

Introduction to Jesus' "I Am" Sayings in John's Gospel

The Gospel of John's overt portrayal of Jesus as both divine and human is unique. Jesus is the Word of God who came into the world as a human being to reveal God and offer true, eternal life to all (John 1:1-18; 3:16; 10:30; 14:9). A powerful way in which Jesus reveals God and identifies God's activity through his own is by making declarations using the phrase "I am" (*egō eimi* or *eimi* in the original Greek). Although at times this phrase functions as the ordinary way for Jesus to self-identify, there are several instances in which it recalls God's own self-revelation in the Old Testament. These theologically significant "I am" statements affirm that Jesus is one with God and shares in God's life-giving power and saving activity.

There are two main types of revelatory "I am" statements in John's gospel: those that are followed by a descriptive phrase and those that stand on their own. This study focuses on the former, in which Jesus vividly conveys who he is by identifying himself with familiar entities or basic human desires—most fundamentally, the longing for life. The following are Jesus' "I am" sayings with clear predicates:

- ♦ "I am the bread of life" (6:35).
- ♦ "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5).
- ♦ "I am the gate" (10:7, 9).
- ♦ "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14).
- ♦ "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).
- ♦ "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6).
- ♦ "I am the true vine" (15:1); "I am the vine" (15:5).

The second category of revelatory "I am"s are those that are not modified by such descriptive words or phrases. They are commonly translated into English as "I am he"—or sometimes, even more simply, as "I am." They often occur when Jesus calls people to recognize his true identity and believe in him. For example, Jesus declares in John 8:24: "You will die in your sins unless you believe that *I am he*" (author's emphasis). He is calling the people to trust that he is the One sent by God to do God's will. Jesus then says, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that *I am he* and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me" (8:28; author's emphasis). Such "I am" statements indicate that God is uniquely at work through Jesus—including in his crucifixion and resurrection—to forgive people's sins and offer them true life through a relationship of trust in him (11:25).

The deepest theological significance of Jesus' "I am" statements stems from their resonance with instances of God's own self-revelation in the Old Testament using various phrases that are often translated into English as "I AM" or "I am he." As session 1 explores, God initially reveals God's name to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14), fundamentally identifying God with life and being itself. Although Jesus does not speak this full phrase in John, he does claim to share in God's life-giving power and eternal existence using "I am" sayings (e.g., John 8:58; 11:25).

In several biblical texts, God speaks in first-person language to identify as the only true God who is sovereign over life and graciously grants salvation. In Isaiah 43:10-11, God calls God's people to "know and believe

me and understand that *I am he*. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior” (author’s emphasis; see also Deuteronomy 32:39). Such language is reflected in Jesus’ “I am” sayings that call people to know and believe in him (John 8:24, 28; 13:19) as God’s Son and agent of salvation. Jesus’ self-identification using both the phrase “I am” and characteristics ascribed to God in the Old Testament shows his unity with God.

The power of Jesus’ “I am” sayings is evident in the mixed response they evoke. Some who hear them believe that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah or Savior (4:25-26; 11:25-27). Others are confused or enraged by the implications of these declarations, such as when Jesus’ “I am” comes with a claim to share in God’s life-giving power (8:51-59). And when Jesus identifies as “I am” to those seeking to arrest him, his captors fall to the ground (18:4-6).

GUIDANCE FOR STUDYING THE “I AM” SAYINGS

- ♦ Jesus’ “I am” sayings show that the God who first called and redeemed God’s people, as seen in the Old Testament, is the same God who sent Jesus to continue to call people to a life-giving relationship with God and one another. Keep in mind, therefore, that although John’s gospel depicts Jesus receiving a mixed response from Jewish people, Jesus’ “I am” statements are one way John’s gospel shows that Jesus *continues* God’s long-standing commitment to God’s people.
- ♦ Many of Jesus’ “I am” sayings reflect language, concepts, and imagery found in the Old Testament. Exploring these connections leads to a richer understanding of Jesus’ sayings. This study will help you identify and engage these connections.
- ♦ Although the “I am” sayings can convey something significant about Jesus when read on their own, it is best to interpret them in relation to the narratives in which they appear in John’s gospel. This study will guide you in doing this.
- ♦ The “I am” sayings in this study use imagery and concepts familiar to all people. This means that whether or not you’ve studied the Bible before, you are prepared to engage these sayings.