discussing what he calls the lexical fallacy of biblical interpretation, Osborne notes, "It has become common...to assume that word studies can settle theological arguments."<sup>93</sup> He decries "the overemphasis on words to the detriment of context."<sup>94</sup> There is nothing intrinsically remarkable about the verb *eimi*, but the way it is used in this particular context is very remarkable.

From an interpretive point of view it is not of great importance whether we translate *ego eimi* as "I am" (following the majority), "I am he", (following the majority translation of other absolute *ego eimi* sayings), "I have been" (following the New World Translation), or "I had been" (following Spiros Zodhiates' translation of the imperfect *en* in John 1:1)<sup>95</sup>, all of which are consistent with the generally accepted meaning of continuous existence.<sup>96</sup> The real key to correct interpretation of this saying is to interpret it in light of its Old Testament context.

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<sup>91</sup> Andrew C. Brunson argues in *Psalms 118 in the Gospel of John*, p. 284ff that John 8:56 is an allusion to Psalm 118:24, and that specifically, "the event Jesus refers to is Abraham's rejoicing at the Tabernacles celebration of Jubilees 16 in anticipation of the future exalted seed of Isaac" (*Ibid.*, p. 301). After all, these words were spoken at the Feast of Tabernacles, and Psalm 118 was the most prominent psalm in the Feast of Tabernacles liturgy of the day.

<sup>92</sup> Furuli, Rolf. *The Role of Theology and Bias in Bible Translation*, p. 229.

<sup>93</sup> Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 84.

<sup>94</sup> Osborne, Grant R. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>95</sup> See Spiros Zodhiates, *Was Christ God?*, p. 39.

<sup>96</sup> This author prefers the translation 'I am he' for *ego eimi* in John 8:58. Graeser, Lynn and Schoenheit rightly criticize the inconsistency of translating *ego eimi* as 'I am' in this verse and 'I am he' in most other cases (*One*

Having already established that the Gospel of John depends heavily on the Old Testament, with a particular emphasis on Isaiah 40-55, we are motivated to look for Old Testament antecedents of this saying of Jesus. In fact, there are several passages in the OT in which God uses similar language to John 8:58 in order to contrast His own eternity and immutability with the transitory nature of other things:

John 8:58 – “Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **Before Abraham was** (*genesthai* – aorist middle infinitive of *ginomai*), **I am** [he] (*ego eimi*).”

Psalms 90:2 MT – “**Before the mountains were brought forth**, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting **you are God**” (ESV).

Psalms 90:2 LXX – “**Before the mountains were brought forth** (*genethenai* – aorist passive infinitive of *ginomai*) and the earth and the world were formed, and from everlasting to everlasting **you are** (*su ei* – second-person equivalent of *ego eimi*)” (New English Translation of the Septuagint)

Isaiah 43:10-13 MT – “You are My witnesses,’ says the LORD, ‘And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that **I am He** (*ani hu*). **Before Me there was** no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me. 11 I, even I, am the LORD, And besides Me there is no savior. 12 I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, And there was no foreign god among you; Therefore you are My witnesses,’ says the LORD, “that I am God. 13 Indeed **before the day was, I am He** (MT: *ani hu*); And there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?” (NKJV)<sup>97</sup>

Isaiah 43:10-13 LXX – “10 Be my witnesses; I too am a witness, says the Lord God, and the servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe and understand that **I am** (*ego eimi*). Before me **there was** (*egeneto* – aorist middle indicative of *ginomai*) no other god, nor shall there be any after me. 11 I am God, and besides me there is none who saves. 12 I declared and saved; I reproached, and there was no stranger among you. You are my witnesses; I too am a witness, says the Lord God. 13 Even **from the beginning, there is** (*estin* – third-person equivalent of *eimi*) also none who rescues from my hands; I will do it, and who will turn it back?”

Isaiah 46:3-4 MT – “3 Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from **before your birth**, carried from the womb; 4 **even to your old age I am he** (*ani hu*), and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” (ESV)

Isaiah 46:3-4 LXX – “3 Hear me, O house of Iakob and everyone who is left of Israel, you who are being carried from the womb and trained from the time you

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*God and One Lord*, p. 480). Past tense translations such as “I was” and “I have been” suffer from the same inconsistency as they are not viable options in Jesus’ other predicate-less *ego eimi* sayings.

<sup>97</sup> Notes: The phraseology in this passage is explicitly associated with being YHWH and being God in an exclusive, absolute sense. In v. 13, “I am he” is *ani hu* in the MT (the Hebrew equivalent of *ego eimi*), but in the LXX *ego eimi* does not appear. Brenton’s translation of the LXX of the end of 43:12 and beginning of 43:13 reads, “...I am the Lord God, even from the beginning...”

were a child. 4 **Until your old age, I am** (*ego eimi*), and until you grow old, **I am** (*ego eimi*); I bear with you; I have made, and I will set free; I will take up and save you.”

Isaiah 48:16 MT – “Come ye near unto me, hear this, Not from the beginning in secret spake I, **From the time of its being, there [am] I** (*ani sham*), And now the Lord Jehovah hath sent me, and His Spirit.”<sup>98</sup> (YLT)

Isaiah 48:16 LXX – “Draw near to me, and hear these things! **From the beginning** I have not spoken in secret; **when it happened** (*egeneto*) **I was** (*emen* – imperfect indicative of *eimi*<sup>99</sup>) there, and now the Lord has sent me and his spirit.”

Three of the above texts, like John 8:58, use the verb *ginomai*, which means “to come into existence; to be created; to exist by creation”,<sup>100</sup> in the aorist tense, denoting a completed action. This verb is contrasted with the subsequent verb *eimi* (“to be; to exist”<sup>101</sup>) in the present tense (or imperfect in Isaiah 48:16), denoting an ongoing action. This contrast serves to differentiate God (who exists actively and continuously) from all other reality (which comes into existence and passes out of existence).<sup>102</sup>

We can see in these passages a recurring formula, which (with some variation) goes thus: **“Before X came into existence (past tense), I am he (present tense).”** The formula expresses God’s eternal presence and immutability by contrasting his absolute existence with the transient existence of X. The claim that John 8:58 reflects these Old Testament *ani hu* sayings is supported by the fact that Jesus spoke these words at the Feast of Tabernacles, where the divine self-declaration *ani hu* played a prominent liturgical role in Second Temple Judaism.<sup>103</sup>

With this evidence in view, we can confidently identify Jesus’ saying in John 8:58 as reflecting YHWH’s exclusive claims to self-existence and absolute deity in the Old Testament. It follows that in John 8:58, Jesus is making an absolute and exclusive claim to deity for himself.

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<sup>98</sup> An intriguing feature of this passage is the question of who the speaker is. Some commentators have seen an immediate, limited application either to Isaiah the prophet or to Israel, and an ultimate Messianic application. The ‘immediate Israel application but ultimate Messianic application’ would fit well with the Isaianic context, in which “the servant of YHWH” in the following chapters unmistakably refers immediately to Israel, but ultimately to Christ (see Isaiah 49:1-6 cf. Acts 13:47, and Isaiah 53). If Isaiah 48:16 is Messianic it has profound Christological implications, and may even have contributed to the self-understanding which led Jesus to appropriate the *ego eimi* divine formula for himself.

<sup>99</sup> This language closely parallels John 1:1-3, where the Word “was” (*en*, third-person indicative imperfect) in the beginning, when all things “were made” (*egeneto*, third-person aorist indicative).

<sup>100</sup> Mounce, William D. *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, p. 126.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, Furuli agrees with Robert Bowman that “the parallels between [Psalm 90:2] and John 8:58 are remarkable,” and states that “Psalm 90:2 evidently says that God is eternal” (*The Role of Theology and Bias in Bible Translation*, p. 240). Yet, strangely, he interprets John 8:58 differently – there, “the time covered by *ego eimi* runs from some unspecified point before Abraham was born [but not eternity], up to the time when Jesus’ words were spoken” (*Ibid.*, p. 241).

<sup>103</sup> On this point see Charles Gianotti, *Christ’s Usage of ‘I Am’ in Light of the Divine Name*, pp. 49-51.

#### 4.1.2.2. “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24, 28)

We dealt with John 8:58 before these verses because it functioned as the climax of the discourse and informs how we should interpret the two prior stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings in the dialogue. As Bauckham states:

“[In some cases of absolute *ego eimi* sayings] there is no plausible antecedent in the context, as though Jesus could be saying ‘I am that one we have just been speaking about.’ In one instance, in fact, the puzzlingly incomplete nature of the phrase is clear in the response of Jesus’ interlocutors. For in 8:24, addressing the Jewish leaders, Jesus says: ‘You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am.’ They respond in 8:25: ‘Who are you?’ – in other words, ‘What do you mean, ‘I am’? ‘I am’ who?’

Jesus is equally obscure when he uses the phrase again in 8:28: ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am.’ He can hardly mean ‘I am the Son of Man,’ because ‘Son of Man’ is an enigmatic way of referring to himself that his hearers in the Gospel do not understand.

In 8:24 and 8:28, therefore, Jesus is clearly making some remarkable kind of claim about himself that is obscure to his hearers. Only when he uses the phrase a third time in 8:58, saying ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ do they realize that he is claiming divine identity. And they react accordingly.”<sup>104</sup>

John 8:24-28, in context, reads thus (ESV):

“23 He said to them, ‘You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that **I am he** (*ego eimi*) you will die in your sins.” 25 So they said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. 26 I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” 27 They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am he** (*ego eimi*), and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. 29 And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.””

The ‘suffering servant’ theme of the latter portion of Isaiah is clearly in view in this passage, which gives further credence to a Messianic interpretation of the one sent by YHWH in Isaiah 48:16. It also gives us further justification for seeing this section of Isaiah as the background to these *ego eimi* sayings.

