

John 8:58b

Before Abraham was, I am. (KJV)

1. Trinitarians argue that this verse states that Jesus said he was the “I am” (*i.e.*, the *Yahweh* of the Old Testament), so he must be God. This is just not the case. Saying “I am” does not make a person God. The man born blind that Jesus healed was not claiming to be God, and he said “I am the man,” and the Greek reads exactly like Jesus’ statement, *i.e.*, “I am.” The fact that the exact same phrase is translated two different ways, one as “I am” and the other as “I am the man,” is one reason it is so hard for the average Christian to get the truth from just reading the Bible as it has been translated into English. Most Bible translators are Trinitarian, and their bias appears in various places in their translation, this being a common one. Paul also used the same phrase of himself when he said that he wished all men were as “I am” (Acts 26:29). Thus, we conclude that saying “I am” did not make Paul, the man born blind or Christ into God. C. K. Barrett writes:

Ego eimi [“I am”] does not identify Jesus with God, but it does draw attention to him in the strongest possible terms. “I am the one—the one you must look at, and listen to, if you would know God.”¹

2. The phrase “I am” occurs many other times in the New Testament, and is often translated as “I am he” or some equivalent (“I am he”—Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8; John 13:19; 18:5, 6 and 8. “It is I”—Matt. 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20. “I am the one I claim to be”—John 8:24 and 28.). It is obvious that these translations are quite correct, and it is interesting that the phrase is translated as “I am” only in John 8:58. If the phrase in John 8:58 were translated “I am he” or “I am the one,” like all the others, it would be easier to see that Christ was speaking of himself as the Messiah of God (as indeed he was), spoken of throughout the Old Testament.

At the Last Supper, the disciples were trying to find out who would deny the Christ. They said, literally, “Not I am, Lord” (Matt. 26:22 and 25). No one would say that the disciples were trying to deny that they were God because they were using the phrase “Not I am.” The point is this: “I am” was a common way of designating oneself, and it did not mean you were claiming to be God.

3. The argument is made that because Jesus was “before” Abraham, Jesus must have been God. There is no question that Jesus figuratively “existed” in Abraham’s time. However, he did not actually physically exist as a person; rather he “existed” in the mind of God as God’s plan for the redemption of man. A careful reading of the context of the verse shows that Jesus was speaking of “existing” in God’s foreknowledge. Verse 56 is accurately translated in the *King James Version*, which says: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw *it*, and was glad.” This verse says that Abraham “saw” the Day of Christ, which is normally considered by theologians to be the day when Christ conquers the earth and sets up his kingdom. That would fit with what the book of Hebrews says about Abraham: “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). Abraham looked for a city that is still future, yet the Bible says Abraham “saw” it. In what sense could

Abraham have seen something that was future? Abraham “saw” the Day of Christ because God told him it was coming, and Abraham “saw” it by faith. Although Abraham saw the Day of Christ by faith, that day existed in the mind of God long before Abraham. Thus, in the context of God’s plan existing from the beginning, Christ certainly was “before” Abraham. Christ was the plan of God for man’s redemption long before Abraham lived. We are not the only ones who believe that Jesus’ statement does not make him God:

To say that Jesus is “before” him is not to lift him out of the ranks of humanity but to assert his unconditional precedence. To take such statements at the level of “flesh” so as to infer, as “the Jews” do that, at less than fifty, Jesus is claiming to have lived on this earth before Abraham (8:52 and 57), is to be as crass as Nicodemus who understands rebirth as an old man entering his mother’s womb a second time (3:4).²

4. In order for the Trinitarian argument that Jesus’ “I am” statement in John 8:58 makes him God, his statement must be equivalent with God’s “I am” statement in Exodus 3:14. However, the two statements are very different. While the Greek phrase in John does mean “I am,” the Hebrew phrase in Exodus actually means “to be” or “to become.” In other words God is saying, “I will be what I will be.” Thus the “I am” in Exodus is actually a mistranslation of the Hebrew text, so the fact that Jesus said “I am” did not make him God.

Buzzard, pp. 93-97,
Dana, Letter 21, pp. 169-171,
Morgridge, pp. 120-21,
Norton, pp. 242-246,
Snedeker, pp. 416-418

Endnotes:

1. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (Westminster Press, London, 1978), p. 342.
2. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (Meyer Stone Pub., Oak Park, IL, 1985), p. 384.

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