

Dear Pastor ... ,

Last Sunday in your sermon titled “God the Son” you outlined your reasons for believing that “Jesus claimed to be God”. Also, last Sunday in your editorial comment you wrote on the front page of the weekly Church News bulletin that, “to deny Jesus is God is to deny the gospel.”

On your own public statements then, you have declared me a denier of Jesus and his gospel, for after many years of prayerful study of the Scriptures, I have to respectfully disagree with your position that Jesus is Almighty God. *Ipsa facto* this does not mean I am necessarily right, but it should drive us together to surrender ourselves afresh to our Heavenly Father with an unshakeable resolve to bow to the authority of the very Scriptures Jesus himself loved and lived by.

Churches of Christ have always said that “where the Bible speaks, we speak, and where the Bible is silent we are silent.” We have traditionally stated that if we can’t use Bible words, Bible terms, Bible phrases, to express our doctrine then chances are strong it’s not in the Bible, but relies on man-made sophistry. I have repeatedly said that I would like for you to give me *just one* Bible verse that nominates Jesus as “God the Son”, but so far you have not. Even one verse that says “God is Three Persons in one Being” would convince me. Just one!

Initially I was not going to comment after last Sunday’s events, however when I was praying for you at 3:15 a.m. the next morning, I felt the conviction of the Spirit of God that I must write to you with the hope that we might “reason together”. Therefore, in obedience to this prompting I write personally and I trust,

personably to you. I wish to address the issues together in an objective and friendly way with a view to hearing Jesus and representing him properly.

I believe you are sincere in your faith and that you really do believe you are pleasing Jesus. However, it is quite possible to be sincerely wrong...and clearly one of us is wrong on this issue. Unexamined tradition can “invalidate the word of God” (Mk. 7:13). Sometimes our position as pastor and leader holds us back from receiving fresh insights because we are employed by a denomination and to disagree with the party-line would mean a lost job and a damaged reputation before men. But if we seek to please men, rather than God, we cannot be the servants of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

To say we love and worship the Jesus of the Bible, but at the same time not listen

to his words is in the end, to not love him nor respect him. It is a very serious matter to either knowingly or unknowingly misrepresent anybody, but how much more serious when it comes to representing Jesus Christ of whom God says, “This is my Son, hear him!”

One Example.

I could choose any number of the verses you quoted last Sunday and give what I believe are sound exegetical reasons why they do not say what you said. But I will choose just one example: You asserted that Jesus in John 8:58 made the stupendous claim to the Divine Name from Exodus 3:14. Because Jesus according to our translations says, “I AM”, the connection is made that he was claiming the Divine Name. Is this really so? I suggest attention to both context and grammar --- neither of which you addressed in any degree --- dispels this connection.

THE CONTEXT.

The old axiom that “a text without a context is just a pretext” is true in this case. So before zeroing in on the “I AM” of v. 58 let’s get the proper context leading up to that statement.

Jesus repeatedly affirms his Father is the source of everything he does and says (verse 12f). When Jesus says he is the light of the world, it is because He is reflecting His Father (v. 14f). Jesus claims to be fulfilling the mission he received from his Father and in fact, says he can do nothing on his own initiative (v. 28, 43). Hence, Jesus claims to “always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (v. 29). The over-arching context of the chapter is a defense of his credentials as the Messiah whom God commissioned, but most of his audience remains unconvinced.

Indeed, they rely on the fact they are Abraham’s offspring (v.33). Jesus retorts that if they were Abraham’s children they would listen to his word (teaching) and not

be wishing to kill him, “a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God” (v. 40). Abraham would not be guilty of treating him this way.

The fact they are trying to murder Jesus is proof enough for Jesus that these unbelieving Jews are not Abraham’s children, but “are of your father the Devil ... who was a murderer from the beginning, and did not stand in the truth”, just as they are not now accepting the truth (v. 44f).

These Jews now get quite personal and make the wild allegation that Jesus is a Samaritan who is demon-possessed (48). Jesus naturally denies this stupid charge and makes a gracious promise that if any of them will yet believe his word and teaching, they, “shall never see death” (v. 51).

