

One God, One Lord

Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism

Second Edition

Edited by

Andrew D. Clarke
and Bruce W. Winter



"The Lord is our God, the Lord is one, He alone."

This unpublished inscription is from a synagogue in Neapolis. The text, written in Samaritan Hebrew, is based on Deuteronomy 6:4 and Exodus 22:20. *Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E. 1-1870; reproduced by permission of the Syndics.*



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"I am . . . "

The "I am" Sayings of Jesus and Religious Pluralism

David M. Ball

This chapter argues that the absolute 'I am' sayings¹ of Jesus in John's gospel deliberately refer to similar sayings in Isaiah and thus identify Jesus with the God of the Old Testament.² John's 'I am' sayings are not simply using a 'divine name'³ but gather up the context of passages in Isaiah. These speak of Yahweh's right to save Israel because he is the only God and there are no other gods before him. Thus the Johannine Jesus takes words upon himself that were originally spoken in a context of many claims to divinity by foreign deities. It is proposed to discuss (1) how the formulation of the absolute 'I am' sayings in John's

¹These are the 'I am' sayings which have no predicate. I use the term loosely here to include all those *ēyō* *ēiū* sayings in John which are not accompanied by an image such as 'bread of life' or 'good shepherd'.

²*Contra* J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London, SCM 1985) 386. Cf. also C.K. Barrett *Essays on John* (London, SPCK 1982) 121.

³*Contra* e.g. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, CUP 1954) 93-96 and R.E. Brown, Vol. 2, 533-538. References throughout giving only author and page number refer to the person's commentary on John.

gospel points to this Isaianic background, and (II) the implications of this for religious pluralism. As the limits of this contribution preclude a full discussion of John's the absolute 'I am' sayings,⁴ it is proposed to deal specifically with John 8.

I. 'I am' sayings and their Isaianic background

The use of $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ in Isaiah as a parallel to the $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ of John has long been recognized by Johannine scholars.⁵ Elsewhere I argue that not only the words $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ alone but also the manner in which these words are formulated in John's gospel allude to particular passages in Isaiah which explicate Jesus' words more fully. This means that the phrases 'believe that I am' and 'know that I am' in John 8:24, 28 call to mind those 'I am' sayings of the OT which are specifically coupled with knowledge and belief. Because the words accompanying $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ in John also allude to the Isaianic background, it means that even those sayings such as John 8:18 which have not normally been regarded as 'absolute' occurrences of 'I am' recall specific passages in Isaiah, as the discussion below demonstrates.⁶

a) John 8:18 $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ δ $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\upsilon\omicron\nu$ $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota$ $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\omicron\upsilon$

The claim of Jesus to be the one who witnesses concerning himself may well reflect the words of Isaiah 43:10 as well as the witnesses required by Deuteronomy 19:15.⁷ The Hebrew

⁴For a discussion, see my thesis 'I am' in Context: The literary function, background and theological implications of $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ in John's Gospel. (Sheffield University, forthcoming).

⁵E.g. P.B. Harner, *The 'I am' of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1970) 6-15.

⁶See my thesis for a discussion of those who regard Isaiah as primary background for the 'I am' of John. There I discuss further the way in which it is the formulation of the phrase in which $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ occurs and not just the words themselves which point the reader to Isaiah. I also draw attention to the fact that the structure of the 'I am' saying of 4:26 parallels the LXX version of Is. 52:6 and may therefore say more than that Jesus is Messiah. In his claim to be the one who speaks, Jesus takes on the words of Yahweh which would be fulfilled in the day when the LORD would return to redeem Zion.

⁷The formal similarity between 8:18 and 4:26 may be to remind the reader of what Jesus said in that context. Like the 'I am' saying of 4:26, the statement is constructed in a very strange manner. If the words mean 'I bear witness to myself' (RSV), Jesus could simply say $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\upsilon\omicron$ instead of the periphrastic $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ δ $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\upsilon\omicron\nu$ $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota$ $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\omicron\upsilon$ (cf. J.P. Chantler, 'L'exégèse johannique d'un Précepte Légal: Jean viii.17' RB 67 (1960) 513). As in 4:26, it seems that

text of Isaiah 43:10 seems to equate Israel with the Servant of the LORD as one witness.⁸ Thus it is translated 'You are my witnesses,' says the LORD, 'and my servant whom I have chosen . . .'. However, as Freed points out, in the LXX there appear to be three witnesses: 'the people addressed, God himself, and his servant are three witnesses to the uniqueness of the Hebrew deity'.⁹

Isaiah 43:10 $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\acute{\epsilon}$ $\mu\omicron\iota$ $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\upsilon\epsilon\varsigma$, $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\upsilon\varsigma$, $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\epsilon\iota$ $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\omicron\varsigma$ δ $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$, $\kappa\alpha\iota$ δ $\pi\alpha\tau\acute{\epsilon}\varsigma$ $\delta\upsilon$ $\xi\acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\nu$. . .

Having summoned the nations to bring their own witnesses (43:9), the LORD now calls on Israel to be his witnesses. He too is to be a witness, and also the servant whom he has chosen. If Jesus' claim to be the one who witnesses derives from Isaiah 43:10, it is not $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ but the accompanying words that demarcate its meaning in John. Jesus takes the role of the witness from the passage in Isaiah and applies it to himself.¹⁰

In Isaiah the LORD speaks of the character of the servant whom he has chosen and whom he calls to witness on his behalf. This servant has been chosen 'as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to

the reason for this strange phrase may lie in John's use of background material. However, unlike 4:26, 8:18 has no formal parallel in the LXX.

⁸It could be argued that the servant of the LORD should be seen as a separate witness, since the servant is singular, while Israel is plural. However, in the light of the identification of 'my servant' with Israel elsewhere this is unlikely (cf. 44:1).