There are uses of *ego eimi* in Isaiah that closely parallel both of these sayings. The first is Isaiah 43:25-28:

“25 **I, I am he** (LXX: *ego eimi ego eimi*) who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and **I will not remember your sins.** 26 Put me in

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<sup>104</sup> Bauckham, *Ibid.*, p. 156.

remembrance; let us argue together; set forth your case, that you may be proved right. 27 Your first father sinned, and your mediators transgressed against me. 28 Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling.”

The obvious parallel between Isaiah 43:25 and John 8:24 is the association of the *ego eimi* saying with the duration of men’s sins. But there are other striking parallels in the wider context. In the Isaiah passage, God is speaking to Israel, calls on them to engage in dialogue, and reflects on the ‘father’ of sin. In John 8, Jesus is speaking to “the Jews”, engages them in dialogue, and reflects on the ‘father’ of sin and lies (v. 44).

The second relevant Isaianic passage is again Isaiah 43:10 (quoted above). Here, the parallel consists of the revelatory nature of *ego eimi*: in Isaiah, it is God’s intention that Israel “may **know** and believe me and **understand that I am he**.” In John, it is Jesus’ prediction to the Jews that after his death, “then you will **know that I am he** (*tote gnosesthe hoti ego eimi*)” (John 8:28). In fact, this phrase, with slight variations, is used with great frequency by YHWH (usually with the predicate *YHWH*) to declare His intention to ultimately reveal Himself through His acts of salvation and judgment (cf. Exodus 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12; 29:46; Deuteronomy 29:6; 1 Kings 20:13, 28; Isaiah 43:10; 49:23, 26; Jeremiah 24:7; Ezekiel 5:13; 6:7, 10, 13-14; 7:4, 9, 27; 11:10, 12; 12:15, 20; 13:9, 14, 21, 23; 14:8; 15:7; 16:62; 17:21; 20:38, 42, 44; 21:5; 22:16, 22; 23:49; 24:24; 25:5, 7, 11, 17; 26:6; 28:22-23, 26; 29:6, 9; 30:8, 19, 25-26; 32:15; 33:29; 35:4, 9, 12, 15; 36:11, 36; 37:6, 13-14; 39:6; Joel 2:27; 3:17).

One very notable passage in the above list is Joel 2:27-32:

“27 You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel (*kai epignosesthe hoti en meso tou Israel ego eimi* – literally, ‘that in the midst of Israel I am’<sup>105</sup>), and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame. 28 "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. 30 "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 31 The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 32 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.”

As in John 8:28, it is here prophesied that something would enable Israel to “know that I am.” The parallel is supported by two apostolic affirmations that this passage is in fact Messianic. Peter declared on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:15-21) that v. 28-32 were fulfilled provisionally in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Joel declares that this would occur *after* it became apparent that YHWH and no other was in the midst of Israel (as expressed in the phrase *ego eimi*). This suggests that v. 27 was fulfilled in Christ. Secondly, Paul quotes the

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<sup>105</sup> It this word order in the LXX that suggests a possible absolute *ego eimi* saying here.

first part of Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13, and in the context he has identified the Lord (YHWH) in that passage as being Jesus (Romans 10:9)!

A fourth Isaianic passage that parallels this *ego eimi* saying of Jesus is Isaiah 52:9-13:

“9 Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. 11 Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD. 12 For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. 13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and **lifted up**, and shall be exalted.”

This passage closely follows a stand-alone *ego eimi* saying in Isaiah 52:6. The key parallel to John 8:28 is the phrase “lifted up” applied to the servant of YHWH in v. 13 (the same verb, *hyphothenai*, is used in Isaiah 52:13 LXX and John 8:28). We already noted the double meaning of this verb in John – in his death by crucifixion, Jesus was both literally lifted up from the earth, and symbolically exalted over the earth.

As a final note on this passage, in John 8:25, we read, “So they said to him, ‘Who are you?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.’” We suggest that there is a double entendre here. On the surface, Jesus means, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning *of my earthly ministry*.” However, on a deeper level he speaks in his capacity as the divine Logos, as YHWH: “Just what I have been telling you (i.e. my people) from the beginning of the world.” In so doing he reflects a number of passages from Isaiah 40-55:

“18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?...20 Do you not know? Do you not hear? **Has it not been told you from the beginning?** Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 21 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in” (Isaiah 40:18, 20-21 ESV)

“4 Who has performed and done this, calling the generations **from the beginning?** I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; **I am he...** Who **declared it from the beginning**, that we might know, and beforehand, that we might say, ‘He is right’? There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion, ‘Behold, here they are!’ and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news” (Isaiah 41:4, 26 ESV)

“9 I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, 10 **declaring the end from the beginning** and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isaiah 46:9-10 ESV)

“Draw near to me, hear this: **from the beginning I have not spoken in secret**, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.” (Isaiah 48:16 ESV – see discussion under John 8:58)

#### 4.1.2.3. “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26)

This absolute *ego eimi* saying occurs in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. On this saying, Bauckham comments:

“First-time readers or hearers of the Gospel will probably,...like the Samaritan woman herself, take Jesus in 4:26 to mean ‘I am the Messiah you just mentioned.’ While this is not wrong, readers who study the Fourth Gospel more carefully will find – particularly in light of the later occurrences of the phrase – that there is a deeper meaning: that Jesus is claiming not just messiahship but divine identity. At this stage in the Gospel narrative, however, such a claim is not made explicit on the surface of his words.”<sup>106</sup>

We have already seen that the absolute *ego eimi* sayings in John 8 function as divine claims (in light of abundant parallels to YHWH’s use of the phrase in Isaiah). We will observe a similar pattern for the saying in John 4:26, which reads thus:

“25 The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’ 26 Jesus said to her, “**I who speak to you am he** (*ego eimi ho lalon soi*).” (ESV)

The most striking parallel to this statement is found in Isaiah 52:5-7:

MT: “5 Now therefore what have I here,’ declares the LORD, ‘seeing that my people are taken away for nothing? Their rulers wail,’ declares the LORD, ‘and continually all the day my name is despised. 6 Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that **it is I** (*ani hu*) **who speak**; here am I.’ 7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” (ESV)

LXX: “5 And now, why are you here? This is what the Lord says, Because my people were taken for nothing, you marvel and howl. This is what the Lord says, Because of you, my name is continually blasphemed among the nations. 6 Therefore my people shall know my name in that day, because I myself am the one who speaks (*ego eimi autos ho lalon*): I am here, 7 like season upon the mountains, like the feet of one bringing glad tidings of a report of peace, like one bringing glad tidings of good things, because I will make your salvation heard, saying to Sion, ‘Your God shall reign’” (NETS).

The parallel is both textual and contextual. Jesus’ statement is identical to YHWH’s except for the absence of *autos* (‘myself’, which adds emphasis but does not alter the meaning).

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<sup>106</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Monotheism and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 156.

Moreover, v. 7 speaks of one “bringing glad tidings” (*euangelizomenou*). That this is a reference to Christ is certain from Isaiah 61:1; indeed, it is probably one of the main sources for the widespread use of the word *euangelion* (“gospel”) in the NT! There, the speaker describes himself as having been anointed by YHWH to “bring good news to the poor,” and Jesus expressly declared that he fulfilled this passage in Luke 4:17-21. Thus, we are completely justified in seeing Isaiah 52:6 in a Messianic context.

The Isaiah 52:6/John 4:26 parallel may be objected to on the grounds that in Isaiah 52, YHWH is addressing Zion/Jerusalem, whereas in John 4, Jesus is addressing a Samaritan woman. However, that the scope of YHWH’s words in Isaiah 52 extends beyond Jerusalem is evident from v. 10: “The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (ESV).

It is our contention that John 4:26 be seen as fulfilling YHWH’s prophecy of self-revelation recorded in Isaiah 52:6. This requires that we see the *ego eimi* saying in John 4:26 as parallel to the Isaianic *ego eimi* sayings, and thus as a claim to deity.

#### 4.1.2.4. “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6:20/Matthew 14:27/Mark 6:50)

This *ego eimi* saying is recorded not only in John, but also in Matthew and Mark. We will quote Matthew’s account, as it is the most detailed:

“22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; **it is I (*ego eimi*)**. Do not be afraid.” 28 And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”” (Matthew 14:22-33 ESV)

As in John 4:26, this *ego eimi* saying can rightly be interpreted as a simple self-identification – “Don’t be afraid – it’s not a ghost, it’s me, Jesus!” However, a closer look at the context in light of the Old Testament Scriptures reveals that it goes well beyond that. As Bauckham points out, “[H]ere the context, which is evocative of Old Testament theophanies, might already suggest to well-informed readers that more [than the ordinary meaning ‘it is I’] is implied.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Monotheism and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 156.

Firstly, this episode led the disciples to worship Jesus as Son of God – a worship which plainly “goes beyond simple respect for a superior.”<sup>108</sup> The ‘walking on the sea’ episode is revelatory of Jesus’ ultimate identity. Thus we are justified in seeing this *ego eimi* saying as more than a mundane self-identification as the man Jesus of Nazareth.

We would like to introduce a similar incident recorded in Mark 4:36-41 in which Jesus showed his power over the sea. Although it does not contain an *ego eimi* saying, it is relevant to our current context because it is also concerned with Jesus’ ultimate identity:

“36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still faith?" 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "**Who then is this**, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"” (ESV)

In the Old Testament, YHWH’s identity as Saviour of Israel and His exclusive claims to deity are frequently tied to His power over the sea, particularly as expressed in the parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus. A first century Jew reading the Gospels and reflecting on the power of Jesus over the sea would not fail to see it in light of this Old Testament background. In fact, there are several textual and contextual parallels which make the connection unmistakable.

Firstly, in Mark 4:39, Jesus “rebuked” the wind. The Greek verb here, *epitimaō*, is the same verb used in Psalm 106:9 LXX, which says that YHWH “rebuked the Red Sea, and it was dried up.” Thus Jesus has the same authority as YHWH to change the weather by direct verbal command.

