

The significance of the “I AM” statements in the Bible

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The “I AM” statements by Jesus in John’s gospel have resonant echoes of the great “I AM” statements by God in the Old Testament.

Here is Exodus 3:14 in the original Hebrew on the right, with, on the left, an English translation published in the 21st century by a Jewish publisher in Israel.

EXODUS III.	104	שמות ג
<p>12 And he said, Certainly I will be with thee ; and this <i>shall be</i> a token unto thee, that I have sent thee. When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.</p> <p>13 And Moses said unto God, Behold, <i>when</i> I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you ; and they shall say to me, What <i>is</i> his name? what shall I say unto them?</p> <p>14 And God said unto Moses, <u>I AM THAT I AM</u> : and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, <u>I AM</u> hath sent me unto you.</p> <p>15 And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham,</p>	<p>עֲמֹד וְזָה-לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלְחֲתִיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת-הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת- 13 הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה : וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל- הָאֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בֹא אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ-לִי מַה-שְּׁמוֹ מַה אֶמֶר אֶלְהֶם : 14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהִיָּה 15 שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם : וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל- מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה</p>	
<p>“THE HOLY SCRIPTURES A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Text - Hebrew and English” Tel Aviv, Sinai Publishing, 2008</p>		

It is clear that this Jewish publisher, which specialises in materials for the teaching of Biblical Hebrew, considers that “I AM” is the best translation of the corresponding Hebrew words.

The Greek translation of the Jewish Hebrew Scriptures

Approximately 250 years before the time of Christ, the Jewish Scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament), which had been written mostly in Hebrew, were translated by the Jews into Greek. This translation was apparently made by seventy Jewish scholars. It is known as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX)¹. The Jews of Jesus’ day no longer spoke Hebrew in daily life. Many, probably most, were bilingual, speaking Aramaic and Greek, so they mostly read their Scriptures in the Septuagint translation.

Likewise, Jesus most frequently spoke in Aramaic or Greek, and the New Testament was written in Greek (with occasional words and phrases in Aramaic).

Below (on the right) is how the Septuagint translated Exodus 3:14, more than 2,250 years ago, with (on the left) the most authoritative modern translation into English from the Septuagint text².

¹ “Septuaginta” edited by Alfred Rahlfs, revised by Robert Hanhart, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006
² “A New English Translation of the Septuagint” (“NETS”), New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
Translations from the Septuagint into English below are from NETS, unless otherwise indicated.

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Exodus 3:14 (NETS)	LXX
“And God said to Moyses, ‘ I am The One Who Is. ’ And he said, ‘Thus shall you say to the sons of Israel, “The One Who Is has sent me to you”.’ ”	καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωϋσῆν ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν ³ καὶ εἶπεν οὕτως ἔρεις τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς (Ex 3:14 LXX)

Here, we see that the Jews who made this translation of Exodus 3:14 into Greek before the coming of Christ *also* understood the Hebrew original to mean “**I am**”, in the present tense. Thus, the Jews in ancient times, both hundreds of years before Christ and at the time of Christ, translated the Hebrew in Exodus 3:14 with the present tense phrase “**I am**”, and Jews in modern times likewise agree that “**I am**”, in the present tense, is the correct translation of the original Hebrew.

Other verses of the Greek translation of the Old Testament also illustrate this point and help to show how the phrase “**I am**” came to be a designation for God.

Exodus 3:6a	LXX
“And he said to him, ‘ I am the God of your father, God of Abraam and God of Isaak and God of Iakob.’ ”	καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς σου θεὸς Ἀβρααμ καὶ θεὸς Ἰσαακ καὶ θεὸς Ἰακωβ

Another very early statement in which God describes Himself as “**I am**” is recorded in the book of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 32:39	LXX
“See, see that I am , and there is no god except me. I will kill, and I will make alive; I will strike and I will heal, and there is no one who will deliver from my hands.”	ἴδετε ἴδετε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν θεὸς πλην ἐμοῦ ἐγὼ ἀποκτενῶ καὶ ζῆν ποιήσω πατάξω καὶ γὰρ ἰάσομαι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὃς ἐξελεῖται ἐκ τῶν χειρῶν μου