⁹E.D. Freed, 'Ego Eimi in Jn viii.24 in the light of its context and Jewish Messianic Belief' JTS 33 (1982) 67. It seems unlikely that the Hebrew version of this text could be in mind, since the LORD's role as a witness is absent there and thus removes the parallel between Jesus and the Father who both witness in John. Thus John appears to use a tradition similar to the LXX rather than the MT. Although the targum of this verse presents two witnesses rather than the single witness of the MT, it is not the LORD who is the second witness there but the chosen Messiah: 'You are witnesses before', says the LORD, 'and my servant the Messiah with whom I am pleased, that you might know and believe before me and understand that I am He'. B.D. Chilton *The Isaiah Targum*, The Aramaic Bible 11 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1987) 84-5.

¹⁰Such a use of the OT is more in line with the way the 'I am' sayings are used with an image than with the unpredicated sayings. The fact that 6:35 explicitly uses $\epsilon\gamma\omega$ $\epsilon\mu\iota$ to apply an OT concept to Jesus is a precedent for such a use of the expression in 8:18. P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the concept of manna in the Gospel of John and the writings of Philo*. SNT 10 (Leiden, E.J. Brill 1967) 78, suggests this is an accepted midrashic form of exegesis.

bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. . . ' (42:6, 7).¹¹ In his role as a light to the nations, the servant of the LORD is called upon to bear witness to the LORD (43:10). The Greek text of Isaiah suggests that the LORD will bear witness with the servant as the Father does with Jesus in John. Thus when Jesus claims to be the one who bears witness, he takes on the role which was to be accomplished by the 'servant of the LORD' in Isaiah. It is Jesus' claim to be the light to the world and to offer light to those who follow him which prompts the discussion of his validity as a witness (8:12,13).¹² Because Jesus takes on the role of the servant, his witness is valid, since it was the role of the chosen servant both to bear witness and bring light.¹³ In John 8:18 Jesus and the Father together fulfil both Isaiah's words, and by implication also the requirements of Deuteronomy 19:15.¹⁴

¹¹E.C. Hoskyns (Vol.2 377) points out that 'It is, moreover, significant that in Is. 43:8-13 not only is the importance of witnessing associated with the divine I am, but also the whole is directed towards the removal of the blindness of the people and for the salvation of the nations'. Cf. A. Guiling, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship: A study of the relation of St. John's Gospel to the ancient Jewish lectionary system* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1960) 109. ¹²In my thesis, I argue that Jesus' claim to be the light of the world also derives primarily from this passage in Isaiah. It is interesting to note that the Jews' charge against Jesus is that his witness is not true (οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθής, v. 13). In Isaiah the LORD calls upon the world to hear and say 'It is true' (ἀληθὴν, v. 9). On the verse in Isaiah, Young, 148 comments, 'If the nations cannot produce their own witnesses, let them hear what God is saying and let them acknowledge that God's witness is true'. (E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3) NIC (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1972). The same sentiment seems to hold for Jesus' statement of verse 18.

¹³Cf. Freed, *op. cit.*, 167. 'In John "the Father who sent me" (viii, 18) corresponds to "the servant whom I have chosen". That the Johannine Jesus identifies himself with Israel may be seen from the background suggested by his claim to be the vine (15:1,5).

¹⁴Freed, *op. cit.*, 167, points out that there is a similar passage in 1 Samuel in which the LXX follows the Hebrew text. There Samuel says to the people: Μάρτυς κτίποιος ἐν θυμῷ καὶ μάρτυς Χριστός αὐτοῦ. . . (1 Sm. 12:5). From this, Freed argues that in Jn 8:18, Jesus is seen as 'the anointed' (Χριστός), and so bears witness with God, just as 'the anointed' was called to bear witness in defence of Samuel. Freed goes on to argue that as Messiah, Jesus can witness to himself—the implication of which seems to be that Jesus does not need to call on two witnesses as Samuel had done. Whether the similarity of these two texts can be taken to prove that Jesus is here seen as the Messiah is far from certain, yet Freed's observation does lend weight to the suggestion that Jesus' claim to be the one who witnesses could derive from the OT. However, because of the similarities between the rest of Jn 8 and Is. 42-3, it seems more likely that

If, as I have suggested, the claim of Jesus to be the one who witnesses refers to the witness of the Servant in Isaiah 43:10, it is correct to enquire as to the content of the Servant's witness. It is here that the background to this 'I am' saying and to those of 8:24 and 28 touch on the question of pluralism. For the witness of the Servant concerned the claim of Yahweh to be the only God and the exclusive Saviour. As Mackenzie states:

Here the monotheism of Second Isaiah emerges in full force. Israel can testify that Yahweh alone is God, that he is eternal. Israel can testify to his power and freedom, because it has experienced his power and freedom in its history. Yahweh alone judges and Yahweh alone saves; and no one, god or man can hinder his action.¹⁵

The fact that Jesus takes on the role of the witness from Isaiah 43:10 implies that his witness is also to the exclusive ability of God to save. However, by applying the words 'I am' to himself, Jesus also implies that it is in him that this salvation takes place. The next two 'I am' sayings of John 8 address the fact that Jesus alone is the one who saves.

b) John 8:24, 28 (cf. 13:19)

Unlike the 'I am' saying of verse 18, neither 8:24 nor 28 speak primarily of Jesus' role, but rather of his identity.¹⁶ Here it is a question of *believing that or knowing that* ἐγὼ εἰμι. The Jews' question ('Who are you?' v.25) in response to Jesus' ἐγὼ εἰμι statement (v.24) shows that even they have grasped that they need to know Jesus' identity to be saved from dying in their sins. The problem raised by Jesus' use of 'I am' here is that there is no predicate in the context with which Jesus can be identified.¹⁷

the Isaianic passage should be seen as the main OT background to Jesus' claim here.

¹⁵L. Mackenzie, *Second Isaiah* AB 20 (New York, Doubleday 1968) 53-4.

¹⁶R. Schnackenburg, (E.T. vol. 2) 198, implies the same when he states, 'The man who introduces himself with this formula is saying something important and unprecedented about his "I".'