Secondly, in Job 9:8 LXX (which differs significantly from the MT), Job says of God, “Who alone has stretched out the heavens, and walks on the sea as on firm ground.” The Greek of “walks on the sea” here (*peripaton...epi thalassei*) is nearly identical to the Greek of “walking on the sea” in Mark 6:48b (*peripaton epi tes thalasses*), leading commentators to see a relationship between the two texts.<sup>109</sup>

Thirdly, returning to our focus on the *ego eimi* saying, there are close parallels to the section of Isaiah where most of YHWH’s *ego eimi* sayings occur. In connection with John 8:58, we have already quoted Isaiah 43:10-13, which contains an *ego eimi* saying (two *ani hu* sayings in Hebrew). Slightly further along, it is written:

“16 Thus says the LORD, **who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters**, 17 who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down,

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<sup>108</sup> Gathercole, Simon J. *The Preexistent Son*, p. 69.

<sup>109</sup> See also Psalm 77:19, where the Psalmist says of God, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.”

they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (Isaiah 43:16-17 ESV).

This is obviously a reference to the parting of the Red Sea, but again, in light of the other close parallels between this passage and John’s *ego eimi* sayings, first century Jews would likely have seen Jesus’ walking on the sea as a further application of v. 16.<sup>110</sup>

Fourthly, a strong parallel between the walking on the sea event and this section of Isaiah consists in Jesus’ reassuring command, “Do not be afraid” (*me phobeisthe*), which is recorded in all three Gospel accounts. The same command is issued by YHWH in the following passages in Isaiah:

“9 Go up on a high mountain, you who bring good tidings to Sion; lift up your voice with strength, you who bring good tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up; do not fear (*me phobeisthe*); say to the cities of Ioudas, ‘See, your God!’ 10 See, the Lord comes with strength, and his arm with authority; see, his reward is with him, and his work before him. 11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd and gather lambs with his arm and comfort those that are with young. 12 Who has measured the water with his hand and heaven with a span and all the earth by handful? Who has weighed the mountains with a scale and the forests with a balance?” (Isaiah 40:9-12 NETS)

The parallel is bolstered by the reference to God’s sovereignty over the waters in v. 12. Two additional things to note about this passage: (1) the shepherd/flock imagery in v. 11, which we already saw self-applied by Christ in John 10:11; (2) the obvious parallel between v. 10 and the words of Jesus in Revelation 22:12 – “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me.” Also, Isaiah 40:13 is applied to Christ by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:16.

“10 Do not fear (*me phobou*), for I am with you; do not wander off, for I am your God who has strengthened you, and I have helped you, and I have made you secure with my righteous right hand. 11 See, all who oppose you shall be ashamed and disgraced, for they shall be as though they were not, and all your adversaries shall perish. 12 You shall seek them, but you shall not find the men who shall treat you violently, for they shall be as though they were not, and those who war against you shall not be, because I am your God, who holds your right hand, who says to you, ‘Do not fear’ (*me phobou*).” (Isaiah 41:10-13 NETS)

This passage is only a few verses along from the *ego eimi* saying in Isaiah 41:4 (which will be examined closely later). Furthermore, a parallel can be seen between the reassurance, “I have made you secure with my righteous right hand...I am your God, who holds your right hand” and Peter’s attempt to walk on the water, which ended thus: “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”” (Matthew 14:31)

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<sup>110</sup> See also the similar reference to YHWH’s power over the sea (Isaiah 51:10, 15) in the context of an absolute *ego eimi* saying (Isaiah 51:13). There is also a rebuke of Israel for fearing temporal things and not turning to the God of comfort (Isaiah 51:12-13), on which see next page.

In summary, we see abundant evidence for interpreting the *ego eimi* saying in Matthew 14:27/Mark 6:50/John 6:20 as parallel to the *ego eimi* sayings of Isaiah. It can thus be rightly called a veiled claim to absolute and exclusive deity on the part of Jesus. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the widespread belief that the Synoptic Gospels present a lower Christology than John.

#### 4.1.2.5. “That...you may believe that I am he” (John 13:19)

In Jesus’ discourse to his disciples at the Last Supper, while discussing the need for them to follow his example of servitude, he makes the following aside about Judas:

“18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that **I am he** (*ego eimi*).”

Unlike John 4:26 and 6:20 (and 9:9), there is no obvious contextual clue to the immediate meaning of *ego eimi*. Its direct interpretation should probably be made in light of everything Jesus has said up till now in the Johannine narrative: he is the one he has claimed to be. The disciples probably would not have understood this as a claim to deity at the time. However, once again, in light of the evidence we have seen so far, we are justified in looking for a deeper meaning.

The most singular feature of this *ego eimi* saying is that it connects Jesus’ identity with his prophetic power. YHWH also does this in several passages in Deutero-Isaiah:

MT: “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; **I am he** (*ani hu*).” (Isaiah 41:4 ESV)

LXX: “Who has wrought and done these things? The one calling her from the beginning of generations has called her. I, God, am first, and for the things that are coming, I am (*ego eimi*).” (Isaiah 41:4 NETS)

MT: “6 You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? **From this time forth I announce to you new things**, hidden things that you have not known. 7 They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, 'Behold, I knew them.' 8 You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously, and that from before birth you were called a rebel...For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. 12 "Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! **I am he**; I am the first, and I am the last.” (Isaiah 48:6-8, 11-12 ESV)

LXX: “6 You have heard all things, and you yourselves have not known. But I have also made to be heard by you, from now on, the new things that shall come to pass, yet you did not speak. 7 They are happening now, not long ago; in former

days you did not hear of them; do not say, 'Yes, I know them.' 8 You have neither known nor understood, nor did I open your ears from the beginning. For I knew that betraying you would betray, and taht even from the womb you would be called a lawless one...For my own sake will I do this to you, because my name is being profaned, and my glory I will not give to another. 12 Hear me, O Iakob, and Israel, whom I call: I am the first, and I am (*ego eimi*) forever."

Here, YHWH's *ego eimi* saying is tied to His identity as the one who declares new things before they come to pass. An even clearer expression of this aspect of YHWH's identity is found in Isaiah 42:8-9:

"8 I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. 9 Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; **before they spring forth I tell you of them.**" (Isaiah 42:8-9 ESV)

There is no *ego eimi* saying here, but *ego kurios ho theos* (literally, "I Lord/YHWH the God") amounts to the same – an absolute claim to deity. Furthermore, the bolded phrases above, "From this time forth I announce to you new things" and "Before they spring forth I tell you of them," is strikingly close to Jesus' statement in John 13:19, "I am telling you this now, before it takes place." Jesus' prophetic power does not only reveal that he is a prophet, a man through whom God is speaking; it reveals His own unique divine identity as encapsulated in the phrase *ego eimi*.

Finally, in Isaiah 44:6-8 YHWH also makes His prophetic power a distinguishing feature of His exclusive claim to deity, and defies all other claimants to foretell the future:

LXX: "6 Thus says God, the King of Israel, who delivered him, God Sabaoth: I am first, and I am after these things; besides me there is no god. 7 Who is like me? Let him stand; let him call, and let him make ready for me, inasmuch as I have made man forever, and let them declare to you the things that are coming before they come. 8 Do not cover yourselves; did you not give ear from the beginning, and I declared it to you? You are my witnesses, whether there is a god besides me, and they were not formerly" (Isaiah 44:6-8 NETS)

#### **4.1.2.6. "When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:5-8)**

The final three stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings in John's Gospel are in the account of his arrest in John 18:5-8. In context it reads thus:

"3 So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" 5 They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "**I am he**" (*ego eimi*). Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. 6 When Jesus said to them, "**I am he**" (*ego eimi*), they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said,

"Jesus of Nazareth." 8 Jesus answered, "I told you that **I am he** (*ego eimi*). So, if you seek me, let these men go." 9 This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one." (ESV)

Here, as in John 4:26 and John 6:20, it is obvious that there is a mundane immediate meaning of *ego eimi*: Christ is simply identifying himself to the soldiers as "Jesus of Nazareth." Once again, however, we are justified in seeing a deeper meaning for *ego eimi* here, in light of the great significance the phrase has had in the Gospel so far, and the reaction of the soldiers to the phrase:

"Jesus asks them, 'Whom are you looking for?' When they reply, 'Jesus of Nazareth,' he responds: 'I am' (vv. 5, 6, 8) – which can, again, mean simply 'I am he' or 'It is I.' In this case, however, we may be suspicious as to whether this ordinary meaning is sufficient to explain the phrase, since the reaction of the soldiers was to fall to the ground (v. 6) and since 'I am' occurs three times, suggesting that this may be an emphatic climax of the series of such sayings."<sup>111</sup>

The soldiers likely fell to the ground from a combination of surprise (they probably weren't expecting him to give himself up so easily) and fear (they had probably heard stories of his supernatural powers). However, it is possible that John wants us to interpret it ironically as an unwitting act of worship (similar to Caiaphas' unwitting prophecy in John 11:49-51). If this is the case, it represents a parallel with the *ego eimi* saying in Isaiah 45:18:

LXX: "18 Thus says the Lord, who made heaven – this is the God who displayed earth and made it; he himself marked its limits; he did not make it to be empty but to be inhabited: I am (*ego eimi*), and there is no other. 19 I have not spoken in secret nor in a dark place of the earth; I did not say to the offspring of Iakob, 'Seek a vain thing.' I am (*ego eimi*), I am the Lord, speaking righteousness and declaring truth. 20 Assemble yourselves, and come; take counsel together, you who are being saved from among the nations! They did not know – those who lift up the wood, their graven image, and pray as if to gods that do not save. 21 If they will declare it, let them draw near so that they may know together who made from the beginning these things that are to be heard. Then it was declared to you, I am God, and there is no other besides me; there is no righteous one or saviour except me. 22 Turn to me, and you shall be saved, you who are from the end of the earth! I am God, and there is no other. 23 By myself I swear, 'Verily righteousness shall go forth from my mouth; my words shall not be turned back, because to me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall acknowledge God' (Isaiah 45:18-23 NETS)

Our suggestion is that, in light of this passage from Isaiah, John interpreted the soldiers' falling to the ground as a prototypical fulfilment of the prophecy that every knee would ultimately bow to YHWH, the great "I Am." As evidence for this assertion we would make two observations. Firstly, we know that the early church saw this prophecy as Messianic, because Paul taught that the exaltation of Jesus Christ, and the bestowal of "the name that is above every name" (which can be none other than *YHWH*) upon him, was a fulfilment of Isaiah 45:23 (cf. Phil. 2:10-11).