These unconvinced Jews keep up the attack saying, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets also; and you say, “If anyone keeps my word, he shall never taste death” (v. 52).

They understand Jesus to be saying he is greater than Abraham and all the Hebrew prophets ... “Surely you are not greater than our father Abraham who died? The prophets died too; whom do you make yourself out to be” by promising us something Abraham and the prophets could not even deliver, seeing they themselves are also dead (v. 53)? Note carefully then, these Jews are offended by Jesus’ claim to superiority over Abraham because he claims to be able to deliver something Abraham and the prophets could not ... eternal life (v.51).

To the Jews, no one is greater than Abraham. Yes, they honour Moses as the great law-giver, but to them Abraham is even greater than Moses. Abraham is the greatest of all! So when Jesus claims his teaching has the power to deliver from death, “if anyone keeps my word”, this was an outrageous claim in their eyes, a claim to bring what their greatest of all could not do.

Don’t miss this! The God whom the Jews

are claiming is their God, Jesus says is his own Father. Jesus thus indicated, not that he himself was the God of the Jews, but that the God of the Jews was *his Father!* Unfortunately, these descendants of Abraham “do not know” *this* God, but Jesus does know Him (v. 55).

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT.

Now we come to the crucial verse that is usually conveniently omitted in most commentary --- verse 56. It actually comes before verses 57 and 58! Jesus now explains to these people who were still taking comfort in the fact they were God’s because they were the direct descendants of Abraham and thus under the covenant of Israel:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad” (v.58).

Observe what it was that Abraham saw. Abraham rejoiced “to see **my day**”. Jesus tells these unbelieving Jews they are not at all like their father Abraham --- because he believed in a future “day” when the promise

that a physical descendant of his would be the promised Messiah. Abraham believed God's promise that day would surely come.

However, the Jews who claimed to be Abraham's sons did not recognize the one now actually standing right in front of them was the very one Abraham had anticipated with such joy! The promised day had arrived. Abraham's tomorrow was now their "today". If Abraham were there he would have believed Jesus to be the promised one. Abraham would have known the day of their visitation.

Thus, Jesus was saying to these doubters he was before Abraham in the sense that God planned the Messiah's coming before Abraham was born. "The day" is what Abraham saw by faith. Abraham did not personally see "God the Son" in a so-called pre-incarnate form, but he anticipated "the day" God's promise would materialize.

Remember the promise God made to Eve that her "seed" would crush the head of the

Serpent? In the Garden and to our first parents, God had already planned and prepared and announced a future day when the promised Saviour would arrive to reverse the curse. Thus, even before Abraham himself was alive, God already had begun His plan for the salvation of the world. *In this sense* --- in the purpose and pre-arranged plan of God --- the Messiah was before Abraham. Before Abraham was born it had already been planned! As Jesus explained it, Abraham saw “the day” in his mind’s eye, for God showed it to him. Thus, before Abraham was even born, Jesus was appointed in the mind and purpose of God.

So, it’s impossible to understand Jesus’ exchange with these Jews unless we get the “helicopter” view of the tensions in these verbal exchanges. To skip straight to v. 58, as most do, (and as you did last Sunday) makes it is easy to be duped into thinking Jesus said, “Before Abraham existed, I AM”. You assured our congregation these Jews understood Jesus claimed to be the I AM God of Exodus 3:14. Why else would they

pick up stones to kill him, if he was not claiming to be the pre-existent God of Israel? So, according to your interpretation, these Jews *knew* Jesus was claiming to be YHVH!

GRAMMATICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

There is also a vital piece of grammatical information we must consider, before being able to properly understand this incident.

Did you not notice that already twice in this chapter Jesus has used the identical words he uses in v. 58... “I am *he*” (*ego eimi*)? Twice already! It’s so easy to miss this because our translators have not capitalized the identical words. Back in v. 24 and v. 28 Jesus tells this crowd “*ego eimi*”, literally “*I am*”, but on these two occasions during the same conversation the translators add in italics the pronoun *he*. This pronoun is a legitimate addition because in the context Jesus is saying he is the one under discussion, the one referred to, the subject. In both these verses the Jews do not connect *ego eimi* with Jesus claiming to *be*

God, that is, *I AM*.