¹⁷R. Bultmann's suggestion that Jesus is to be identified with 'Son of Man' (349) is rightly rejected by Schnackenburg (vol. 2, 202) 'for the following reasons: (1) It would obscure the connection with v. 24, and v. 28 must be a deliberate echo of that. (2) Jesus never says directly, 'I am the Son of man'. In 9:35-7 this self-testimony is implied, but the ἐγὼ εἰμι is avoided. Perhaps John too preserves the knowledge that Jesus only used the title 'Son of man' in the third person. (3) The title 'Son of man' is associated with a particular complex of ideas,

Since the verb 'to be' usually requires a predicate, these words make little sense on their own.¹⁸ They are truly absolute. The Jews are grammatically correct to want to supply a predicate to Jesus' words.

The LXX translation of Isaiah again appears to provide the key to a correct understanding of both these 'I am' sayings, as well as the saying of 13:19. As before, it is the formulation of the phrase which accompanies these 'I am' sayings and not the words *ἐγώ εἰμι* on their own which provides the clue for their interpretation. Combined with 'I am', the two phrases to *know that* and to *believe that* in such close succession appear to reflect the second half of Isaiah 43:10 which also combines both ideas in one phrase.

John 8:24: *ἐὰν γὰρ μὴ πιστεύετε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ἀποθνήσκειτε ἐν ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις ὑμῶν*

John 8:28: *ὅταν ὑνώσκητε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τότε γινώσκειτε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι.*

Isaiah 43:10: *γένησθε μοι μάρτυρες... ἵνα γινώτε καὶ πιστεύετε καὶ συνήτε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι.*¹⁹

The similarity between the words of Jesus in John 8 and those of the LORD in Isaiah appears to be deliberate, so that the words in John can, by implication, be interpreted in the light of the passage in Isaiah.²⁰ Several themes are common to both passages. In Isaiah the LORD is to be tried before the nations to show that he is the only God. He needs a testimony that is

especially 'exaltation' and 'glorification', and is introduced here in the wake of the word *ὕψωθι*. The statement of the main clause stands on its own.

¹⁸Barrett, 342, suggests that the *ἐγώ εἰμι* which occurs in Isaiah and John without an explicit or an implied predicate 'is in itself (as Greek) a meaningless expression'. Therefore it is the context which delineates the meaning of the absolute *ἐγώ εἰμι* even in the OT (see note 22). He suggests that, like *awh yna*, the phrase means 'I am (for ever) the same'.

¹⁹Unlike the first half of Is. 43:10 (see above), the LXX follows the Hebrew quite closely for the second part. However, it should be noted that the Hebrew has 'know and believe me (יִּשְׁמְעוּ וְיִּבְרְאוּ) and understand that I am he' (*awh yna*), which again suggests that the LXX is being followed by John.

²⁰The reader who has also seen the connection between Jesus' words in 4:26 and the words of Is. 52:6 may again see a reference to that verse in the combination of the verb 'to know' and the phrase *ἐγώ εἰμι*: Is. 52:6: *δὴ τὸντο γινώσκειται ὁ λαὸς μου τὸ ὄνομα μου ἐν τῇ τηλότῃ ἐκείνῃ, ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι αὐτὸς ὁ λαὸς πᾶσι.* However, while there may be an indirect allusion to this verse, it seems that the main reference in Jn 8 is to the saying of Is. 43:10.

true (v.9). In the same way the validity of Jesus' testimony is challenged by his opponents who think he has no right to claim to be the light of the world. They claim that his testimony is not true (v.13). The purpose of Israel's witness is that they may know and believe and understand that I am he (v.10).²¹ Jesus' 'I am' sayings also concern knowledge and belief, though here Jesus' opponents are warned about the consequences of not believing. In John this knowledge will be revealed to them when he is lifted up by them.²² However, there are differences in the application of terms between Isaiah and John. In Isaiah, the LORD calls upon his audience to witness that his testimony is true while in John it is Jesus who is the witness with the Father and so he has no need of other witnesses. In Isaiah, the witness himself is described as blind and deaf (v.8).²³ In contrast it is not Jesus, the witness, but the Pharisees who are described as blind in John (9:40).

In Isaiah the Hebrew words *אֵינִי יָדָע, אֵינִי שָׁמַע*, like the Greek phrase *ἐγώ εἰμι*, do not make sense on their own as the object of belief or knowledge but must be determined by the context.²⁴

²¹Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Tr. D.M.G. Stalker) OTL (London, SCM 1966) 122, points out, 'It is to be noted that "to believe" stands between "to know" and "to understand". Therefore, what is meant is not, as our way of thinking might suggest, either a knowledge that leads to faith or, on the other hand, a knowledge which rests on faith. Both views would be a misconception of the passage. In order to understand the words, we must leave our modern concept of knowledge aside'. R.N. Whybray *Isaiah 40-66 NCB* (London, Oliphants 1975) 84 points out that 'the usual function of a witness is to enlighten others rather than himself'. However, 'in defiance of contextual appropriateness he (Second Isaiah) here states what is the real aim of this oracle and indeed of his whole work, that the exiles, his audience, should be convinced of Yahweh's unique power'.

²²It is interesting to note that D.A. Carson, 201, points to the exaltation of the Suffering Servant in Is. 52:13-53:12 as a precedent for John's double usage of the verb to lift up (*ὕψωθι*). Such a possibility simply emphasises the likelihood that John is dependent on the thought of Isaiah for his understanding of the person of Jesus. Cf. Barrett, 214; Lindars, 157 (who also suggests the Aramaic of Ezra 6:11 as background for *ὕψωθι*).

²³If Is. 42 and 43 provides the background to Jn 8, it may not be by chance that both the sign and the debate, which follow, take up this theme of spiritual blindness which is also a theme in Is. 42:18-20 (cf. Jn 9:39, 41).

²⁴Westermann, *op. cit.*, 122, says much the same of the Hebrew as Barrett does of the Greek. He comments: 'We are told in terse words that defy translation, but which may be approximately rendered as, "that it is I". If we made this into a main clause, it would run, "I am he"—a cry used in personal encounter, whose significance depends in each case on the circumstances.'

