

DID JESUS REALLY SAY HE EXISTED BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS BORN?

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Most assuredly I say to you, Before Abraham was, I AM (John 8:58 NKJV).

During my recovery from surgery I have been able to do a little Greek grammar revision. Yes, sounds boring I know, and some would say I need to get a life! Anyway, in my review of Greek infinitives (verbal nouns) I was reminded of a conversation I had not long ago with a dedicated pastor whom I sincerely admire.

I happened to mention an alternative interpretation of Jesus' statement to the one which most of our English translations render as, "**Before Abraham was, I AM**". The NASB adds, **Before Abraham was born, I AM**. (¹) The New Living Translation (NLT) goes further, **Before Abraham was even born, I AM**. The Passion Translation (TPT) goes so far as to translate it, **I give you this eternal truth: I have existed long before Abraham was born, for I AM!** (exclamation mark original). (²)

Contra this ubiquitous consensus I mentioned to my friend that Jesus' statement, when considered in the context of his discussion with his traducers, in all likelihood should more appropriately be translated to read, "**Before Abraham comes to be, I am he**". Unsurprisingly, my friend's response was that he had never seen any translation or commentator mention this possibility — the implication being I was out on the proverbial limb and sawing proximal to the trunk! (³)

At the time, I appealed to the Greek construction where the adverb 'before' (**πρὶν**) in combination with the aorist infinitive (**γενέσθαι**) --- in the context of Christ's claim to be offering something far greater than even Abraham was able to do (i.e., give freedom from bondage to sin and to give eternal life (see **8:33-36** & **51-53**) --- is better taken as a reference to a future occurrence rather than an appeal to the ancient past.

Therefore, I reasoned how the immediate context before **verse 58** (where the adverb **πρὶν** before the infinitive aorist **γενέσθαι**) better means Jesus was saying, "**Before Abraham comes to be (or, comes to be-ing), I am he**". Which is to say, Jesus was not talking about his own **eternal nature and pre-existence before Abraham was born**, but was rather referring to his own up-coming resurrection before Abraham ever comes up out of the grave — referencing future events and not long ages ago!

¹ This is how my 1963 edition reads, but I note their more recent 1995 edition changes it to **I am** — without capitals.

² When I Googled what **The Passion Translation** had to say about its bold rendering, the statement was that their interpretation highlights **Jesus' eternal nature and his pre-existence before Abraham, aligning with the core meaning found in other translations**. TPT just by the way, does not claim to be a translation *per se*!

³ One translation which seems to agree with this alternative is **Young's Literal Translation (YLT)**: **Verily, verily I say to you, Before Abraham's coming — I am.**

JESUS' OWN RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD PROVES HIS PRIORITY BEFORE ABRAHAM.

If Jesus is predicting he himself will be resurrected before Abraham comes to be, then it will prove to his skeptical audience his superiority over Abraham. The question for us then is: Has Jesus come to be alive before Abraham "comes to be"?

We already know the answer, don't we? It's what the Gospel announcement is all about; **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... and he was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures ... (1 Cor 15:3-4).** Jesus is the first man ever raised up by God from the dead to immortality.

Jesus is called the **'first-fruits'** of the resurrection from the dead. Every other man, including Abraham the great father of the faithful, will follow afterwards **in his own order** at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ as per **1 Cor 15: 23!** Taken this way we see how this interpretation that Jesus will come to be before Abraham perfectly harmonises with the rest of the Gospel message in the NT.

So, let's investigate further. Was Jesus in **John 8:58** alleging that he is greater than even the great patriarch Abraham, not because he himself is the "I AM", the eternal God, but because he would himself be raised from the dead before Abraham comes up from the grave at the close of this present age.

GRAMMATICAL CONSISTENCY!

In case anybody accuses me of being a rogue translator, please allow me to point out that the Greek construction wherever the adverb "before" with the aorist infinitive occurs in other verses, it's speaking of something still in the future. For example, in **Matthew 26:34** where Jesus predicts Peter's imminent denial of his Lord, we read, **"Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times"** [**πρὶν** plus the aorist infinitive **φωνῆσαι** demands, in this context, a future time reference].

