

“I AM” SAYINGS

The four canonical Gospels contain several pronouncements that feature the Greek phrase *egō eimi* (“I am”). Since only the verbal form (*eimi*) is required in Greek to express the words “I am,” the inclusion of the personal pronoun (*egō*) gives prominence to the words of the speaker. In the Synoptic Gospels and particularly in John’s Gospel, where “I am” declarations occur with striking frequency, the authoritative *egō eimi* statements pronounced by Jesus can possess profound christological significance.

1. Synoptic Gospels

2. John’s Gospel

1. Synoptic Gospels.

In some cases “I am,” as uttered by Jesus or other figures, is accompanied by a predicate (e.g., Mt 24:5: “I am the Christ”; cf. Mt 22:32; Lk 1:19; 24:39), while on other occasions an implied predicate can be identified from the context (e.g., Mt 26:22, 25: “Surely it [the one who will betray Jesus] is not I?” [*mēti egō eimi*]). Of particular interest are the three instances in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus’ pronouncement of *egō eimi* belongs to the narrative’s gradual unfolding of his identity (Mk 6:50; 13:6; 14:62).

On the first occasion Jesus announces to the *disciples as he walks on the sea: “Take heart, it is I [*egō eimi*]; do not fear” (Mt 14:27 // Mk 6:50). This *egō eimi* utterance functions not only as Jesus’ statement of self-identification to allay the disciples’ fear (“It’s me, Jesus”), but also as the vehicle whereby he discloses his identity as the one who exercises God’s power to walk on the sea (cf. Job 9:8; Ps 77:20; Hab 3:15). The presence of numerous theophanic motifs within the account (Mk 6:45-52; cf. Ex 14:4, 18) indicates that Jesus’ “I” pronouncement embodies his offer of divine deliverance in the form of a new exodus.

The most enigmatic Markan example of *egō eimi* occurs in the *eschatological discourse, where Jesus tells his disciples, “Many will come in my name saying ‘I am’ [*egō eimi*], and they will lead many astray” (Mk 13:6 [cf. Lk 21:8]). These impostors, later identified as false prophets and false messiahs (Mk 13:21-22), are represented as usurping Jesus’ own claim to authority (= *egō eimi*) as already set out in Mark 6:50 (Williams, 233-41). In a likely historical reference to leaders of popular first-century A.D. movements (see Revolutionary Movements) who sought to initiate a new deliverance patterned on the exodus and the conquest of the land (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97, 167-170; *J.W.* 2.259, 261-263), Mark emphasizes that Jesus alone has the power and authority to fulfill God’s promises.

Finally, when the high priest asks Jesus during his *trial, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?” (Mk 14:61), he responds, “I am [he]” (*egō eimi*) (Mk 14:62) (see Christ). This forms an affirmative response to the preceding question; Jesus, for the first time in Mark’s Gospel, publicly or openly confirms his identity according to the categories (“Messiah” and “Son of God”) that sum up Mark’s understanding of Jesus (see Mk 1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 15:39).

2. John’s Gospel.

Among the “I” formulations that characterize the speeches of the Johannine Jesus are a number of *egō eimi* declarations, for which at least three patterns of usage are commonly identified: (1) “I am” is accompanied by a predicate (e.g., Jn 15:1: “I am the true vine”); (2) “I am” is self-contained (e.g., Jn 8:28: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will know that I am”); (3) “I am” has an implied predicate recoverable from the immediate context (e.g., Jn 18:5: “I am he [Jesus of Nazareth]”). However, John’s Gospel does not always maintain a hard-and-fast distinction between the second and third categories.

2.1. Metaphorical “I Am” Statements. On seven occasions Jesus makes a self-declaration in which the expression *egō eimi* is combined with a predicate in the form of a memorable image or concept.

- “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35, 48) (cf. Jn 6:41, 51: “I am the [living] bread who descends from heaven”)
- “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12) (cf. Jn 9:5)
- “I am the door (for the sheep)” (Jn 10:7, 9)
- “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11, 14)
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25)
- “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6)
- “I am the true vine (Jn 15:1, 5)

With regard to form and structure, several of the metaphorical or predicative “I am” declarations are followed, either immediately or in their wider context, by conditional statements highlighting the importance of following Jesus (Jn 6:35, 51; 8:12; 10:9; 11:25-26; cf. Jn 6:48-50; 15:5-6). Sometimes the conditional statement spells out the consequences of belief both positively and negatively (e.g., Jn 8:12 NRSV: “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”). In terms of content, the images (“bread,” “light,” “vine,” “shepherd”) attached to “I am” operate on a material level and center on tangible realities, although on a deeper level they point beyond the material objects to Jesus’ true identity (see Zimmermann, 126-31). In terms of *christological function, it is necessary to investigate the origin(s) of these metaphorical “I am” sayings as well as their symbolic significance, which usually can be determined from their wider Johannine context.