As a matter of fact, every other time Jesus says *ego eimi* in the rest of John's Gospel (or in any of the Synoptic Gospels for that matter) the translators render it "I am *he*" --- all in lower case with the pronoun *he* in italics --- because the obvious meaning is that Jesus is simply saying "I am the one under discussion; I am the one being referred to; I am *he*."

In John's gospel the first occurrence of *ego eimi* is in John 4 in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman. This first occurrence sets the pattern for John's use of *ego eimi* in the rest of his gospel. The subject being discussed is the coming Messiah God has promised. Note the context:

"The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that one comes, he will declare all things to us' (v. 25).

Jesus answers the woman,

“I who speak to you am *he*” (The Greek text simply reads Jesus’ words as “*ego eimi*”) (v.26).

So what prevents our translators from writing that Jesus says, “I AM” here? Answer: the context won’t allow it. The subject being discussed is the Messiah, not the Divine Name or whether Jesus is God.

This same practice holds in John 6:20 where Jesus walking on the water says to the frightened disciples, “*ego eimi*” which is translated, “It is I”, or “It’s me”. Again note, no capitals because the context won’t allow that. Definitely not translated as I AM.

Indeed, in John’s gospel there are others besides Jesus who say, “*ego eimi*”, such as the blind man Jesus healed in John 9. The Jews wonder is he really the one who used to sit there begging? Some said, “Yes, it’s him alright”. Others said, “No, just looks like him.” But the beggar says, “*ego eimi*”. That is, “I am *the one*” or, “I am *he*” (v.9). The beggar’s identical expression with Jesus in

the previous chapter does not mean, “I AM”!

The same for John 13:19 where Jesus says, “I am telling you the truth before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may know that I am *he* --- *ego eimi*.” Again, our translators don’t say Jesus is claiming the Divine Name for the obvious reason that’s out of context and not warranted. As just pointed out, Jesus is not the only one to use these exact words, so just saying “*ego eimi*” by itself is not a unique declaration of eternal existence that only the Almighty utters.

If you wish to follow this through, you will note that all of the disciples, each one individually --- including Judas (!) --- says, “*ego eimi*” when they asked their master if they were the one who would betray their Master Jesus (Matt. 26: 22,25).

Gabriel the archangel announces himself as “*ego eimi*” in Luke 1:19. Jesus warns that many false Messiahs will come and say, “*ego eimi*” (Matt. 24:5; Mk. 13:6; Lk. 21: 8). In Acts 10:21 the apostle Peter says “*ego*

eimi” to identify himself before Cornelius. So does the apostle Paul in Acts 26:29. The list goes on. But the bottom line is that just because somebody says “*ego eimi*” it is no proof of eternal existence or a claim to the Divine Name!

So far, all of Jesus’ “I am *he*” statements in John are satisfactorily explained as Jesus claiming to be the Messiah whom God has sent and who acts on his Father’s behalf. Indeed, five times in the dialogue in John 8 between Jesus and his traducers, Jesus says he is acting on behalf of, and with the full backing of His Father. Jesus can’t be any clearer that, “I am the Messiah whom God sent,” “I am the promised Christ,” but you people won’t listen.

The most important point from all this is that *ego eimi* never stands on its own in isolation. It always has a qualifier signifying I am the one being referred to. Even in English we say, “I am the engineer” or “I am the doctor.” Does the person speaking this want you to think he is an “I am” or that he is

an engineer or a doctor?

The grammatical problem is that if Jesus was trying to relate back to Ex. 3:14 and really wanted the Jews to think he was God, he would have finished the sentence with the appropriate qualifier. By referring to the Hebrew or the Septuagint he would have finished the sentence by saying, "I AM THE BEING". (If Jesus wanted to match himself with God he would have said in the Greek text, "*Esomai ho esomai*", that is, "I will be what I will be." But Jesus did not match his words to either its Greek equivalent, or as I shall soon prove, to the Hebrew text.