There Yahweh speaks of his exclusive claim to be the saviour of Israel.²⁵ "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and beside me there is no saviour." (vv. 10b,11). Again it is this context which addresses the question of pluralism, for Jesus takes words that speak of the LORD's exclusive right to save Israel and applies them to himself. In other words it is in him that the salvation of the LORD will be seen. It is when the Son of man is lifted up on the cross that they will know that I, I am the LORD, and beside me there is no saviour.²⁶ It is interesting to note that in these words, and more explicitly in 52:6, the phrase $\kappa\tau\iota \iota\kappa$ is paralleled by the phrase $\kappa\tau\iota \iota\kappa$ and seems to be synonymous.²⁷

By implication Jesus' 'I am' sayings also occur in the context of the forgiveness of sins, for, if an unwillingness to believe that $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ will result in the Jews dying in their sins, it must be assumed that the opposite is true—belief would result in them being saved from such a death. The combination of $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ and the question of sin suggests there may be an allusion to Isaiah 43:25 in the 'I am' saying of 8:24.²⁸ In the LXX there is a double $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ as the LORD claims: $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\acute{\omega} \epsilon\nu \tau\omicron\iota\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\iota\alpha\varsigma \sigma\omicron\upsilon \kappa\alpha\iota \epsilon\nu \tau\omicron\iota\varsigma \delta\omicron\lambda\kappa\tau\iota\alpha\varsigma \sigma\omicron\upsilon \pi\rho\acute{o}\epsilon\sigma\tau\eta\nu \sigma\omicron\upsilon \epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota \epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota \acute{\omicron} \epsilon\acute{\xi}\acute{\alpha}\lambda\epsilon\iota\phi\omega\nu \tau\omicron\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\mu\iota\alpha\varsigma \sigma\omicron\upsilon \acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\nu \epsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon, \kappa\alpha\iota \tau\omicron\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\iota\alpha\varsigma \sigma\omicron\upsilon \kappa\alpha\iota \omicron \mu\grave{\eta} \mu\eta\tau\eta\sigma\theta\eta\sigma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota.$

In the verses that follow the LORD calls upon the people to remember him (v.26) and reminds them of the punishment he brought upon those who transgressed previously. This 'I am' saying from Isaiah makes sense of the warning that the Jews will die in their sins, for in Isaiah the saying occurs in

²⁵C. Westermann, *op. cit.*, 122, suggests that 'In the trial speech, v.10 represents the endorsement of a testimony in court'.

²⁶The LXX translates 'I, I am the LORD' simply as $\epsilon\gamma\omega \acute{\omicron} \theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$.

²⁷See Harner, *op. cit.*, 14-5.

²⁸Lindars, 320, thinks that a more general form of salvation is implied by the background to Jesus' words here. He thinks of the salvation connected with all the 'I am' sayings (Is. 41:4, 43:10,13,25: 46:4, 48:12; cf. Dt. 32:39) in which Yahweh is the one who created all things, who raised up Cyrus to conquer Babylon, and who will restore Israel. All his power is concentrated on this one fact, that he is the one who saves his people. Now we have the same phrase on the lips of Jesus in a parallel situation—that God, who created all things through the Word, is the one who saves mankind through him in the events of the incarnate life; cf. 3:16. We may, then, fill out the saying thus: 'I am the one through whom salvation is accomplished'.

the context of the burden of sin which the people have placed on the LORD. However, it is he in whom they must believe because it is he who blots out sins and does not remember transgressions. If Jesus' 'I am' saying of 8:24 alludes to these verses from Isaiah as well as to 43:10, then the implications of that must carry over to the 'I am' saying of 8:28. By means of $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ Jesus identifies himself with the forgiving action of Yahweh. In other words, when Jesus is lifted up by the Jews, it will be revealed that he is the one who blots out transgressions and remembers sin no more.²⁹ However, for those who do not believe, the result will be that they die in their sins.³⁰

Although the use of $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ in John 13:19 has not been discussed in this section, it seems clear that the recurrence of the phrase 'believe that $\epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$ ' in that context takes its meaning from the use of the words in 8:24,28. The interaction between the 'I am' sayings throughout the Gospel suggests that the implications of background carry over to John 13:19 as well as to the more immediate 'I am' saying which concludes John 8.

c) John 8:58 $\pi\rho\acute{\iota}\nu \lambda\alpha\beta\acute{\alpha}\tau\epsilon\mu \gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\theta\alpha\iota \epsilon\gamma\omega \epsilon\mu\iota$

The contrast between $\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ and $\epsilon\mu\iota$ in this 'I am' saying points the reader back to a similar contrast between the two verbs in the prologue of the Gospel. Because of this contrast, the emphasis here is on the verb ($\epsilon\mu\iota$) rather than on the pronoun ($\epsilon\gamma\omega$). This saying also comes as the climax of a discussion about Jesus' identity and answers the earlier question: 'Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?' (8:53—cf. 4:12). The 'I am' saying also responds to the question: 'Who is it that you claim to be?' (v. 53). The issue of

²⁹The suggestion that Jesus' 'I am' saying here implies that the cross involves the blotting out of sin runs contrary to both Bullmann and J. Forestell. Bullmann in his *Theology of the New Testament* 2 (London, SCM 1955), 54, suggests that 'The thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John'. Forestell suggests that the purpose of his work is 'to show that the properly Johannine theology of salvation does not consider the death of Jesus to be a vicarious and expiatory sacrifice for sin'. J. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute 1974) 2. For a critique of both Bullmann and Forestell see M. Turner 'Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John: Some questions to Bullmann and Forestell' *EQ* LXII (2, 1990) 99-122.

³⁰There is an interesting correspondence between the comment in Isaiah that their first father sinned (43:27) and the parallel theme in Jn 8 where Jesus claims 'You do what you have heard from your father' (38, cf. 41, 44).

