



QUESTION – What did Jesus mean when he said, “Before Abraham was, I am.”
(John 8:58)



This sentence of only five words – (in both English and New Testament Greek) – invites our attention to one of the profoundest and most important subjects in the scriptures; the nature of the Lord Jesus. I think this fact becomes even clearer when we understand that the word ‘was’ is the word *‘genestai’*, which literally means ‘was born’; thus, *‘before Abraham was born, I am’*.

You will have noticed, I am sure, that as it stands, the sentence does not make very grammatical English, but its significance becomes clearer when we recognize that this is a statement that must be considered, not grammatically, but theologically.

Jesus confronts the Jews

John chapter 8 records a confrontation between Jesus and the Jews and the main question at issue concerned His identity. His Jewish questioners were quite certain and proud of their own origin. They were the children of *‘Father Abraham’*, who was mentioned no fewer than 10 times in the discussion. But Jesus pointed out that, even if that were true, they certainly did not demonstrate the faith of Abraham, because, He said, *“Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day, and saw it and was glad.”* v.56 (See also Gal. 3:8)

We hear the mockery and ridicule in their voices when they responded, *“You are not yet 50 years old, and have you seen Abraham?”* Of course, if they had been listening to what He was saying they would have noticed that He was not claiming to have *‘seen Abraham’*. He was saying that Abraham had been privileged and glad to have been allowed to ‘see’ the coming of the One through whom all nations would be blessed.

The Lord did not respond to their question. Instead He made the statement in verse 58 which instantly turned their ridicule into blazing anger. *“Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am”*.

Notice carefully what He said. He did not say, *“Before Abraham was born, I was born”*, or, *“Before Abraham existed, I existed”*. His assertion was, *“Before Abraham was born, I AM”*, and regardless of how strange this may fall on *our* ears, His meaning was clearly understood by those who heard His words that day. They immediately took up stones to stone Him to death, because they saw this statement as blasphemous and therefore deserving of the penalty for blasphemy imposed by the Mosaic Law. They realized – quite correctly - that Jesus was claiming to be greater than their Father Abraham, because He shared the nature of deity.

What Jesus meant by ‘I am’

The two words which aroused their anger and indignation are the last two words in His statement; *‘I Am’*, words which, in the Greek text read, *‘Ego eimi’*, and they were enraged because they knew perfectly well what those words meant when used in this context.

To understand why they were angry it is necessary to go back to Exodus 3, which records God’s words to Moses at the burning bush. You will remember that God called

Moses, in order to send him back to Egypt with a message for Pharaoh. However, having been brought up as an Egyptian prince in the heart of Egyptian life and culture, Moses knew that every deity in Egypt had a personal name, (and it has been calculated that there were some 20,000 personal and national deities in the land). It would not be enough, therefore merely to tell either his fellow-Hebrews or Pharaoh that – *'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'* was demanding the release of His people. The people had been in Egypt too long to know the God of their forefathers, and Pharaoh himself would certainly demand to know the name of this 'god', but, at this point, Moses did not know how to respond.

In fact, in chapter 5 we see that Moses had accurately predicted Pharaoh's reaction.

God's answer to Moses is found in Exodus 3:58. He said, *"I Am who I Am". Tell the people of Israel, I Am has sent me"*.

Now the words, *'I Am'* form part of the verb *'to be'*, and when I went to school I was taught that this verb embraced such expressions as *'I am, he is, you are, they are'*, all of which are in the present tense.

The Hebrew verb *'to be'* is *'hayah'*, and in Ex. 3:14, the first person, singular number, present tense of the verb *'to be'*, is *'ehveh'*. *"I Am who I Am"*. It is as though God was saying to Moses: *"You ask Me for a name, but My nature cannot be expressed in words, nor can it be grasped or understood by man's mind, I exist essentially – eternally. I am reality. I exist and no-one and nothing else exists. If, with the limitations of human language I am to give you a name which expresses My nature, call Me "I Am"*.

The reality of Jesus' claim

A little later, at chapter 3:15, God modified the verb *'ehveh'* when he told Moses *"Go to the people and tell them that 'YHVH', the God of your fathers has sent me to you. This is My Name for ever"*. The *'ehveh'* = *'I AM'* had become *'YHVH'* = *'I shall Become'*.

This is the first Person, singular number, future *tense* of the verb *'to be'*. And the significance of this name *'YHVH'* or *'Yahveh'* is that it identifies God as *'The Becoming One'*. It is His redemptive Name. He is the God Who *'becomes'* whatever His people need. Becoming Man. Becoming the Redeemer.

When, in the period between the Testaments, the Hebrew scriptures were translated for the use of Jews who used the Greek language, which had become the common language throughout the Roman Empire, the Hebrew word *'ehveh'* = *'I Am'* was rendered in the Greek by *'ego eimi'* = *'I Am'*, so that in the days of Jesus every devout Jew understood and accepted it as the name for God. Indeed, this was emphasized by the fact that, in those days, since very few Jews could read Hebrew anyway, the 'authorized version' of their scriptures was the Greek version.

Therefore, when Jesus said, *"Before Abraham was born, I AM"*, He was claiming to be deity. And the Jews knew it! You can also understand how angry and shocked they were when He told them, *"Unless you believe that I Am, ('ego eimi') you shall die in your sins"*. *John 8:24*.

It would be difficult to find a clearer or more emphatic warning against unbelief than this, in the entire New Testament!

Frank Worgan.