So, what's different about Jesus' statement "*ego eimi*" in v. 58 to make us think we can break this obvious pattern of translation? Ah, the translators think --- and they have influenced so many to think by the capitalization of *ego eimi* --- that Jesus was saying he existed before Abraham was born. The unbelieving Jews say, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" (v.57). So, doesn't the immediate context

suggest this is a legitimate deduction because the Jews pick up stones to kill Jesus for a blatant claim to be God? We are told these Jews understood Jesus was claiming to be the pre-existent I AM. What effrontery to claim to pre-date Abraham and to pre-exist their great patriarch! . What blasphemy to claim the Divine Name for himself!

The interesting fact to note is that if this is what Jesus had claimed --- that he had personally pre-existed Abraham as God the Son --- then at Jesus' trial everybody would have been lining up to say, "This crazy bloke claimed to be Yahweh! He actually claimed to be God in the flesh, because he said he was eternally existent before Abraham was even born. We all agree this is what he said." But guess what? Not one witness at Jesus' trial said this is what Jesus had said! How easy that would have been. But it never happened this way because they knew he never claimed the Divine Name of YHVH for himself!

If discretion is the better part of valour, then caution here might be the better part of wisdom. Before rushing to the conclusion that these enemies of Christ who constantly misunderstood him were right on this occasion, it might be wise to look at the facts. Now let's turn to the Hebrew text.

GOD'S PERSONAL NAME.

Is it legitimate to say that in John 8:58 Jesus is claiming the Divine Name "I AM" of Exodus 3:14?

The exegetical facts are that the God of Moses revealed Himself as *Eh'he'yeh asher Eh'he'yeh*, which in the Hebrew is a genderless verb projecting into the future, and which literally is translated, I WILL BE THAT WHICH I WILL BE. Any Hebrew Lexicon will confirm this fact. Even Robert Bowman, a Trinitarian apologist was honest enough to acknowledge this is the case. (1)

I have a friend who is a native Hebrew-speaking and Hebrew-literate Jew who believes in Jesus Christ, and who believes in

the inspiration of the Old & New Testament Writings. Uri explains that *Eh'he'yeh* is best translated into English as "I shall always be" or simply, "I shall be". Uri states the *asher* is simply a relative pronoun meaning who, that, or which. Then the *Eh'he'yeh* is repeated, which effectively modifies its antecedent in the same way an adjective modifies its relative pronoun or noun. Uri explains that practically this means the second *Eh'he'yeh* should not carry over as a duplicate of the first *Eh'he'yeh* in translation.

Specifically, this means Ex. 3:14 is a unique phrase found nowhere else in the entire Bible! In fact, whenever the word *Eh'he'yeh* appears by itself elsewhere in the OT or in the Hebrew NT, a preposition, noun or verb follows, which is what normal usage expects. Indeed, it occurs two verses previous in Ex. 3:12 where God tells Moses, "*Eh'he'yeh*", "Certainly I will be with you ..."

In Hebrew this verb-to-be cannot be conjugated in the present tense as a stand-alone pronoun-verb pair, as most other

verbs can, without adding an infinitive verb, a preposition or a noun at its side. Uri explains that strictly speaking, **the English stand-alone phrase "I am" does not exist in Hebrew!** Ex. 3:14 is unique in the entire Hebrew Bible. My friend categorically states, *Eh'he'yeh asher Eh'he'yeh* does not, and **cannot** be translated as **"I AM that I AM" in English.** (Bold emphasis his.) (2). Moreover, he is adamant the Septuagint Greek of Exodus 3:14, "*Ego eimi ho own*" was never and could never be the personal Hebrew name of God, Yahweh. There exists no Greek equivalent, nor was any attempt ever made to translate or transliterate this Personal Name of the Deity ... YaHVeH.

Our English translations understate with, I AM WHAT I AM. This is grammatically inferior for it confines the Living God to only the present tense, whereas God declares Himself to be far more. The Greek LXX attempts to capture the Divine Name with its *Ego eimi ho own* which literally means, I AM THE ONE WHO IS. It could faithfully also be translated, I AM THE One Who is BEING.

This proves it's impossible to render Jesus' declaration in John 8:58 of *ego eimi* as a claim to the Personal Divine name in Exodus 3:14.