Jesus' identity is also to be seen in the question that prompts this climactic 'I am' saying (v. 57). Thus with the words *ἐγὼ εἰμι*, Jesus not only claims that he existed before Abraham but that this existence can be spoken of in the present tense. This 'I am' saying therefore explicitly concerns his essential nature.³¹

Maybe the best way to see the 'I am' saying of 8:58 is not as a direct allusion to any particular 'I am' saying in Isaiah but rather as a special development of the allusions made so explicitly by the other sayings in John 8.³² The structure of this chapter is enough to suggest that the reader should see an interaction between all the occurrences of *ἐγὼ εἰμι* in this debate with the Jews³³ and it is surely this final *ἐγὼ εἰμι* more than any other which forces the reader to see Jesus' words as a claim to divinity. The reaction of the Jews to these words confirms that the reader was correct to think that Jesus was identifying himself with Yahweh in the earlier 'I am' sayings of John 8. The fact that this 'I am' saying is formulated slightly differently from the other sayings in the same chapter actually helps to draw out the significance of the previous occurrences. The reader who has seen an allusion to the

³¹If Bultmann's categories (E.T. 225) are used to define the function of this occurrence of *ἐγὼ εἰμι* it is difficult to determine which category, if any, suits this saying best. On one level, these words function to describe what sort of person Jesus is (i.e. pre-existent and unlike Abraham) and would thus fit into the category of *qualification*. While it is certain that Jesus does not claim to be the one expected and thus does not fit into the category of *recognition*, it is possible that Jesus is identifying himself with God. The fact that the Jews attempt to stone him suggests that this is so, for when they attempt to do the same again, their reason is that 'you, being man, make yourself God' (10:33). See discussion below.

³²In my thesis I pursue possible links between Is. 42,43 and this final 'I am' saying of Jn 8. The connection is interesting in the light of the LXX translation of Is. 43:10b, in which the verb *πρόφασι* occurs in the same verse as 'I am'. Since there is no contrast between the verbs in Isaiah, the connection is hardly convincing. The fact that the Targum of Isaiah also mentions Abraham in this context is also pursued in my thesis.

³³This is a point emphasised by Robert who suggests that this interaction calls for a consistent translation of *ἐγὼ εἰμι* in 8:24,28 and 58. R. Robert, *Le Malentendu sur le Nom divin au chapitre VIII du quatrième Évangile* (*Revue Thomiste* 88, pt 2 (1988) 278-87. Robert suggests that, if all three occurrences of *ἐγὼ εἰμι* are absolute, which he thinks they are, they should be translated uniformly. It follows that they should take the form of the last *ἐγὼ εἰμι* rather than the first two which are often translated ambiguously. Admittedly, Robert regards *ἐγὼ εἰμι* from the start as an utterance of the divine name which assumes a consistent use of the term.

exclusive claims of Yahweh in 8:24 and 28 now knows that such a formulation on Jesus' lips was no mistake, for, by means of the very same words, he claims to have existed before Abraham and thus claims for himself not only the words of God but the very nature of God. The Jews correctly interpret Jesus' words but are unwilling to accept that his witness is true. For this reason they pick up stones in order to kill Jesus.

II. The implications of such a background

In conclusion I shall draw out four implications of the Isaianic background of *ἐγὼ εἰμι* for the question of pluralism.³⁴ I shall base this on four of the six distinctive features which Harner sees in the *κτλ* *ἔκ* of Second Isaiah and shall show that these are paralleled in the *ἐγὼ εἰμι* of John's Gospel.³⁵

(i) *κτλ* *ἔκ* is always spoken by Yahweh and is closely related to the other expressions of divine self-predication especially the phrase *ʾAni Yahweh*. To quote Harner:

ʾAni Hu in Second Isaiah is always attributed to Yahweh. It is a solemn statement or assertion that only he can properly make. If anyone else spoke these words, it would be a sign of presumptuous pride, an attempt to claim equality with Yahweh or displace him. This is very nearly the case in 47:8,10, in which Babylon makes the presumptuous statement, 'I am, and there is no one besides me'. In these verses it is interesting that Second Isaiah uses the single word 'I' (*ʾani*) to express the idea 'I am'. He is evidently contrasting Babylon's claims with the *ʾani hu* of Yahweh. Yet even here he refrains from attributing the phrase *ʾani hu* to anyone other than Yahweh.³⁶

³⁴These implications are specifically addressed to the views of J. Hick and M. Wiles as laid out in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (J. Hick ed.) (London, SCM 1977). It is particularly for the question of the incarnation that the 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel are relevant.

³⁵Harner, *op. cit.*, 7, states: 'We may distinguish six important characteristics of this phrase, as Second Isaiah uses it in various settings. 1) It is always spoken by Yahweh, never by anyone else. 2) It signifies that Yahweh alone is God. 3) It presents Yahweh as Lord of history, and therefore as redeemer of Israel. 4) It presents Yahweh as creator of the world as well as Lord of history. 5) It points to a reality that Israel perceives, in faith within the context of its witness and faith to Yahweh. 6) It is closely related to other expressions of divine self-predication, especially the phrase 'I am Yahweh' (*ʾani YHWH*). Harner spells these six characteristics out in detail in 7-15.

³⁶Harner, *op. cit.*, 7.

It may be noted... that the phrase 'I am He' sometimes appears in the immediate context or unit of speech as 'I am Yahweh'. This is the case in 41:4 and 43:10,13. In 51:12 it appears in the same context as the phrase 'I am Yahweh your God', and in 46:4 it is followed several verses later (v. 9) by 'I am God'. In 48:12 it appears in a sentence that is nearly identical with 41:4, in which 'I am Yahweh' and 'I am He' are both used. All these factors indicate that Second Isaiah regarded the phrase 'I am he' as an abbreviated form of other expressions, especially 'I am Yahweh', summing up in concise terms everything represented by the longer terms.³⁷

It is most striking that Jesus takes on himself a phrase reserved for Yahweh alone. Although the use of *ἐγώ εἰμι* is not limited exclusively to Jesus in John's Gospel (cf. 9:9), the way it is used on Jesus' lips identifies him so closely with Yahweh's saving action and even with Yahweh himself that it is equivalent to the claim: 'I and the Father are one' (10:30). The Jews perceive that by those words Jesus, a man, makes himself God (*ὁτι σὺ ἄνθρωπος ὦν ποιεῖς σεαυτὸν θεόν* - 10:33) and so they attempt to stone him. Such a reaction confirms to the reader that the Jews see a similar blasphemy in the words of 8:58. If in Isaiah *אני ה'* is a phrase that the LORD speaks in defence of his exclusive right on his people, it surely holds true that it would be a matter of 'presumptuous pride' for someone to take these words from such a context and apply them to himself. When Jesus uses the phrase, the Jews see it from this perspective. However, from the Gospel's point of view, it is not Jesus who makes himself God but the reverse. It is the Word, who was in the beginning with God and was to be identified as God, who has made himself flesh (*σὰρξ ἐγένετο*, 1:14).