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<sup>111</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Secondly, there are several notable parallels between Isaiah 45:19 and John's account of Jesus' trial (which closely follows the *ego eimi* sayings of John 18). In Isaiah 45:19, God declares, "I have not spoken in secret nor in a dark place of the earth."<sup>112</sup> Compare this with Jesus' declaration in John 18:20 – "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret." God in Isaiah 45:19 further says, "I am the Lord, speaking righteousness and declaring truth," while Jesus says, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if **what I said is right**, why do you strike me?" (John 18:23) and, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world--**to bear witness to the truth**. Once again, then, we have good reason for seeing a veiled – but nonetheless absolute – claim to deity in Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings in John 18:5-8.

#### 4.1.2.7. "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself" (Luke 24:39)

The final stand-alone *ego eimi* saying we wish to discuss in detail comes from Luke 24:39. It is found in no other Gospel and represents the only post-resurrection *ego eimi* saying recorded. In context it reads thus:

"36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that **it is I myself** (*autos ego eimi*). Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet." (Luke 24:36-40 ESV)

This account bears similarities to the "walking on the sea" episode, in that the disciples mistake Jesus for a spirit/ghost and he uses *ego eimi* for the immediate purpose of confirming that he is, in fact, Jesus. But once again, the meaning of the saying does not end there. There is a clear epiphanic overtone to the saying – Jesus is revealing his resurrected self to the eleven and those who were with them. And, once again, the immediate context of the saying contains striking parallels to YHWH's *ego eimi* sayings in the Old Testament:

MT: "39 **'See now that I, even I, am he** (*ani ani hu*), and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. 40 For I lift up my hand to heaven and swear, As I live forever, 41 if I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me. 42 I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh-- with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy.' 43 "Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land." (Deuteronomy 32:39-43 ESV)

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<sup>112</sup> See also Isaiah 48:16 – "From the beginning I have not spoken in secret" – a passage we have already discussed for its intriguing Messianic implications.

LXX: “39 See, **see that I am** (*ego eimi*), and there is no god except me. I will kill, and I will make alive; I will strike, and I will heal; and there is no one who will deliver from my hands. 40 For I will lift up my hand to the sky, and I will swear by my right hand, and I will say: I live forever, 41 because I will sharpen my dagger like lightning, and my hand will take hold on judgment, and I will repay my enemies with a sentence, and those who hate me I will repay. 42 I will make my arrows drunk with blood – and my dagger shall devour flesh – with the blood of the wounded and of captives, from the head of the commanders of the enemies. 43 Be glad, O skies, with him, and let all the divine sons do obeisance to him. Be glad, O nations, with his people, and let all the angels of God prevail for him. For he will avenge the blood of his sons and take revenge and repay those who hate, and the Lord shall cleanse the land of his people.” (Deuteronomy 32:39-43 NETS)

Other than Exodus 3:14 this is the only absolute *ego eimi* saying in the Pentateuch. The parallel to Luke 24:39 consists in the command to “See...that I am he” (in Deuteronomy 32:39, *idete idete hoti ego eimi*; in Luke 24:39, *idete...hoti autos ego eimi*).

We noted earlier that the Dead Sea Scrolls have often supported the text of the LXX over the MT in cases where the two disagree. The above passage is an example of this. The reason the vindication of the LXX rendering is relevant to our present purpose is that the writer of Hebrews quotes from Deuteronomy 32:43 LXX and applies it to Christ: “And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’” (Hebrews 1:6 ESV).<sup>113</sup> This is important because, as with Isaiah 45:18-23, it means that the early church interpreted an OT passage containing a divine *ego eimi* saying as Messianic. Thus we have good reason to assert that Deuteronomy 32:39 is reflected in Jesus’ declaration in Luke 24:39, which is therefore, ultimately, a claim to deity.<sup>114</sup>

A second OT parallel to the *ego eimi* saying in Luke 24:39 is found in Isaiah 52:5-7 (already quoted in the exegesis of John 4:26). There are two observations which support the claim of a parallel here. The first is the use of the predicate *autos* (myself) qualifying the *ego eimi* saying. To this writer’s knowledge, Isaiah 52:6 and Luke 24:39 are the only *ego eimi* sayings where this predicate occurs (though it could be taken as equivalent to *ego eimi ho on* in Exodus 3:14).

The second observation is the hands and feet imagery in this passage. We already argued that Isaiah 52:7 is clearly Messianic based on its similarity to Isaiah 61:1. This verse likens God’s presence to “the feet of one bringing glad tidings of a report of peace.” This One’s feet are revelatory – they enable YHWH’s people to know that He is present. Similarly, in Luke 24:39 Jesus’ feet are revelatory of his identity as expressed in the *ego eimi* saying<sup>115</sup> (see also Matthew 28:9). His hands are also revelatory, possibly reflecting Isaiah 49:16, where YHWH (in a strongly Messianic context – see v. 6-7) declares to Zion, “Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (although this connection is not clear in the LXX, where YHWH

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<sup>113</sup> The quotation also reflects Psalm 97:7.

<sup>114</sup> The speaker has changed in Deuteronomy 32:43, but it appears that God is the one being addressed (whereas God was speaking in v. 39-42).

<sup>115</sup> Of course, there is a paradox here – it was the *scars* or *marks* in Jesus’ hands and feet to which he was directing their attention. But these scars are in fact beautiful, because of the grace they represent!

says, “See, I have painted your walls on my hands”). See also John 20:25 on this, which refers explicitly to the *tupos* (mark, print or impression) of the nails on Jesus’ hands. On the cross, just as Jesus figuratively bore his people’s sins in his body (1 Peter 2:24), so he figuratively engraved his people’s destiny in his hands.

**4.1.2.8. “Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’” (Mark 13:6/Luke 21:8; cf. Matthew 24:5)**

There is at least one other stand-alone *ego eimi* saying in the Gospels. It occurs in the Olivet prophecy in Mark and Luke:

“5 And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ (*ego eimi*) and they will lead many astray.” (Mark 13:5-6 ESV)

“8 And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ (*ego eimi*) and, ‘The time is at hand!’ Do not go after them.” (Luke 21:8 ESV)

“4 And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.” (Matthew 24:4-5 ESV)

It is clear from comparing Mark and Luke with Matthew that *ego eimi* here means, in the immediate sense, “I am the Messiah.” It is possible to see a higher meaning behind *ego eimi* in Mark and Luke<sup>116</sup>, but the basis for doing so is certainly weaker than the other stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings. Moreover, it is unlikely that these other false Messiahs who would arise would make divine claims, as it was not widely anticipated among the Jews that the Messiah would be divine.<sup>117</sup>

**4.1.2.9. “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? I am” (Mark 14:62)**

*Ego eimi* here functions as a simple affirmative answer to the high priest’s question of whether Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed.” Some scholars see a divine claim beneath the surface of this response<sup>118</sup>, which is possible, but not demanded by the context.

**4.1.3. Other *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus**

**4.1.3.1. “I am from above” (John 8:23)**

In John 8:23 (in a verse immediately preceding a stand-alone *ego eimi* saying that we have already examined), Jesus declares, “You are from below; **I am from above**. You are of this

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<sup>116</sup> See, for instance, Williams, Catrin H., *I Am He: The Interpretation of Ani Hu in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>117</sup> This is not an argument against Christ’s divinity, for it was also not widely anticipated among the Jews that the Messiah would die!

<sup>118</sup> See, for instance, Bowman & Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in his Place*, p. 249.

world; I am not of this world.” Earlier in the Gospel, in explaining the decline of his mission, John the Baptist declared:

“28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease." 31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all” (John 3:28-31 ESV).

We could do a whole study on the bridegroom imagery used of Christ here and elsewhere in the New Testament (Matthew 9:15; 25:1-13; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:23; Revelation 19:7; 21:9), which is also employed heavily by YHWH in the prophets for His relationship with Israel (cf. Isaiah 54:5; 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2; 3:20; 31:32; Hosea 2:2, 16). However, our main focus is on the phrase, “I am from above”, which plainly teaches Christ’s heavenly pre-existence.<sup>119</sup>

In terms of Old Testament antecedents, there are many passages which speak of YHWH’s dwelling-place in heaven, and use this fact to declare His superiority over humans, who dwell on earth:

“4 The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! 5 Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, 6 who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?” (Psalm 113:4-6 ESV)

“18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?...22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; 23 who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.” (Isaiah 40:18, 22-23; we have already stressed the Messianic import of this chapter)

“8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV)

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<sup>119</sup> It may be argued that “I am from above” is a figurative expression meaning, “I have been commissioned by God.” However, this interpretation does not fit the context for multiple reasons. First, John the Baptist was commissioned by God (John 1:6), yet in John 3:28-31 he uses Jesus’ heavenly origin as a point of contrast between his own mission and Jesus’. Secondly, for John, Jesus’ coming from above implied that he was “above all.” Simply being commissioned from above would imply nothing of the kind. A second interpretation could be that “I am from above” refers figuratively to the virgin birth. This view also has major problems. First, the Fourth Gospel does not even contain an account of Jesus’ birth (suggesting, perhaps, that the author did not view it as the commencement of Jesus’ existence). Second, when Jesus said, “I came from the Father and have come into the world” (John 16:28), his disciples responded that that he was now “speaking plainly and not using figurative speech” (v. 29). Third, Jesus claimed to have ‘heard things from’ and ‘seen things with’ the Father in heaven, which requires that his pre-existence was a conscious one (John 3:11-13; 3:32; 6:46; 8:26; 8:38; 15:15).