In the book of Isaiah, God is repeatedly described as the “**I am**”. Here are some examples:

Isaiah 41:4b	LXX
“I, God, am first and for the things that are coming, I am. ”	ἐγὼ θεὸς πρῶτος καὶ εἰς τὰ ἐπερχόμενα ἐγὼ εἰμι

Isaiah 43:10	LXX
“Be my witnesses; I too am a witness, says the Lord God, and the servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe and understand that I am . Before me there was no other god, nor shall there be any after me.”	γένεσθέ μοι μάρτυρες καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός καὶ ὁ παῖς ὃν ἐξελεξάμην ἵνα γνῶτε καὶ πιστεύσητε καὶ συνῆτε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι ἔμπροσθέν μου οὐκ ἐγένετο ἄλλος θεός καὶ μετ’ ἐμὲ οὐκ ἔσται

Isaiah 43:25	LXX
“ I am [the] “ I am ” who blots out your acts of lawlessness, and I will not remember them at all.”	ἐγὼ εἰμι ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἐξαλείφων τὰς ἀνομίας σου καὶ οὐ μὴ μνησθήσομαι

³ The Greek phrase ἐγὼ εἰμι is pronounced approximately “eggo Amy”.

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Isaiah 45:18	LXX
<p>“Thus says the Lord, who made heaven – this is the God who displayed the earth and made it; he did not make it to be empty but to be inhabited: <u>I am</u>, and there is no other.”</p>	<p>οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν οὗτος ὁ θεὸς ὁ καταδείξας τὴν γῆν καὶ ποίησας αὐτήν αὐτὸς διώρισεν αὐτήν οὐκ εἰς κενὸν ἐποίησεν αὐτήν ἀλλὰ κατοικεῖσθαι <u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἕτι</p>

Isaiah 45:19	LXX
<p>“<u>I am</u> “<u>I am</u>”, the Lord.”</p>	<p><u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> <u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> κύριος</p>

NETS translates this verse as “I am, I am the Lord”. The only difference between their version and mine is in the punctuation, and as the original text does not have any punctuation at all, both versions represent interpretations of the best way to show the meaning of the original. NETS simply presents the double use of the phrase “I am” as a repetition. I, however, see it as God saying “I am the ‘I am’.” Since the Greek for the word “the” is often omitted in Greek, supplying it in a translation is absolutely normal and uncontroversial.

It may be that the Jews at the time when the Septuagint translation was made, and subsequently, at the time of Christ, could have read the text either way and indeed it is possible that some understood it in the way it is presented by NETS and others in the way that I present it here. In evaluating which is more likely, we need to look at the further use of “I am” in the Septuagint. Just a few chapters later in Isaiah, we have a very similar sentence:

Isaiah 51:12	LXX
<p>“<u>I am</u> [the] “<u>I am</u>” who comforts you”⁴</p>	<p><u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> <u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> ὁ παρακαλῶν σε</p>

I contend that the use of the phrase “I am I am” on repeated occasions does lend weight to my interpretation: “I am “I am” ” or “I am the “I am”.” Moreover, when we look beyond the book of Isaiah, we see further use of the “I am” phrase, this time in a context that is not ambiguous.

In the case of **2 Samuel 12:7**, the use of the phrase “I am” is not obvious in most English translations (which are, of course, from the Hebrew, not from the Greek translation), but the Septuagint Greek text reads:

<p>τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς Ἰσραὴλ <u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> ἔχρισά σε εἰς βασιλεῖα ἐπὶ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ <u>ἐγὼ εἰμι</u> ἔρρυσάμην σε ἐκ χειρὸς Σαουλ.</p>

In English, this is: “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘ “I am” anointed you as king over Israel and “I am” rescued you out of the hand of Saul’ ” [my translation].⁵

This important text about King David would have been well known to the Jews of Jesus’ day. Furthermore, when Jesus and the New Testament writers quoted from the Old Testament, they mostly quoted from the Septuagint Greek translation. When Jesus said “I

⁴ The NIV misses the point, translating this as: “I, even I, am he who comforts you” (but it is translating from the Hebrew, not the Greek!).