When our Bibles translate the second half of Ex. 3:14 as God saying, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you" they again take massive liberties with what is written in the text. Even the Septuagint LXX cannot be translated as God saying, 'I AM has sent me...' The Greek says, "THE BEING has sent you..." In fact, I AM does not even appear in verse 14 at all! The grammatical fact is this: **The words Jesus spoke in John 8:58 are not even included in the name God wanted Moses to tell the Israelites!**

A VALID ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATION?

Now there is a very tantalizing possibility with the Greek translation of Jesus' affirmation, "Before Abraham was, I am *he*." The Greek perfectly allows that Jesus may have said, "Before Abraham comes to be, I

am *he*.” The Greek adverb *prin* plus the aorist infinitive *genesthai* may refer to a yet future event.

Jesus utters the exact same construction the night of his trial to Peter, “Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times” (*prin* plus *aorist infinitive*). (Matt. 26:34). It is found in John 4:49 where the official pleads with Jesus, “Sir, come down before my son dies.” (*prin* plus *aorist infinitive*). Or Jesus himself says, “I have told you before it comes to pass, that when it comes to pass, you may believe” (John 14:29).

So, did Jesus really intend to be understood that before Abraham comes to be --- that is, before Abraham is raised back to life in the resurrection --- I am *he* who will be already alive prior to Abraham in the resurrection order?

I would not push this tantalizing possibility, but it is grammatically possible. Either way, whether Jesus says that he is superior to

Abraham because he is prior to Abraham in God's plan and purposes, or whether Jesus is prophesying that he is before Abraham in the resurrection stakes, Jesus stands before them that day as Abraham's superior. To that unbelieving crowd this was irreverent in the extreme, quite preposterous.

Conclusion.

When the context and the grammatical facts are taken together, Jesus did not claim the Divine Name of Exodus 3:14. This is an unsupported hypothesis that misrepresents Jesus' communication to his enemies. The assertion that "I am" is a claim to be God is absurd because even if we say the translation "I am " is legitimate (which it is not), then it still is not the personal name for God, for many in the Bible say, "I am ..."

"If Jesus really claimed to be the "I WILL BE THAT WHICH I WILL BE" of Exodus 3:14 he would be claiming to be Yahweh! Which means that Jesus "who did not grasp at equality with God" ((Phil. 2:6) now publicly makes himself the only true

God of Scripture! And Yahweh categorically says, “I am Yahweh, and there is no other, besides Me there is no God” (Is. 45:5). One must surely ask, if Jesus did claim to be Yahweh, and therefore the only God, who then is the Father? Yahweh’s Father? Trinitarians, in the very attempt to make Jesus God, destroy trinitarianism itself!” (3)

Furthermore, surely it is a shaky foundation to build one’s whole system around what Christ’s enemies allege! Why not also agree with them that Jesus was raving mad, or demon-possessed? That’s a no-brainer of course. But what makes us want to rely on the position of Christ’s enemies in this one instance? Could we be cherry-picking out of context to suit our agenda?

All Jesus is saying in John 8:58 to his enemies is that he is the one Abraham would have recognized as Messiah, because he was before Abraham in God’s purposes and Abraham saw Jesus’ “day” by faith. To ignore the context, to disregard the

grammatical facts, leaves an invented theology! As my friend Uri says,

“The Great **“I AM”** house of cards flops when examined in the light of the grammatical evidence. No single passage in the book of John ever makes a claim that Yeshua is God. Rather, it presents a claim that he is the Son of the Living God, Messiah and King of Israel.
(4)

I had to write this letter to you because I have the strong conviction that Jesus would not have recognized himself in your sermon, for not once did he claim, “I am Yahweh God”, or, “I am God the Son.” I respectfully suggest that not to listen to Jesus’ own testimony is to misrepresent and dishonour him, no matter how great the sincerity in doing so. Thanks for listening. I hope it can lead to some loving and honest dialogue.

With blessings, Greg.

Footnotes

1. Bowman, Robert. *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity*. p.99.
2. Uriel ben-Mordechai, *If? The End of a Messianic Lie*. Above and Beyond, Ltd. Jerusalem, Israel. 2011. p. 175.
3. Chang, Eric. H. H. *The Only Perfect Man: The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ*". Edited & Completed by Bentley C.F. Chan. 2014, p. 278.
4. Modechai, *Ibid*, p. 21.