The fact that these words are placed on the lips of Jesus suggests at the very least that the Johannine church regarded them ontologically and not just confessionally. From the viewpoint of John's christology, Jesus is unique not because of what God has done through him as a man but because he himself is divine.³⁸ John 8:58 speaks of Jesus' divine nature which existed before Abraham. Just as the words *πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγώ εἰμι* were abhorrent to the Jewish audience of 8:58, so are

they abhorrent to Jewish and Muslim people today for they speak of an ontological identification of Jesus with God. That God should become flesh is a detestable suggestion; that anyone should claim to be identified with God is blasphemous.³⁹ The allusions to the *אני ה'* of Isaiah speak of Jesus' identification with the words, work and very nature of God.

To suggest these words are merely the confession of the early church not only dismisses their validity as a historical witness to Jesus but also the fact that the Johannine church saw Jesus to be ontologically identified with God. For the writer of John, the incarnation was no myth, for it was not just an expression of what they saw of God in Jesus.⁴⁰ The fact that the word became flesh was not, as Wiles suggests, merely 'an interpretation of the significance of Jesus' but *was* the significance of Jesus.⁴¹ Without the Son coming to dwell among humanity, the Father would not have been made known (1:14,18). For John, the reason the Son can make the Father known is not only because he was in the bosom of the Father, but because he is also the Word who was in the beginning with God. In fact he is God. It is this ontological identification with God that is the basis for the use of the 'I am' sayings outlined above. For John, this is also the basis of his christology. Wiles is wrong to suggest that the doctrine of the incarnation 'is not something directly presented in scripture', unless he means either that the two phrases 'the word was God' (1:1) and 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us' (1:14) are not part of scripture or that

³⁹I am indebted to Prof. I.H. Marshall for pointing out the phrase 'to identify oneself with God' is ambiguous and not in itself blasphemous if it only implies empathy with God. I use it here as an ontological identification in which, at the very least, Jesus claims to be equal with God (cf. Jn 5:18). It is more likely that the claim is to ontological unity with God (cf. the Jews' reaction in Jn 10:33).

⁴⁰This concept of myth is that defined by Hick, who states: 'a myth is a story which is told but which is not literally true, or an idea or image which is applied to someone or something which does not literally apply, but which invites a particular attitude in its hearers... That Jesus was God the Son incarnate is not literally true since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application of a mythical concept whose function is analogous to that of the notion of divine sonship ascribed in the ancient world to a king... J. Hick (SCM, London 1977) 178.

⁴¹Wiles, 'Christianity without incarnation?' in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 2.

³⁷Harner, *op. cit.*, 14.

³⁸Here I am indebted to C.J.H. Wright's book, *What's so Unique about Jesus?* (MARC, Eastbourne 1990) 22.

the incarnation was not expressed in scripture as a confessional formula of the church.⁴² Even this second point is to be doubted in the light of Hebrews 1:2 and Philipians 2:6. Wiles goes on to state, 'All (even the Fourth Gospel, which comes nearest) stop short of the assertions that have come to characterise the later doctrine of the incarnation'.⁴³ If this is so, why, at the conclusion of his Gospel, does John allow Jesus to confirm Thomas's confession 'My Lord and My God?' (20:28)?

It is interesting that it is the two claims of Jesus to be one with the Father and to have existed before Abraham that prompts Wiles to call for the Fourth Gospel to be understood 'in a less straightforwardly historical way'.⁴⁴ For Wiles, this will conveniently mean that the Fourth Gospel's 'implications for doctrine may prove to be somewhat different from what they appeared to earlier ages. . .'.⁴⁵ This suggests that Wiles is aware of the implications of John's Christology, which is ontological and not merely functional. By the 'I am' sayings, Jesus identifies himself with statements only Yahweh can properly make. If Jesus' words are not to be seen as 'an act of presumptuous pride', they must be seen as constituting an ontological identification with Yahweh. The fact that Jesus' words in John are often formulated in such a way as to deliberately echo the words of Isaiah strongly suggest that this is the case.

(ii) The phrase *ʔani hu* signifies Yahweh alone is God, in contrast to the so-called 'gods' of the various peoples of the world. Harner states:

This assertion of exclusive monotheism is a major theme for Second Isaiah which he expresses in a variety of ways. . . he makes the explicit

⁴²Wiles, *op. cit.*, 3.

⁴³Wiles, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁴⁴Wiles, *op. cit.*, 4.

Hick, too, *op. cit.*, 171, is keen to join 'the great bulk of modern New Testament Scholarship' in regarding the Fourth Gospel as 'a profound theological mediation in dramatic form, expressing a Christian interpretation of Jesus' so that 'we cannot properly attribute its great christological sayings. . . to Jesus himself'.