Given that “I am” sayings are attested in a number of religious traditions in the ancient Near East, a wide range of possible formal parallels has been proposed, from Isis aretologies (“I am Isis, the ruler of every land” [Cyme inscription]) to gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi (e.g., “I am the first and the last” [*The Thunder: Perfect Mind*]) to Yahweh’s “I” declarations in the OT (e.g., “I am your shield” [Gen 15:1]). Some scholars are eager to maintain a broad religious context for the Johannine predicative “I am” sayings in order to highlight their capacity to draw culturally diverse audiences into the Fourth Gospel’s distinctive textual and metaphorical worlds (MacRae; Petersen).

As far as thematic affinities are concerned, all the Johannine images attached to “I am” possess striking parallels in the OT and ancient Jewish tradition (see Ball), whether it is the image of Israel as a flock (Ps 77:20; 78:52) (see Shepherd, Sheep) or a vine (Ps 80:8; Jer 2:21; Ezek 17:6-8; cf. Is 5:1-7), of the *Servant of Yahweh as a “light to the nations” who opens the eyes of the blind (Is 42:6-7; 49:6; 51:4), or of *Wisdom inviting people to eat her bread (Prov 9:5) and to eat and drink of the fruits of her vine (Sir 24:17-18) so that they will hunger for more and thirst again (Sir 24:21). The fact that possible referents for the image of “shepherd” include the successor of *Moses (Num 27:17), *God (Ezek 34:11-16; Mic 2:12)

and his “servant David” (Ezek 34:23) highlights the difficulty of pinning down the Johannine metaphors to a specific OT passage. It appears likely that John deliberately draws on images that have the potential to evoke more than one referent; what binds these images together is that all of them stem from scriptural promises of divine *salvation.

The network of metaphorical “I am” statements in John’s Gospel are similarly linked by the theme of salvation, as all of them focus on Jesus’ role as the source and giver of eternal life. Three of the sayings refer explicitly to Jesus in terms of “life” (*zōē*) (“the bread of life” [Jn 6:35, 48, 51]; “the resurrection and the life” [Jn 11:25]; “the way, the truth and the life” [Jn 14:6]), whereas two other pronouncements contain overt references to “life” in their immediate context (Jn 8:12; 10:9-10). Furthermore, Jesus as shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11, 15), which is then explained: “I give them [the sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish” (Jn 10:28 NRSV). The connection with “life” is also maintained in the seventh, and final, of the “I am” sayings, where remaining on the vine (= Jesus) is said to sustain the life of the branches (= disciples) and to be the source of their fruitfulness (Jn 15:1-2, 4-5).

The link between the theme of life and Jesus’ “I am” claims is sometimes demonstrated by his miraculous deeds (“signs”). Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand “signifies” his identity as the *bread of life (Jn 6:1-14, 26-27), and his claim to be the light of the world is exemplified by his subsequent healing of a man born blind (Jn 9:5-41). Jesus’ bestowal of eschatological life is most fully explicated in the seventh of the Johannine signs: the raising of *Lazarus to physical life serves as a symbolic enactment of Jesus’ claim “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25), but also as a concrete manifestation of his earlier promise that “the hour is coming, and now is here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25 [cf. Jn 11:38-44]).

Given that God is frequently described as the sole giver of *life (cf. Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6; Ps 36:10), and some of the Johannine metaphors are used in the OT as designations for God (“light,” “shepherd”), the identification of Jesus with these life-evoking images amounts to a christological appropriation of the role traditionally ascribed to God alone. The emphatic nature of the formulation (“I am”) thus articulates the exclusiveness of Jesus’ claim to embody the revelatory and salvific presence of God.

2.2. Absolute “I Am” Statements. A second pattern of usage centers on Jesus’ declarations in which *egō eimi* occurs without a predicate. In these statements, commonly referred to as “absolute” *egō eimi* pronouncements, Jesus employs the phrase “I am” without, it seems, clearly identifying what it is he claims to be. He declares to his opponents, “Unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24 [cf. Jn 8:28]), and they pick up stones to kill Jesus upon hearing him proclaim, “Before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58). And when Jesus predicts his imminent betrayal, he informs his disciples: “I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am” (Jn 13:19).

There is much debate about the origin and significance of these enigmatic absolute “I am” statements, for which there are, in contrast to their metaphorical counterparts, no non-Jewish parallels. It has been claimed that John’s use of *egō eimi* in its bipartite form echoes God’s revelation of his name to Moses, “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14a [Heb. *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh*]), which is rendered in the LXX as *egō eimi ho ōn* (“I am the one who is”) (see Odeberg, 308-10; Fossum, 127-28). It should be noted, however, that LXX Exodus 3:14 gives greater prominence to *ho ōn* than *egō eimi*, as Yahweh directs Moses to tell the people, ““He who is’

[*ho ōn*] has sent me to you.” If Exodus 3:14 has influenced John’s use of *egō eimi* in its absolute form, this probably has occurred indirectly through other divine self-declarations in the OT that can provide a more adequate explanation of Jesus’ words.