See also 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 2:2-4; 71:19; 103:8, 11, 19; 115:1, 3, 16; Proverbs 30:4; Ecclesiastes 5:2. The Hebrew Scriptures, then, declare that God is above all precisely because His dwelling-place is in highest heaven. This is one of the fundamental attributes that separates Him from mankind. In the Gospel of John, we find John the Baptist and Jesus using this same concept to draw a fundamental distinction between Jesus and other people, and declare that he is “above all.” Furthermore, there are many passages which speak of YHWH’s descent to earth to accomplish His purpose (usually to perform judgment):

“6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens and **came down**; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.” (Psalm 18:6-10 ESV)

“1 Oh that you would rend the heavens and **come down**, that the mountains might quake at your presence-- 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!” (Isaiah 64:1-2 ESV)

See also Genesis 11:5-8; Exodus 19:20; Psalm 76:8-9; 96:13; 144:3-5; Micah 1:2-4. These passages may also be reflected in New Testament teaching that Jesus had come from above, and will come again. Of course, Jesus’ first coming was not for purposes of judgment – a point which John’s Gospel clarifies (John 3:17-18; 12:47-48); but he is the ultimate judge (John 5:22).

#### 4.1.3.2. “I am with you” (Matthew 28:20; Acts 18:10)

This promise is given by Jesus twice to his apostles after his resurrection – once in the Great Commission and once to Paul in a vision:

“16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, **I am with you always**, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:16-20 ESV).

“9 And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, 10 for **I am with you**, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18:9-10 ESV).

Sherwood calls these sayings “reminiscent in meaning to Exodus 3:12-15, bringing out the presence force in that passage of God’s name, YHWH.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, the similarities are remarkable. In Exodus 3, God appears to Moses on a mountain, sends him on a mission to

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<sup>120</sup> Sherwood, John. *The Relationship of ‘I Am’ in Exodus 3:14 to Jesus’ ‘I Am’ Statements*, p. 62.

His people, reassures him that “I will be (or am<sup>121</sup>) with you”, and provides insight into His Name. In Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus appears to his disciples on a mountain (which was by design – v. 16), sends them on a mission to all nations, reassures them that “I am with you”, and provides insight into the divine Name (as comprising Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

In Acts 18:9-10, the Lord (which within Acts refers to Jesus) appears to Paul in a night vision, sends him on a mission (or rather, revitalizes his morale for his existing mission), reassures him that “**Do not be afraid...I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you.**” This is also reminiscent of other OT declarations of YHWH to His servants. For instance:

“And **on that night the Lord appeared** to [Isaac] and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraam; **do not be afraid, for I am with you** (*me phobou meta sou gar eimi*) and have blessed you and will make your offspring numerous for your father Abraam’s sake.’” (Genesis 26:24 NETS)

“**Do not fear, for I am with you** (*me phobou meta sou gar eimi*); do not wander off, for I am your God who has strengthened you...See, all who oppose you shall be ashamed and disgraced...**you shall not find the men who shall treat you violently**” (Isaiah 41:10-12 NETS)

“And the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am rather young’, because you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak according to all I command you. **Do not be afraid before them, because I am with you** (*me phobethes apo prosopou auton, hoti meta sou ego eimi*) to deliver you,’ says the Lord...‘they will fight you, and **they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you** to deliver you,’ says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 1:7-8, 19 NETS)

By reassuring his people of his ongoing presence and protection, Jesus fulfils a primary role of YHWH as encapsulated in the divine name.

#### 4.1.3.3. “I am the first and the last” (Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13)

Thus far we have noted three OT passages which speak about YHWH’s exclusive claims to deity and use an *ego eimi* saying to that effect, and which are declared by an NT writer to be Messianic. These passages are Deuteronomy 32:39-43 cf. Hebrews 1:6; Isaiah 45:18-23 cf. Phil. 2:10-11; and Joel 2:27-32 cf. Romans 10:9-13.

We now wish to look at one further instance of this: the saying “I am the first and I am the last,” which occurs (with some textual variation) in Isaiah 41:4, 44:6 and 48:12 (immediately before an *ego eimi* saying in Isaiah 41:4; immediately after an *ego eimi* saying in Isaiah 48:12).

This same claim is made by Jesus three times in the Book of Revelation, once with the synonymous declarations “I am Alpha and Omega” and “the beginning and the end”

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<sup>121</sup> The verb here is *ehyeh* which, as noted previously, may be translated in the present tense and be understood as continuous – I have been with you, I am with you, and I will continue to be with you. Similarly, when Jesus declares ‘I am with you’, He is present with them at the time, and has been present with them for a long time already (cf. John 14:9), and will continue to be present with them until the end of the age.

(Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13<sup>122</sup>). God also makes similar claims in the book: “I am Alpha and Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” in Revelation 1:8, and “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” in Revelation 21:6.

This writer has encountered an interpretation among Christadelphians which says that “I am the first and the last,” when used by Jesus in Revelation 1:17 and 2:8, refers to his being the firstborn from the dead (Revelation 1:5; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 12:28) and the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). There is some justification for the first half of this interpretation: Jesus is identified as the firstborn of the dead in the context in Revelation 1:5, and both Revelation 1:17 and 2:8 emphasize that Jesus died and came back to life. Given the emphasis on the new heavens and new earth in chapters 21-22, it makes sense to interpret ‘first’ in these passages, and in Revelation 22:13 along with ‘Alpha’ and ‘beginning’ (cf. Colossians 1:18), as a reference to Jesus’ role as the firstborn of the new creation. However, there does not appear to me to be any reason to interpret ‘last’ as “last Adam.” Adam is not mentioned in Revelation, and it is also difficult to reconcile ‘Omega’ and ‘end’ with this interpretation. The phrase “the first and the last” is certainly intended to express an infinite span of time, and thus it is better to interpret “last” as representing the fact that Jesus is “alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:18). Thus, a likely immediate interpretation of “the first and the last” is in line with the description of Jesus in Hebrews 12:2 as “the founder and perfecter of our faith.”

While the “firstborn of the dead” interpretation has merit, it would be a mistake to see it as *exhausting* the meaning of “I am the first.” “I am the first and the last” is a quotation from Isaiah 41:4, 44:6 and 48:12, and must reflect the meaning given to the phrase in those passages. A first century Jew reading Revelation 1:17, 2:8 and 22:13 would undoubtedly interpret them in light of these Isaianic passages.

Read in context, the expression “I am the first and the last” in Isaiah functions as: (1) an explicit and exclusive claim to YHWH’s deity (44:6-8); (2) an exclusive claim to be able to foretell the future from ancient times (41:4; 44:7-8); (3) an exclusive right to the glory of the name of YHWH (48:11); (4) YHWH’s role as Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth (48:13).

It also functions as a claim to absolute, timeless existence. This can be seen from God’s use of the similar phrase, “I am Alpha and Omega,” in Revelation 1:8, where it is coupled with, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” This coupling is noteworthy because, by comparing Revelation 1:8 with Isaiah 41:4 and 48:12, it appears to confirm that “who is, and who was, and who is to come” is equivalent in meaning to *ego eimi*.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> It is not entirely clear who the speaker is in Revelation 22:13. An angel is speaking in v. 9-10. Commentators have generally seen Jesus as the speaker in v. 12-13, since he is later in the chapter the one who is coming soon (cf. 22:20), and since he is elsewhere identified as “the first and the last” (1:17; 2:8). It is possible that in 22:12-13 the angel is speaking on Christ’s behalf, although this would be anomalous within Revelation. It is not plausible that the angel is speaking on his own behalf – no angel would make such lofty claims after having refused worship in v. 9. It is also not plausible that the angel in v. 9-13 *is* Jesus, because Jesus does not refuse worship in Revelation (cf. 1:17; 5:12-14; 22:3).

<sup>123</sup> This would further support the claim made earlier that Exodus 3:14 should be translated “I am who is” or “I am who I am” and interpreted in terms of absolute, timeless existence encompassing past, present and future. The interpretation “I will be who I will be” is limited only to the future, whereas God throughout the Bible reveals Himself as the God of all aspects of time.

Thus, we are required to see behind Jesus' statement, "I am the first and the last," a claim to absolute deity and timeless existence, past, present and future. Isaiah makes it clear that this phrase is an exclusive claim, so even if Jesus uses it only with reference to the new creation in Revelation, he would not have the right to do so unless he were "the first and the last" in an absolute sense as well. No being other than God can claim to be the first and the last in any sense. Jesus did not become the first and the last by rising from the dead; rather, he was shown to be the first and the last by rising from the dead.<sup>124</sup> As Jan Lambrecht wrote, "After Easter one could no longer conceive of God apart from Jesus his Son."<sup>125</sup>

A further problem that arises if we limit the application of "the first and the last" to the new creation when used by Jesus is that this would be a departure from, rather than an extension of, the contextual meaning of the phrase. It is plainly a claim to absolute deity and timelessness both when used by YHWH in Isaiah, and when used by God in Revelation 1:8 and 21:6. How can we justify a meaning which neither derives from Isaiah nor agrees with the meaning of the phrase elsewhere in Revelation?

Furthermore, there are contextual cues beyond the phrase itself that require us to interpret Jesus' uses of "I am the first and the last" in light of Isaiah. In Revelation 1:17, the phrase is prefaced with "Fear not," which, as we saw earlier, also occurs in the context of two of the three Isaianic uses of the phrase "I am the first and the last" (Isaiah 41:10, 13; 44:8). Furthermore, in Revelation 22:13, the phrase is prefaced with, "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done." We mentioned earlier that this is an allusion to Isaiah 40:10, which occurs shortly before YHWH's first "I am the first and the last" declaration in Isaiah 41:4.

Thus the phrase "I am the first and the last," when used by Jesus, is not only a claim to absolute deity and timelessness, but also demonstrates that the similar expression, "I am," as it occurs in the immediate context of "I am the first and the last" in Isaiah, applies to Jesus. This further supports our view that the *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus in the Gospels ought to be interpreted in terms of the *ego eimi* sayings of YHWH in Isaiah.