⁵ Readers without a knowledge of Koiné Greek are referred to “A New English Translation of the Septuagint” pp. 271, 284.

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AM”, he was using exactly the same words that were used in the Septuagint when quoting God speaking. **A comparison of the words printed in red in this article will confirm this – even for readers who know no Greek.**

Thus, when Jesus made his “I AM” statements, he was affirming his right to speak about himself in the same way that God spoke about Himself in the Jewish Scriptures, both as recorded in the Hebrew and in the ancient Greek translation.

“I AM” statements in John’s gospel

Here are some of the “I AM” statements made by Jesus that are recorded in John’s gospel:

English (NIV)	Greek New Testament text
• I am the bread of life (John 6:35, 6:48)	ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς.
• I am the light of the world (John 8:12)	ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου.
• I am the door (or gate) of the sheep (John 10:7)	ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ θύρα τῶν προβάτων
• I am the good shepherd (John 10:11)	Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός.
• I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)	ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωὴ.
• I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6)	ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ.
• I am the vine (John 15:5)	ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος

John 4:26 may possibly be considered to contain another “I AM” statement. We start reading from the previous verse, in order to understand the context.

John 4:25-26	Greek New Testament text
²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “ I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” (NRSV)	²⁵ λέγει αὐτῷ ἡ γυνὴ· οἶδα ὅτι Μεσσίας ἔρχεται ὁ λεγόμενος χριστός· ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐκεῖνος, ἀναγγελεῖ ἡμῖν ἅπαντα. ²⁶ λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἐγώ εἰμι , ὁ λαλῶν σοι.

I say “possibly”, because this instance may be a “normal” use of the phrase “I am”, without the sacred meaning that it acquired in the Old Testament. However, considering the identity of the speaker (Jesus) and the nature of what he says here (that he is the Messiah), many would interpret this to be another occurrence of “**I am**” indicating Christ’s deity.

“I am” statements by Jesus are also recorded in other gospels, for instance, in Mark:

Mark 6:50	Greek New Testament text
"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (NIV)	θαρσεῖτε, ἐγώ εἰμι · μὴ φοβεῖσθε.

As indicated by the NIV translation, this example may, however, be no more than a normal use of the phrase, without religious overtones.

The most astounding – and totally unambiguous – “I AM” statement can be found in John 8:58:

εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι **ἐγώ εἰμὶ**.
“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, **I am!**” (NIV)

Jesus is here unquestionably claiming to be God.

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This is confirmed by the reaction of the Jews – see the next verse:

“At this, they picked up stones to stone him.” (NIV)

The significance of this attempt to kill Jesus by stoning becomes clear in John 10:31-33:

³¹ Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, ³² but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

³³ “We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, **claim to be God.**” (NIV)

A note on the Jehovah’s Witnesses

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reject the deity of Christ and in their translation⁶ change the meaning of the original texts, in order to produce a version that hides the fact that their teaching is contradicted by Scripture.

Their translation removes the link between Jesus’ words in John 8:58 and God’s words in Exodus 3:14, by changing the tense of the verbs in *both* passages. They transform the “**I AM**” in Exodus 3:14 into a convoluted phrase that is in the future tense: “I SHALL PROVE TO BE WHAT I SHALL PROVE TO BE” (capital letters in their text throughout). As we have demonstrated above, this goes against the meaning of the original Hebrew text as understood by the Jews both in ancient times and in the present day.

To obscure the reference completely, the Jehovah’s Witnesses also change the “**I AM**” in John 8:58 – but this time into the past tense of the verb: “I have been.” This is not a possible meaning of the Greek original and the arguments that the Jehovah’s Witnesses use to try to justify their change to the original text lack any foundation in fact. Readers wishing to study the translation of John 8:58 in more detail are encouraged to read the article on this verse, on this website.

The Greek that we have in John 8:58 is simple and it is identical to the phrase in the Old Testament texts. **The translator’s job is to translate, not to change the text to make it match his or her theology.** We do not need to appeal to dictionaries, grammar reference books, philosophical and theological arguments – just to accept it and to translate honestly what the text says!

⁶ “New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc, 1961.