The key that appears to unlock the meaning of the bipartite Johannine “I am” statements is the distinctive use of *egō eimi* in the LXX versions of the Song of Moses (Deut 32:39) and the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 41:4; 43:10, 25; 46:4; 51:12; cf. Is 45:18; 52:6) to render Yahweh’s proclamation of his exclusive divinity and eternal sovereignty: “I am he” (Heb. *’anî hû’*). The presentation of *egō eimi* as the object of belief (Jn 8:24; 13:19) and knowledge (Jn 8:28) finds its closest parallel in LXX Isaiah 43:10, where Yahweh calls upon Israel to act as his witnesses, “so that you may know and believe and understand that I am [*egō eimi*]” (see Ball, 188-95; Williams, 271-73). Several other thematic and structural parallels strongly suggest that John has consciously reflected on both the setting and significance of “I am” as the self-declaration of God. In Isaiah’s trial speeches some of the arguments presented as proof that Yahweh alone is God bear close resemblance to the context of Jesus’ *egō eimi* declarations. Like Yahweh, Jesus exists from eternity (Jn 8:58; cf. Is 41:4; 43:13; 48:12), he is able to foretell and control events (Jn 13:19; cf. Is 43:9-10; 46:10-11), he offers salvation to those who believe in him (Jn 8:28; cf. Is 41:4; 46:4; 48:12), although those who reject him face condemnation (Jn 8:24). Central to Jesus’ claim is his unique divine status: he can declare *egō eimi* because he is the eternal Word incarnate, the heavenly emissary, the Son, who speaks and acts in unity with the Father.

It is also possible that when Jesus claims to have been given God’s name and to have manifested it during his earthly mission (Jn 17:6, 11, 12, 16), the name in question is *egō eimi* as a rendering for the Hebrew declaration *’anî hû’* (see Brown, 1:533-38; 2:755-56). In addition to extensive Jewish evidence for the use of *hû’* (“he”) as a substitute for the Tetragrammaton (e.g., 1QS VIII, 13; *m. Sukkah* 4:5), those cases where the LXX reads *egō eimi* (LXX Is 43:25; 51:12) could well have prompted John to interpret the second occurrence as the divine name: “I am ‘I AM’” (see Dodd, 94).

2.3. “I Am” Statements with an Implied Predicate. Another cluster of Johannine *egō eimi* declarations are commonly categorized as statements of self-identification because a predicate can be supplied from the immediate context (Jn 4:26; 6:20; 18:5, 6, 8). Thus, the Samaritan woman’s remark “I know that the Messiah is coming” leads Jesus to announce, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (*egō eimi ho lalōn soi*) (Jn 4:25-26). In other words, Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah, who will “proclaim all things” (Jn 4:25). He offers a similar response to the arresting party when they state that they are looking for “Jesus of Nazareth”; once again it is appropriate, at least in formal terms, to interpret Jesus’ words as affirmation that he is the figure in question: “I am he [Jesus of Nazareth]” (Jn 18:5, 6, 8). Numerous parallels to this usage of *egō eimi* (e.g., LXX 2 Sam 2:20; *T. Job* 29:4; 31:6; Mk 14:62; Jn 9:9) indicate that, as a declaration of identity, it does not necessarily possess christological significance.

It is likely, however, that John, on these occasions, engages in a deliberate interplay of the various possible meanings of *egō eimi*, from its use in everyday speech to its more theologically charged function as a divine self-declaration. For example, not only do Jesus’ words in John 4:26 bear resemblance to Yahweh’s proclamation in LXX Is 52:6 (*egō eimi autos ho lalōn*), but also the pivotal position of Jesus’ declaration within the scene suggests that *egō eimi* encapsulates all that he has hitherto revealed to the woman about himself (Jn

4:10-26). Similarly, the theophanic connotations of Jesus' pronouncement of *egō eimi* as he walks on the sea (Jn 6:20) indicate that this occasion of divine self-manifestation ("I am; do not fear" [cf. Is 41:10, 13; 43:1]) is what enables the disciples to move from the darkness (cf. Is 42:16) and reach the safety of the other side (cf. Is 43:16; 51:10). The polyvalent force of *egō eimi* finds its most dramatic demonstration in the account of Jesus' arrest, where the soldiers' response of drawing back and falling to the ground (Jn 18:6) demonstrates Jesus' sovereign control over the events leading to his death. Indeed, Jesus' twofold pronouncement of *egō eimi* in this scene serves as a powerful exemplification of the claims linked to this elusive expression elsewhere in John, for it encapsulates the Johannine presentation of Jesus as the one in whom God is revealed and his promises are fulfilled.

See also BREAD; CHRIST; CHRISTOLOGY; LIFE, ETERNAL LIFE; LIGHT AND DARKNESS; SHEPHERD, SHEEP.

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