#### **4.1.3.4. "I am he who searches mind and heart" (Revelation 2:23)**

Revelation 2:18-29 contain "the words of the Son of God", so there is no question who the speaker is in 2:23bc. Here, Jesus prophesies, "And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works."

This is a paraphrase of Jeremiah 17:10, which reads, "I the LORD (YHWH) search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (ESV); "I, the Lord, am one who tests hearts and examines kidneys<sup>126</sup>, to give each according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (NETS).

Here YHWH declares that knowledge of human motives and judgment are definitive divine attributes. Thus, by quoting this passage and applying it to himself, Jesus accomplishes two

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<sup>124</sup> See Romans 1:4 for a similar understanding of the title 'Son of God' on the part of Paul.

<sup>125</sup> Lambrecht, Jan. *Out of the treasure*, p. 239.

<sup>126</sup> The NETS translator notes that kidneys are symbolic of emotions.

things: first, he implicitly identifies himself as YHWH; second, he takes for himself prerogatives that YHWH declares to be his own.

Furthermore, the Greek of “I am he who searches” in Revelation 2:23 is *ego eimi ho eraunon*. It is therefore very close to the LXX of the divine name in Exodus 3:14 (*ego eimi ho on*), following the formula of *ego eimi ho* + present active participle. This formula is also used by God in definitive self-declarations in Isaiah 43:25 LXX (“I am he who blots out your transgressions”) and 51:12 LXX (“I am he who comforts you”).

Finally, in using the expression, “And all the churches will know that I am he...” Jesus reflects a very common Old Testament proclamation of YHWH – “You/they will know that I am YHWH”, as we saw in the exegesis of John 8:28. As in Revelation 2:23, these Old Testament proclamations are usually spoken in the context of judgment.<sup>127</sup>

It is likely that Revelation 2:23, in context, reflects Ezekiel 23:36-49. Note the similarities between these passages:

“36 The LORD said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Declare to them their abominations. 37 For **they have committed adultery**, and blood is on their hands. With their idols they have committed adultery, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me. 38 Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my Sabbaths. 39 For when they had slaughtered their children **in sacrifice to their idols**, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it. And behold, this is what they did in my house. 40 They even sent for men to come from afar, to whom a messenger was sent; and behold, they came. For them you bathed yourself, painted your eyes, and adorned yourself with ornaments. 46 For thus says the Lord GOD: “Bring up a vast host against them, and make them an object of terror and a plunder. 47 And the host shall stone them and cut them down with their swords. **They shall kill their sons and their daughters**, and burn up their houses. 48 Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. 49 And they shall return your lewdness upon you, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry, and **you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.**” (Ezekiel 23:36-40, 46-49 ESV)

“20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice **sexual immorality** and to eat food **sacrificed to idols**. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and **I will strike her children dead**. And **all the churches will know that I am he** who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.” (Revelation 2:20-23 ESV)

In light of these Old Testament parallels, Revelation 2:23 furnishes powerful evidence that Jesus is none other than YHWH, God of Israel.

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<sup>127</sup> See also John 14:20 – “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

## 4.2. *Ho on* as a possible expression of Christ's absolute existence

*On* is the present active participle of the Greek verb *eimi* ('to be'). Its literal translation would therefore be 'being.' In this section we will argue that in certain NT passages which speak of Christ, it is plausible to interpret the phrase *ho on* as denoting absolute and timeless existence, reflecting the use of the phrase in Exodus 3:14c LXX and Jeremiah 1:6, 4:10, 14:13 and 39:17(32:17) LXX.

That this interpretation is linguistically feasible is also evident from the writings of Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jewish writer contemporary with Jesus. Philo used *ho on* as an epithet for God (cf., for instance, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3:82; *Life of Moses* 1:75; *Questions and Answers on Exodus* 2:67), and gave it an existential meaning:

“Being’ denotes that which is real or has existence; its opposite is non-being or nothing. For Plato, reality belonged to the eternal unchanging Forms or Ideas, while the realm of becoming was held to be intermediate between being and non-being. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria applied this Platonist teaching to the OT. The obvious link was the name of God as revealed to Moses: ‘I am who I am’ (Exodus 3:14). While this expression had originally, in all probability, a very active sense, it came to be interpreted as static immutable being. Philo’s name for God is *ho on*, ‘the Being’ or ‘He who is.’”<sup>128</sup>

Runia refers to *ho on* as a “Septuagintal and eminently Philonic epithet.”<sup>129</sup> It does not matter whether we accept Philo’s Plato-influenced interpretation of Exodus 3:14 LXX. The point we can take from it is that a) *ho on* was seen by Jewish readers of the LXX as an important divine title because of its prominent use in Exodus 3:14, and b) it was semantically possible in the first century for the present active participle *on* to express absolute, timeless existence.

We observed earlier that *ho on* is used in a similar way by the author of Revelation as well. In this section, we want to examine some NT passages where *ho on* may be used to express the deity and absolute existence of Christ. It is important to stress that this is only a possible interpretation of these passages. The positive evidence for such an interpretation is much weaker than the evidence that *ego eimi* expresses the deity and absolute existence of Christ, so we are not being dogmatic in this section.

### 4.2.1. “The only God, who is at the Father’s side” (John 1:18)

“No one has ever seen God; the only God, **who is** (*ho on*) at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” (ESV)

The bolded phrase “who is,” translates the Greek *ho on*. Given the strong parallels to Exodus in this passage, it is possible that this phrase here expresses absolute existence, reflecting the divine name. Karl Zickendraht suggested that the divine designation, “the one who was and

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<sup>128</sup> Richardson, Alan & Bowden, John. *A new dictionary of Christian theology*, p. 63.

<sup>129</sup> Runia, David T. *Witness or participant? Philo and the Neoplatonist tradition*. In *Philo and the Church Fathers: A collection of papers*, p. 197.

is and is to come” is hidden in the Johannine Prologue.<sup>130</sup> If true, this would bolster the claim that *ho on* is absolute in John 1:18.

#### 4.2.2. “He who is from God” (John 6:46)

“Not that anyone has seen the Father except **he who is** (*ho on*) from God; he has seen the Father.” (John 6:46 ESV)

Jesus’ claim to having seen God (which no man had ever done) implies that he had a personal existence in heaven prior to his coming in the flesh (cf. John 6:62). In light of the lofty claim being made here, there may be cause for interpreting *ho on* in an absolute sense – “the being from God.” In keeping with the pattern laid out in John 1:1, the Evangelist elevates Jesus to the level of God and at the same time distinguishes him from God.

#### 4.2.3. “Christ who is God over all” (Romans 9:5)

“To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ **who is** (*ho on*) God over all, blessed forever. Amen” (ESV).

The word order is actually “...Christ who is over all God blessed forever amen.” There is no textual dispute about this passage but there is a punctuation dispute. The original manuscripts contained no punctuation marks, so it is up to the interpreter to decide whether there should be a period after “all” (in which case the verse would read, “...Christ, who is over all. Blessed is God forever. Amen.”) This latter reading is an abrupt and awkward doxology to God, which does not flow with the context. For this reason, most commentators prefer to punctuate the verse as the ESV above, which says of Christ “who is (*ho on*) God over all.” In the context of declaring his deity, it is likely that *ho on* is intended in an absolute sense.

As an aside, another point of Christological importance in this verse (on which cf. also Romans 1:3) is Paul’s clarification that Christ belongs to the race of Israel “according to the flesh.” This phrase is frequently used by Paul to make a point of contrast, usually between flesh and spirit. So the Israelites are Paul’s brethren “according to the flesh” in Romans 9:3, but this qualifier implies a spiritual sense in which they are not his brethren. Similarly, the phrase in Romans 1:3 and Romans 9:5 implies a spiritual sense in which Christ is not of the seed of David, or the race of Israel. The distinction consists in his divine Sonship (Romans 1:4), which is equivalent to his deity (Romans 9:5).

#### 4.2.4. “He who is blessed forever” (2 Corinthians 11:31)

“The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, **he who is** (*ho on*) blessed forever, knows that I am not lying” (ESV).

Coupled with the word “forever,” similar to Romans 9:5, this occurrence of *ho on* could easily be taken as absolute. However, the difficulty is in determining the subject of *ho on*. Grammatically, it could be God the Father or the Lord Jesus. An intriguing third possibility is that it is both. This would mean the Father and the Son are grouped under a singular verb,

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<sup>130</sup> Zickendraht, Karl. “EGW EIMI.” *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 94 (1922): 162-168. Cited in McDonough, Sean M., *Ibid.*, p. 170.

which might be objectionable to a unitarian theology which sees them as completely distinct beings. However, Paul certainly groups the Father and Son under a singular verb in 1 Thessalonians 3:11, and John does so in Revelation 11:15, so there is precedent for this.

#### 4.2.5. “Who, being in very nature God” (Philippians 2:6)

“5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 **Who, being** (*hos...hyparchon*) in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8 NIV)

There is certainly no direct textual parallel to Exodus 3:14 here, for Paul uses *hyparcho*, a different verb for ‘to be’, rather than *eimi* (the bolded expression reads “*Hos...hyparchon*” in Greek). However, given the context there is good reason to see this present participle as expressing timeless existence. The much-debated word *harpagmon* is not our main concern here, though it “denotes ‘grasping’”<sup>131</sup>. *Morphe* (translated ‘very nature’ in the NIV) “is that which truly characterizes a given reality.”<sup>132</sup> It certainly does not mean ‘outward appearance’ here, because this is speaking of a time prior to Jesus’ exaltation, when he definitely did not have the outward appearance of God<sup>133</sup>.