Not counting **John 8:58**, the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses **γενέσθαι** six times. In each instance he is referring to something still to come — an anticipated future (**John 1:12; 5:6; 8:33; 13:19; 14: 29 and 15:7**).

More specifically and significantly, the only other time when the writer of John's Gospel uses the adverb **πρὶν** with the infinitive aorist **γενέσθαι**, he refers to what is still to happen in the future! In **John 14: 29** Jesus says, **"And now I have told you before it happens [πρὶν γενέσθαι] so that when it does happen you may believe."** Can't get much clearer than that!

So why do translators at **John 8:58** break John's practice and make out that Jesus is referring, not to a future state into which Abraham will yet enter, but say he is referring to his own putative past existence before Abraham was even born?

One reason could be (and we are all susceptible to this) that often we become so familiar and comfortable with our well-worn reading habits that we fail to investigate other possibilities? Sometimes familiarity breeds contempt, as they say.

Another reason is our reluctance to question those who give us our English translations, as though they invariably pick the best options available (in the medical world we are encouraged to seek a second opinion, so why not in the theological world?).

But if you ask me for a more likely reason (as I will shortly show) it is that the translation panels are so beholden to their Deity of Christ position — that their Jesus simply must be the pre-existent 'God the Son' and second member of the reputed holy Trinity, the eternal I AM — and so they are unable to recognise the possibility that Jesus may be referring to his own prior resurrection before father Abraham will be raised up to enter the Messianic Kingdom. (⁴)

SUBTLE INSINUATIONS

Notice how most modern translations direct our minds away from this very real exegetical possibility by capitalising Jesus' words "I am" [ἐγὼ εἰμί] to read "I AM". This is an unwarranted translator 'suggestion', (i.e. interpretation, not translation) if not downright manipulation!

There are many places in the NT where the words [ἐγὼ εἰμί] "I am" come from Jesus' mouth, but in *no other instance* do our linguists capitalise the words as I AM. There is a simple reason why they do not capitalise the words in any other such statement to read, I AM --- context will not allow it.

The common justification for the capitalisation here in John 8:58 is to imply that Jesus was claiming to be the God who spoke the words I AM to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3 which many English translations render as, "I AM WHAT I AM"). This is disinformation. It just is not so, indeed cannot be because

The Hebrew is a genderless verb projecting into the future (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה / *hāyâ 'ăšer hāyâ*) and is more accurately translated to, "I will be what I will be". The LXX puts it as, "I am the existing One" or, "I am the self-existent One" (ἐγὼ εἰμί ὁ ὢν / *ego eimi ho hown*). Either way this is definitely NOT what Jesus said in John 8: 58, so he was **not** claiming to be the God Who spoke to Moses in Exodus 3.

CONFIRMATION FROM “TWO OR THREE (OR INDEED FOUR) WITNESSES!

I was recently corresponding with another fine man of God, a dedicated pastor who has written a book which is an apologetic (defence) for the Trinity. In the book he

⁴ If you care to read the Editorial Preface to the various translations you will almost invariably find express statements of their commitment to the doctrine of the Three-in-One Trinity and to “the Deity of Christ” .

makes the assertion that, "in the Hebrew 'I am' is only used in reference to God. It is his name. His signature!" He then states that, "In everyday communication, a Jewish person would not use 'I am' in the common way we do." He cited a Jewish Pastor for support (whose name I withhold).

Although I was sure this is not so, I decided to double-check the facts with a local Hebrew speaker (and a believer in the One God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua) as well as with a Doctor in Hebrew and Greek studies (also a very committed evangelical Christian) and, not to leave anything to chance, with two other well-versed specialists in Hebrew / Greek Biblical linguistics. All four were adamant the assertion that Jewish practice does not accommodate the use of "I am" as we do, is without foundation.