⁴⁵Wiles, *op. cit.*, 4. It is interesting that Wiles so closely links the historicity of John's Gospel with its validity for doctrine. He thus implies that authority for doctrine is intimately linked with historicity! Could it be that in view of John's ontological Christology, he has his own dogmatic reasons for suggesting that John should not be regarded as a historical record?

assertion that there is no god besides Yahweh (44:6,8; 45:5,6,18,21,22; 46:9).⁴⁶

If, as has been argued above, the 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel deliberately allude to the similar sayings in Isaiah, it is highly significant that Jesus is not only identified with Yahweh, but he is identified with a phrase which excludes all other rivals from the worship of the LORD. Commenting on Isaiah 41:4, Whybray states:

Yahweh was not only active from the beginning of history, but is also first in an absolute sense; unlike the Babylonian gods, who were themselves the children of older gods. Yahweh alone has no genealogy (cf. 43:10). Equally he is with the last; that is, he will be God when the last human generation comes to an end. The Babylonian and other Near Eastern religions could not match such a claim, which was inconceivable in a polytheistic religion. Even in Israelite belief this had never been so clearly understood and expressed. I am he, as other passages show, is a characteristic expression used by Deutero-Isaiah to express the conviction that Yahweh is the only God.⁴⁷

Just as the 'I am' sayings in Isaiah express exclusivity, so do those in John. The exclusivity of Jesus' claims are seen most explicitly in the 'I am' sayings with a predicate. There, as well as claiming that he is the only way to the Father (14:6), Jesus applies concepts from the OT in an exclusive manner when he claims to be the 'good' shepherd and the 'true' vine. In fact he claims that those who came before him were thieves and robbers, but that he is the door and if anyone enters by him they will be saved (10:8,9). The phrase 'you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am' (8:24) suggests an exclusiveness in Jesus' role in the forgiveness of sins as well as implying that such forgiveness only comes about by belief in him as the one who is to be identified with Yahweh.

Hick is correct to think that such language, especially when formulated in the Nicene creed, 'implies that God can be adequately known and responded to *only* through Jesus; and the whole religious life of mankind, beyond the stream of Judaic-Christian faith is thus by implication excluded as lying outside

⁴⁶Harner, *op. cit.*, 8.

⁴⁷Whybray, *op. cit.*, 61.

the sphere of salvation'.⁴⁸ Yet he is wrong to think that such a theology should be rejected simply because Western Christianity has recently come face to face with the claims of other religions. In fact, if, as Hick himself supposes, John's Gospel was written in Ephesus towards the end of the first century,⁴⁹ the Gospel is addressed to a community in a context of conflicting religious claims not unlike those of the 20th century. The way that John portrays his view of Christ is not as one who takes aboard the claims of the other gods of Ephesus and Asia minor so that 'all salvation, within all religions, is the work of the Logos and that under their various images and symbols men in different cultures and faiths may encounter Logos and find salvation'.⁵⁰ In fact the opposite is true. John portrays Christ as the one who takes on himself the exclusive words of Yahweh, who 'alone is God in contrast to the so-called gods of the various peoples of the world'. Thus it is ironic that the word that Hick wants to use for his new and acceptable Christ is Logos which itself speaks most explicitly of the ontological identification of Jesus with God.

(iii) It presents Yahweh as lord of history and therefore is a call to awaken faith in him as redeemer of Israel.⁵¹

... For Second Isaiah the belief in Yahweh as lord of history is closely related to the assertion that he alone is God. This belief in Yahweh's sovereignty over history finds particular expression in the prophet's conviction that he is about to redeem the people of Israel by restoring them to their homeland. In a number of passages Second Isaiah weaves these ideas together (44:6-8; 45:1-8; 46:5-13).⁵²

One of Second Isaiah's main tasks was to awaken faith on the part of his fellow exiles in Babylon and reassure them that Yahweh was

⁴⁸Hick, *op. cit.*, 179.

⁴⁹Hick, *op. cit.*, 171. In Acts 19 the riot in Ephesus concerns the fact that those who had turned to Christianity had also turned away from gods such as Artemis. Even if John were not written in Ephesus, there was probably nowhere in the Roman world where the early Christian church was isolated from the claims of other religions, except perhaps in Palestine itself.

⁵⁰Hick, *op. cit.*, 181. Cf. also K. Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London, Epworth 1986) 90-107, who uses Logos as an inclusivist (rather than a pluralist) term which allows for salvation in other religions.

⁵¹Cf. Harner, *op. cit.*, 7.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 9.

indeed about to restore them to their homeland. Many of the people, he realised, were inclined to believe that Yahweh was powerless because the Babylonians had destroyed their temple in Jerusalem and taken a large number of Israelites into exile. In the context of this need for renewed faith, Second Isaiah represents Yahweh as using the self-predication 'I am He'.⁵³

It was indicated above that the 'I am' saying of 4:26 may deliberately allude to the day when the LORD was to redeem Jerusalem and by implication identify Jesus with that redemption. Even if this is not the case, the 'I am' sayings in John, just as in Isaiah, are fulfilled in an act of history. The Jews will 'know that I am' (8:28) when Jesus is 'lifted up' by them. The disciples 'will believe that I am' (13:19) in the events following Jesus' betrayal. Thus in his betrayal, passion and crucifixion both his opponents and his followers will realize that Jesus is identified with the salvation of Yahweh.⁵⁴ They will realise that by taking the words of the LORD upon himself it is he (and he alone) who plots out sins because it is he alone who is one with the Father. By the way he uses *ἐγώ εἰμι*, John also wishes to awaken faith in his readers.

The identification of God with the cross and the betrayal of Jesus is again a problem to the pluralist. It is interesting that, in his discussion of how Jesus no longer needs to be seen as the incarnation of God, Hick does not find space for discussing what the cross now means in his theology. Surely it is the cross, as much as the incarnation itself, which makes Christianity unique. Hick talks in vague terms, saying that 'to encounter Jesus... has always been liable to be a turning point in anyone's life, a crisis of salvation or judgment'.⁵⁵ However, he does not say from what the person is saved or what is judged in this encounter and it appears that this event does not take place in a decisive act of redemption such as traditionally seen

⁵³*Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁴It is interesting that John the Baptist describes his task as a fulfilment of the words of Scripture in which he is to 'make straight the way of the LORD' (1:23). If the context of these words from Isaiah is taken into account, this saying, like the 'I am' sayings, concerns preparation for the LORD's coming. However, in the context of John's Gospel it is Jesus and not God for whom John the Baptist prepares the way.