This passage clearly teaches Christ’s personal, conscious pre-existence in v. 7. “Made himself nothing” is *heauton ekenosen* in Greek – a reflexive pronoun accompanying the aorist indicative of the verb *kenoo* (“to empty, evacuate”<sup>134</sup>). The aorist denotes a completed action and the reflexive pronoun indicates that the subject performed the action upon himself; thus the subject performed the action consciously. This aorist verb is modified by two aorist participial clauses – “taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” As Wallace notes in his Greek Grammar:

“The aorist participle is normally, though by no means always, antecedent in time to the action of the main verb. But when the aorist participle is related to an aorist main verb, the participle will often be contemporaneous (or simultaneous) to the action of the main verb.”<sup>135</sup>

In Philippians 2:7 we have an aorist main verb and two dependent clauses with aorist participles. It is clear that the first dependent clause is contemporaneous to the action of the main verb – “taking the very nature of a servant” explains *how* Christ emptied himself<sup>136</sup>.

<sup>131</sup> Comfort, Philip W. *Philippians*, in Cornerstone Bible Commentary, Vol. 16, p. 169. The three basic interpretations, he notes, are (1) trying to attain, (2) clinging to, and (3) exploiting. He argues that (1) can be ruled out by the context, and that either (2) or (3) may be correct.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>133</sup> The only possible exception to this would be the transfiguration, but it would be a huge stretch to suggest that this clause refers to a single event in the middle of Jesus’ ministry.

<sup>134</sup> Mounce, William D. *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, p. 279.

<sup>135</sup> Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar beyond the basics*, p. 624.

<sup>136</sup> Richard Bauckham points out the strong parallels between Philippians 2:6-11 and Isaiah 52-53; 45 (*God Crucified*, p. 43). It is probable that “the form of a servant” in Philippians 2:7 reflects this prophecy, which describes the servant of YHWH as having “no form or majesty that we should look at him” (Isaiah 53:2).

Given the parallelism and the word order, we ought to interpret the second dependent clause (“being made in human likeness”) in a way consistent with the first – it is also contemporaneous to the action of the main verb, and it also explains *how* Christ emptied himself<sup>137</sup>. Of course, if Christ emptied himself by being made in human likeness, then he must have had a conscious pre-human existence.

Because Philippians 2:7 definitely teaches the conscious pre-existence of Christ, Philippians 2:6a refers to a period of indeterminate length, but before he became incarnate, when Christ existed consciously in the very nature of God. With this in mind, it would be best to understand the present participle *hyparchon* in this clause as denoting timeless, absolute existence.

#### **4.2.6. “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3)**

“But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **He is** (*hos on*) the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:2-3b ESV).

Here the Greek has *hos on* (he is, or he being) rather than *ho on* (who is, or who being). The immediate context mentions Christ’s divine functions in the past (instrumental Cause of the universe or of history), present (Sustainer of the universe, which may also be timeless) and future (Heir of the universe), which suggests that this statement about Christ’s nature should be understood as timeless. This interpretation is reinforced by other references to Christ’s timelessness within Hebrews (cf. 1:10-12; 7:3; 13:8).

## **5. Summary of the argument and its implications for monotheism**

### **5.1. Summary of the argument**

In this book we have proposed a method for interpreting the *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. We first argued that the divine Name given in Exodus 3:14 is best translated in the present tense, representing the ongoing presence of God within His creation – past, present and future. We observed that this idea is expressed repeatedly in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah 40-55. Secondly, we defended the LXX in general and in particular argued that its translation of Exodus 3:14 is linguistically plausible and vindicated in the Book of Revelation. Thirdly, we showed that a profound thematic and textual relationship exists between the books of Exodus, Isaiah and John, and that the earliest readers of John were likely very familiar with the LXX. This observation formed a contextual background inducing us to interpret Jesus’ *ego eimi* sayings in John in light of YHWH’s *ego eimi* sayings in Exodus 3:14 LXX and Isaiah 40-55 LXX.

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<sup>137</sup> It seems that one denying the conscious pre-existence of Christ would have to read this verse along the lines of, “Because Christ was made in human likeness, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” This interpretation is untenable for three reasons: (1) the word order, which places ‘being made in human likeness’ last, not first; (2) the lack of any textual basis for inserting the word ‘because’; (3) the participial nature of the verb *genomenos* in clause 7c, which joins it to clause 7b and makes both of these clauses dependent on 7a.

We examined the *ego eimi* sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel with predicates, and found some evidence in them for Christ's deity and his identification with the *Logos*. We then came to the crux of the argument: that the *ego eimi* saying of Jesus in John 8:58 ought to be interpreted as an absolute claim to deity because it follows a formula used by YHWH in the LXX (which was familiar to the Gospel writers) to express His exclusive deity. Furthermore, we observed a multitude of verbal cues in the immediate context linking Jesus' other stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings in the Gospels to YHWH's *ego eimi* sayings in the LXX. In light of this evidence, we argued that the claim to absolute deity which is plain in John 8:58 also lies beneath the surface of most of Jesus' other *ego eimi* sayings in the Gospels, not only in John but also in the Synoptics. This argument was further supported by four NT examples (two from Paul, one from Hebrews and one from Revelation) in which the writer took an OT passage about YHWH from the immediate context of one of YHWH's "I am he" sayings and applied it to Jesus Christ.

Lastly, we suggested that certain uses of the phrase *ho on* with respect to Christ may be intended as statements of absolute existence and therefore deity. Several of the passages examined (John 6:46; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 1:2-3) were seen to demonstrate Christ's deity and/or pre-existence regardless of whether *ho on* is understood to be timeless.

We have only scratched the surface of the evidence for Christ's deity, but we have seen enough to know that it is substantial and compelling. Many readers will dispute arrive at a different conclusion simply because their preconceptions do not allow them to see how a man could possibly identify himself as YHWH. To such readers we echo the following warning:

“Many today, in denying that Jesus really uttered such a ‘preposterous’ claim, are siding with those of Jesus’ time who could not see how a man could claim to be God without blaspheming. But this was not a mere man; this was Emmanuel – God with us – as faith has revealed.”<sup>138</sup>

## 5.2. Implications for monotheism

Before concluding, we need to briefly consider a question that is bound to arise in the mind of anyone remotely familiar with the Scriptures: what does this mean for monotheism (the doctrine that God is one)? In order to answer this question, we first have to carefully define what monotheism means – or more correctly, what it meant to Jews in the first century. The Jews' religion was defined by their strict adherence to monotheism and monolatry (worship of only one):

“The distinction in cultic practice between Jews and others who acknowledged a high god is, in fact, correlative with a difference in monotheistic conception. The typical Hellenistic view was that worship is a matter of degree because divinity is a matter of degree. **Lesser divinities are worthy of appropriate degrees of worship.** Philosophical monotheists who held that all other divine being derives ultimately from the one, nevertheless held the derived divinity of lesser divine beings to be appropriately acknowledged in cultic worship. The notion of a hierarchy or spectrum of divinity stretching from the one God down through the

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<sup>138</sup> Gianotti, Charles. *Christ's Usage of 'I Am' in Light of the Divine Name*, p. 67.

gods of the heavenly bodies, the daemons of the atmosphere and the earth, **to those humans who were regarded as divine or deified**, was pervasive in all non-Jewish religion and religious thought, and inseparable from the plurality of cultic practices in honour of a wide variety of divinities. Jews understood their practice of monolatry to be justified, indeed required, because **the unique identity of YHWH was so understood as to place him, not merely at the summit of a hierarchy of divinity, but in an absolutely unique category**, beyond comparison with anything else. Worship was the recognition of this unique incomparability of the one God. It was the response to YHWH's self-revelation as the sole Creator and Ruler of all... **that it is inappropriate to worship beings other than the one God could be justified by pointing out that they are created by him**, benefit humans only in a way that derives ultimately from God, ministers of God's will, not independent sources of good."<sup>139</sup>

Thus, the evidence we have presented for Christ's deity cannot be explained away by claiming that Christ is a deified man, or a lesser, secondary deity, or a deity in name only. Jewish monotheism simply could not accommodate such ideas. Nor can it be explained away by claiming that Christ is deity in a representative sense. In the Book of Revelation, God's representative angels refuse worship (19:10; 22:9), on the grounds that it should only be directed to God; yet Jesus accepts worship (1:17; 5:12-14; 22:3)!

This leaves only the possibility that Christ is somehow included in the identity of the one God. Bauckham explains how Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, redefines monotheism in a way that allows for Christ's inclusion with the Father in the identity of the one God, and also why Jesus was identified with the Word/Wisdom of God by the earliest Christian writers:

"It is now commonly recognized that Paul has here adapted the *Shema* and produced, as it were, a Christian version of it...Paul has, in fact, reproduced all the words of the statement about YHWH in the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4: 'the LORD our God, the LORD, is one'), but Paul has rearranged the words in such a way as to produce an affirmation of both one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. It should be quite clear that Paul is including the Lord Jesus Christ in the unique divine identity. He is redefining monotheism as Christological monotheism. If he were understood as adding the one Lord to the one God of whom the *Shema* speaks, then, from the perspective of Jewish monotheism, he would certainly be producing, not Christological monotheism, but outright **ditheism. The addition of a unique Lord to the unique God of the Shema would flatly contradict the uniqueness of the Father. The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to understand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God affirmed in the Shema...**Implicit in the reformulation is an identification of Christ with either the Word or the Wisdom of God or both...The purpose is to include Jesus completely in the unique identity of God, protologically as well as eschatologically. The role of Word and/or Wisdom was appropriate for this purpose, since...they represent Jewish ways of making some form of distinction within the unique divine identity"<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the God of Israel*, p. 12.

<sup>140</sup> Bauckham, Richard. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.

In summary, then, we find that rather than infringing on monotheism, the doctrine of the absolute and intrinsic deity of Christ represents the only way to reconcile monotheism with what the New Testament teaches about Christ!

This study has only scratched the surface of the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8), “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). However, the conclusion of the study is clear: that when Jesus’ stand-alone *ego eimi* sayings are properly interpreted, they teach his deity. The importance of this conclusion is seen in Jesus’ assertion in John 8:24, “Unless you believe that I am he (*ego eimi*) you will die in your sins.” The reader is left to reflect anew upon his or her answer to the all-important questions, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15) and “What do you think about the Christ?” (Matthew 22:42)

## **Appendix 1 – Glossary of technical terms**

The author has used certain technical terms that one is bound to encounter in reading scholarly works on the subject at hand. In order not to lose the reader who is not familiar with these terms, some definitions are offered here.