One of them summarised what the others basically stated. He wrote:

1. **Exod 3:14 does not say "I am who I am." It says, "I will be what I will be." This passage does not prove that God's name is "I am." We know God's name, it is Yahweh.**
2. **The phrase "I am" ... is actually the first-person pronoun and the third-person pronoun, literally "I am he." This is a self-designation, often casual, "I am the one we are all talking about."**
3. **King David says "I am he" in 1 Chron 21:17, and the LXX has *ego eimi*. David was not claiming to be God, and no one thought he was blaspheming when he said it. This proves that human beings can say it, and there is no confusion. It is not a claim to be Yahweh.**
4. **When Yahweh says, "I am he" it proves that God is one person, since these are two singular pronouns.**

We may safely dismiss, therefore, any suggestion that in **John 8:58** Jesus is claiming to be the God of Moses and of the people of Israel.

I AM HE

It's time to show how Jesus' words "**I am**" are translated elsewhere in the Gospel of John --- not to mention other times in the Synoptic Gospels.

The first time in the Gospel of John when Jesus says, **ἐγὼ εἰμί** is during his conversation with the woman at the well in **chapter 4**. The woman says to Jesus, "**I know that the Messiah is coming ... When he comes, he will tell us all things.**" Jesus said to her, "**I, who speak to you, am he**" [**ἐγὼ εἰμί**] (**vs. 24-25**).

It would be impossible to capitalise it to read, I AM, for Jesus is not claiming to be the God whom he has just previously identified in the narrative as both "**the God of the Jews**" and as "**the Father**" (**vs. 21-24**). I never get tired of saying it, but context is always the final determinant in translation and interpretation. Jesus was affirming

that the one whom the woman is speaking to is the long-awaited Christ, i.e. the human Messiah, "the Saviour of the world" (vs.29, 42).

This is why the translators say in good English, "I, who speak to you, am *he*." They are telling us that '*he*' is not in the original text but has been added in italics for good reading. Fair enough. "I am *he*" means, I am the Messiah, the one in question. This is why the translators do not capitalize "I am" in John 4:24-25! Context will not allow it.

The same occurs twice in John 8 in verses 24 and 28 before we ever arrive at verse 58:- Take verse 28 where Jesus tells the doubters, "When you lift up the Son of man, then you will know that I am *he* (ἐγὼ εἶμι) and I do nothing of my own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father has taught me."

Jesus cannot be saying that the Son of man — who can do nothing on his own — will be seen to be the Almighty I AM when he dies. It is intolerable for One who is God Almighty to say, "I can do nothing of Myself!" Besides, God cannot die! Once again the consistent and natural reading is that Jesus is claiming to be their Messiah ... I am the one who is being discussed.

BROADER CONTEXT

Have you ever noticed how many times previous to John 8:58 --- i.e., throughout chapters 5,6,7 & all of 8 --- that Jesus has to argue with his opponents concerning his Messianic credentials? Again and again Jesus affirms that the authority he has been given concerning his power to heal, to work mighty signs and miracles, and to raise the dead in the future Kingdom Age, is delegated to him by God his Father. Such instrumentality in God's purpose is proof that Jesus is indeed God's promised Messiah. The eternal destinies of all mankind are put into his hands because God his Father has "sent" (or commissioned) him to accomplish this work.

John chapters 5,6,7 & 8 are choc-a-bloc full of Jesus' own defence regarding the question as to his Messianic mission, claims, and identity --- they are not about whether He is the I AM WHAT I AM! It surely is significant that, in all of these four chapters from 5 through to 8, the subject concerns Jesus' claim to being their Messiah. The entire narrative centers around whether Jesus has been given authority to heal on the Sabbath, to forgive sins, to give life, to save from death, to raise the dead, to be the judge of all of humanity, and finally to inherit the kingdom!

It is surprising to me that such an obvious thematic flow of these narrative discourses is by and large overlooked by the time we get to John 8. John 8:58 is not an isolated discussion popping up from a nowhere vacuum! Specifically, John 8:58 follows after chapters 5,6, 7 and all of 8 where Jesus' insistent claims to being the long-awaited Messiah are being discussed!