⁵⁵Hick, *op. cit.*, 172.

to take place at the cross.⁵⁶ Yet in John it is the cross which is the decisive climax to Jesus' life. From the cross Jesus cries out 'It is finished' (19:30). Here is fulfilled the greatest act of care which the Good Shepherd can show for his sheep, because he is willing to lay down his life for them (10:18). The absolute 'I am' sayings link Jesus' identification with the God of Isaiah to his lifting up on the cross (8:28). At the same time it is active belief in this identification with God that will save the Jews from dying in their sins (8:24).

(iv) For Second Isaiah the belief in Yahweh as redeemer of Israel was closely related to the belief that he is also the creator of the world...

It is significant to note... that Second Isaiah associates the phrase *ʾani hu* with creation faith. In this way he indicates that this phrase of self-predication, in addition to its other meanings, also presents Yahweh as creator of the world.⁵⁷

The identification of Jesus with the very nature of God is perhaps most explicitly seen in his claim to pre-existence in the words of John 8:58. It is in these words more than any others that Jesus identifies himself with the word of the Prologue. It is through the Word that the Father has made the world (1:2). While the 'I am' sayings do not directly refer to Jesus' identification as the creator of the world, it is possible that the idea is implicit in the Isaianic background to the phrase.

⁵⁶By suggesting that the concept of the incarnation should be viewed as a myth, Hick fails to deal with the other central tenet of the Christian faith, for he removes the claim of Christianity that in Jesus God dealt decisively in the salvation of humanity. In creating a Jesus who is available to all religions, Hick himself creates a mythological figure who has little basis in the historical records of Jesus of Nazareth and who has no decisive influence on history. F. Young tries to deal with a non-incarnational theology of the cross when she acknowledges the need to 'come to terms with evil, suffering and sin by meditating on the story of the 'crucified God', 'A Cloud of Witnesses' in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 30. She concludes that Jesus should be seen as an archetypal believer, one in whom God is 'involved in the reality of human existence with its compromises, its temptations, its suffering, its pain, its injustice, its cruelty, its death', 37. The ontological identification of Jesus with God expressed by means of the 'I am' sayings speaks not only of God's empathy with the human race in its suffering, but also of an historical event which could save the Jews from 'dying in their sins'.

⁵⁷Harner, *op. cit.*, 10.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion it may be said that by means of ἐγὼ εἰμι John portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah.⁵⁸ These prophecies spoke of a time when the LORD himself would redeem his people and restore them to their own land. Because the LORD was the creator and also the Lord of history, it was he and he alone who could do this. The gods of Babylon had no such power. By taking such a phrase upon himself Jesus not only identifies himself with the one true God of Israel but also claims to fulfil the day when God's salvation would be seen.

John's presentation of Jesus is a reversal of Hick's view, for in John it is not adoration that leads to the confession of Jesus as God, but Jesus' claims to be identified with God which lead to adoration.⁵⁹ It is significant that John does not present this ontological identification of Jesus with God in the language of confession or adoration, but on Jesus' own lips. It is these very same claims of identification with God which cause opposition amongst Jesus' hearers; (cf. 8:59, 10:31-3). These same claims of the Johannine Jesus are what cause Hick and Wiles to call for John's Gospel to be treated in a non-historical way.⁶⁰ They think that if these words can be seen to be the invention of the church and not the words of the historical Jesus, Christianity will be able to 'outgrow its theological fundamentalism, its literal interpretation of the idea of incarnation'.⁶¹ So it becomes clear that the words that John portrayed as a stumbling block to Jesus' narrative audience continue to be a stumbling block for the pluralist who encounters John's Gospel today. While the twentieth century pluralist is

⁵⁸If, as Coetzee, suggests, Jesus' ἐγὼ εἰμι utterances deliberately refer to the prophecies of Is. 42-3 (see above), then it may be said that Jesus is claiming that those prophecies are embodied/fulfilled in his person. J.C. Coetzee 'Jesus' Revelation in the Ego Eimi sayings in Jn 8 and 9' in *A South African Perspective on the NT* (J.H. Petzer and P.J. Hartin edd.) (Leiden, E.J. Brill 1986), 171.

⁵⁹Cf. Hick, *op. cit.*, 173-4.

⁶⁰This is the view of Wiles, 4, who no longer wants John's Gospel to be used for questions of doctrine, for the implications of John's Christology are clear. Hick himself admits the same in 'Whatever path men choose is mine' esp. 185 in *Christianity and other Religions* (J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite edd.) (Glasgow, Collins 1980) 171-90.

⁶¹Hick, *Myth*, 183.

unwilling to throw stones at the 'historical' Jesus for making such claims about himself, it is the church which is accused of 'presumptuous pride' by claiming that its founder is to be identified with the exclusive God of Isaiah. The Jesus who is portrayed in John is again called to hide himself and to depart from the temple (John 8:59). It is certain, however, that such a Jesus will continue to be the light of the world as long as his followers are in the world (9:5). Such a Jesus will also continue to meet the needs of those born blind, although they too may find themselves thrown out of the Synagogue, for it has already been decided that those who confess him as such a Christ should be put out of the synagogue (9:22).

4

Behind the Classical Façade

Local Religions of the Roman Empire

David W. J. Gill

1. Introduction

New Testament documents addressed multi-racial and multi-cultural communities. These included Rome, the capital of an empire, Corinth and Philippi, Roman colonies, and Ephesus and Colossae which were Greek cities. Religion helped to form their identity and some cult activity could have been there for at least half a millennium before the epistles were written.

In looking at Roman religion it is very easy to come with preconceived ideas. Modern public perception may have been formed by images from classical and renaissance art. The gods of antiquity have been made familiar through Old Master paintings, and the sculptural schemes for English country houses.¹ Deities appear as restrained, idealised human figures and thus served as a model for beauty and perfection in art.

¹F. Haskell and N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique: the Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500 - 1900* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1981).