Adoptionism – the doctrine that Jesus began as a mere man, but was granted deity by God at a later point in his life (typically either his baptism or his resurrection) as a reward for his obedience

Christology – the study of the person of Christ, usually with a particular focus on his identity and nature. A particular understanding of Christ’s identity and nature may be termed a Christology (e.g. “a high Christology”).

Dead Sea Scrolls – several hundred documents discovered in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in caves near the ancient Jewish settlement of Qumran, and dating roughly from 150 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. They include the earliest extant texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Deutero-Isaiah – a scholarly term for the section of Isaiah from chapters 40-55, which are seen as representing a distinct portion of the book (and, by some liberal scholars, as a separate book altogether)

Doxology – a short hymn of praise addressed to a deity. The New Testament contains doxologies addressed to God through Christ (e.g. Romans 16:27; Jude 1:24-25) and to Christ himself (2 Timothy 4:18; 2 Peter 3:18; Revelation 1:5-6).

Hellenistic – an adjective describing Greek influence upon other civilisations and cultures following the conquests of Alexander (died 323 B.C.E.)

Masoretic Text (MT) – the most widespread Hebrew text of the Old Testament (upon which translations into English have been largely based). The earliest extant manuscript fragments date from the ninth century C.E.

Monolatry – worship of only one God

Monotheism – belief in only one God

Second Isaiah – see Deutero-Isaiah

Septuagint (LXX) – a Greek translation of the Old Testament, created in the third century B.C.E. It was widely used by Jews at the time of Christ, perhaps more so than Hebrew/Aramaic texts of the Old Testament. The earliest extant manuscripts are dated to the fourth century C.E.

Shema – the Hebrew term for the monotheistic declaration of Deuteronomy 6:4, named for the first word of the verse (“Hear”)

Socinianism – a rationalist, unitarian belief system named for Faustus Socinius (died 1604 in Poland), which denies the deity of Christ and asserts that he began to exist when he was born as a man.

Synoptic Gospels – a term for Matthew, Mark and Luke, which are grouped together because of their similarities relative to John (roughly 90% of the narrative content of John is not found in any other Gospel)

## **Appendix 2 – John Thomas’ interpretation of Exodus 3:14 examined**

The following are excerpts from John Thomas’ book *Phanerosis*, which outline his theology of God-manifestation for which he depends heavily on his unique interpretation of Exodus 3:14:

“In previous pages, expository of Scripture revelation which the Eternal Spirit has given concerning 'God,' we have shown --

1. That Moses, the prophets, and Jesus all teach that the Godhead is one AIL, or Power and that this unity is absolute;

...

6. That they teach, that "there be Gods many and Lords many," which are called Elohim, Shaddai, Adonai, and so forth; and that these are created intelligences -- corporeal manifestations of the Spirit of the light-inhabiting ETERNAL INCREATE;

7. That they teach expressly or by implication, that these created deities have all been originally subject to evil even as we; and that they have become Immortal Gods after the moral and physical type exhibited in the biography of Jesus of Nazareth;

...

11. We have shown, that these Sons of Power ("sown in weakness, raised in power") in the aggregate constitute THE NAME OF YAHWEH -- a Name of Multitude; a myriad-manifestation of THE SPIRIT OF THE INVISIBLE GOD -- THE ONE I SHALL BE: "God manifested in flesh"; which is a grand mystery, but apostolically revealed;

...

These things having been demonstrated: much rubbish has been cleared away. Trinitarianism and Unitarianism have both received a quietus. There are not three Gods in the Godhead; nor are there but three in manifestation; nevertheless, the Father is God and Jesus is God; and we may add, so are all the brethren of Jesus gods; and "a multitude which no man can number." The Godhead is the homogeneous fountain of the Deity; these other gods are the many streams which from this fountain flow. The springhead of Deity is one, not many; the streams as numerous as the orbs of the universe, in which a manifestation of Deity may have hitherto occurred.”<sup>141</sup>

Concerning point #1, the assertion of the Godhead’s “absolute unity” depends on what is meant by that term. If it is intended to exclude Jesus Christ, then the assertion is false.

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<sup>141</sup> Thomas, John. *Phanerosis*, pp. 83-84.

Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings demonstrate his own full inclusion in the Godhead – a fact borne out by Paul's inclusion of Jesus in his reworked *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

This brings us to point #6, which is actually a straightforward misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. What Paul is actually saying here is that, to the pagan idolaters, there are many so-called gods and lords, but to Christians, there is but one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. All others are idols, which have “no real existence” (v. 4). Paul is not affirming the real existence of “many gods!” *Shaddai* is a Hebrew title for God denoting His self-sufficiency and omnipotence. It is therefore difficult to see how it could be applied to “created intelligences” which were formerly “subject to evil even as we.” In affirming the real existence of “many gods” John Thomas approached the threshold of polytheism, if he did not cross it! His theology calls to mind Bauckham's description of ancient pagan religions which, in contrast to Jewish monotheism, espoused “the notion of a hierarchy or spectrum of divinity stretching from the one God down through the gods of the heavenly bodies, the daemons of the atmosphere and the earth, to those humans who were regarded as divine or deified.”<sup>142</sup>

Point #7 speaks of created deities which have *become* Immortal Gods. This notion of the deification of creatures is again a blatant contradiction of the monotheism of the Scriptures, in which God declares, “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me” (Isaiah 43:10), and, “I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God” (Isaiah 45:5).

In Point #11, Thomas again articulates polytheism, with appeal to an inadequate interpretation of Exodus 3:14-15 and a doubtful rendering of 1 Timothy 3:16.<sup>143</sup>

The Scriptures do not affirm that the angels are gods, or that the saints are or will ever become gods. They do affirm the hope of being “like him” (1 John 3:2<sup>144</sup>), and becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4<sup>145</sup>), but neither of these entail being gods, or being part of God. There are a handful of instances in which the word ‘god’ is applied to humans in the Old Testament, but read in context the application is very limited.

In Exodus 4:16 and 7:1 Moses is told that he will be “a god unto Pharaoh” (7:1 KJV). Moses was only designated “a god” *unto Pharaoh* – that is, within the confines of this particular situation. He was not deified in any kind of absolute sense, as this would contradict monotheism. Nearly all modern translations render the verse as a simile – “I have made you as God,” reflecting the fact that Moses was God unto Pharaoh by analogy or representation, just as Aaron was “his” (Moses') prophet within this analogy.

In Psalm 82, the Psalmist declares that “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (v. 1). He goes to declare to this council in v. 6, “I said,

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<sup>142</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> Most modern scholars are agreed that *hos* ('He who'), not *theos* ('God') is the correct first word of 1 Timothy 3:16. The 'He' is clearly Christ. It was Christ who was manifested (1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 3:8).

<sup>144</sup> This is one of a number of texts in 1 John where it is not entirely clear whether a masculine pronoun refers to God or Christ. As one commentator notes, “‘God’ is the nearest possible antecedent of the pronoun ‘him.’ Yet...Jesus seems to be the one who appears, or comes, in 2:28, and...the one who appeared to take away sins (3:5)” (Dwight Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, pp. 77-78). For other examples of such ambiguity in the epistle, see 1 John 1:3-6; 2:24-25; 3:16-17; 3:21-24; 5:11-16; 5:20.

<sup>145</sup> In 2 Peter 1:3-4, the promise of partaking of the divine nature is granted as a result of Jesus' “divine power,” which was manifested even in the days of his flesh (cf. the allusion to the transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:16-18).

‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’” Jesus, in his exegesis of this passage, said that these men were called gods in their capacity as prophets – “he called them gods to whom the word of God came” (John 10:35). This deity was therefore only a representative deity. That they had not become gods in any absolute or lasting sense is clear from Psalm 82:6-7, where God continues, “Nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.’ Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!” Here, God’s eternal deity is contrasted with the mortality of these human ‘gods’; and it is apparent from the parallelism that ‘god’ is not used here in its fullest sense but is synonymous with ‘prince.’

Even in the picture of the ultimate destiny of the saints given in Revelation 21-22, we do not find any notion of a multitudinous God, or many gods flowing from a single springhead. Rather, we find a picture of God dwelling harmoniously with His people (Revelation 21:3), and of the servants of God and the Lamb continuing to worship Him. The ultimate hope that will be realized then is for God’s servants to see His face (Revelation 22:4a), but there is no expectation of becoming God or gods. God’s name will be written on their foreheads (Revelation 3:12; 14:1; 22:4b), but this does not mean they have inherited the name of YHWH (as Jesus has), or that they have become God. This imagery alludes to the plate engraved, ‘Holy to YHWH’ and fastened to a turban on the Mosaic high priest’s forehead (Exodus 28:36-38). The plate denoted ownership; but it was the high priest who belonged to YHWH, not YHWH who belonged to the high priest!

Jesus inherited the name of YHWH (Philippians 2:9; Hebrews 1:4); but the Scriptures are clear that no one other than YHWH can bear the name of YHWH (Isaiah 42:8; 45:18; Joel 2:27). Thus, for Jesus to inherit the name of YHWH in a way that does not violate monotheism, he must have already been fundamentally one with the Father.

The greatest flaw in the God-manifestation theology outlined in *Phanerosis* is that it fails to draw any appreciable distinction between the current status of Jesus and the ultimate status of the saints. The Scriptures from start to finish draw a clear distinction between God and His creation. Only Jesus bridges that gap. We can be empowered to become sons of God (John 1:12); Jesus is the one-of-a-kind Son of God.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> ‘One-of-a-kind’ or ‘unique’ is a better translation of *monogenes* than ‘only begotten.’ The word is used of Isaac in Hebrews 11:17, but he was not Abraham’s only begotten son; he was Abraham’s ‘one-of-a-kind’ son because he was the son of the promise.

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