There is only space here for one representative example to demonstrate this. In **chapter 6** we have enigmatic discourse concerning the bread which has come down from heaven to give eternal life to any who will believe in Jesus. Observe how Jesus connects the coming resurrection from the dead as the great sign that he really is the bread of life;

"And this is the will of Him that sent me, that of all that He has given me I lose nothing, but **raise him up on the last day**. For this is the will of my Father, that **every one who beholds the Son, and believes in him, may have eternal life (literally, the life of the Age to Come)**; and **I myself will raise him up on the last day** ... No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him; and **I will raise him up on the last day** ... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and **I will raise him up on the last day** ... As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me, **he also shall live because of me**. This is the bread which came down out of heaven, not as the fathers ate, and died. [But] **he who eats this bread shall live forever**" (vs. 39,40,44,54, 58).

The overarching theme concerns whether Jesus is doing his Father's will. Is he really the one appointed by the Father to resurrect into the Kingdom all who have died believing his testimony? Only the true Bread from heaven has this life-giving power. Consistent with his whole Gospel message, Jesus emphasises his critical role as God's Messiah in the coming new world order --- eschatology is the focus!

JESUS CHRIST ALWAYS EXISTED — BUT IN GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

But even if we go against all this contextual evidence and still prefer to translate **John 8: 58** in the conventional way to make Jesus say that, "**Before Abraham was born (or, before Abraham existed) I am he**", it still does not *necessarily* mean that Jesus is claiming conscious, personal pre- existence before Abraham. How so?

Well, there is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that Jesus the Messiah existed in the mind and purpose of Yahweh long before Abraham appeared on the scene (the same way that he spoke to the woman at the well!). There is no problem in thinking that Jesus is also telling his unbelieving audience that he indeed always existed in God's plan as the long-anticipated Messianic Saviour.

Other NT verses do teach this. For example, **Acts 2: 28; Romans 1: 2-4; 1 Peter 1:20** etc., where Jesus the Messiah is said to have **been foreknown** and **pre-determined** to exist in God's purpose from before the world began. (⁵)

That said, I personally prefer to think that the broader and immediately preceding contexts of Jesus' statement in **John 8:58** **require** that he is referring to Abraham's future resurrection ... **after Jesus has himself been raised up as the firstfruits of the great harvest to follow** (per **1 Cor 15: 23**)!

⁵ E.G., see my articles **JESUS' PRE-EXISTENCE: Literal or Ideal?** and **1. THE GOD-MAN'S SYMPHONY**.

My reason for this preference is that the only way Jesus could ultimately prove his superiority over Abraham, would be if, when, and after, God would vindicate him by bringing him back to life from the dead — before that happens to Abraham!

*The many verses of intense discussion before we get to **John 8: 58** do not usually seem to enter into the exegetical discussion for translating verse 58. An unfortunate oversight! Let's briefly consider the immediate context then.*

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

In the lead up to **8:58**, Jesus claims to be offering something far greater than even Abraham was able to do (freedom from bondage to their sin and vs. 33-36 and assurance of eternal life vs. 51-53):- **Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word he shall never see death.** Then the Jews said to him ... Abraham is dead, and the prophets, and **you say, 'If anyone keeps my word he shall never taste death'.** Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Whom do you make yourself out to be? ... [Jesus answered] **Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.**

Stop there for a minute. Note firstly, that Jesus is claiming a greater status than their esteemed father Abraham because he is able to dispense life over death, eternal life, in fact. Whereas Abraham and the prophets are long dead Jesus is **"making himself out to be"** Abraham's superior precisely because he has been given power to raise the dead! In God's purposes Jesus has been fore-ordained to have the prior place way before Abraham and the prophets.

Abraham himself trusted in God's promise to him concerning the future Messiah. By faith he believed God's word and looked forward to seeing Messiah's day. The sad thing is that Abraham's sons did not act in the same faith as their esteemed ancestor. They did not recognise how Jesus could be Abraham's greater son and how history was about to be fulfilled right in front of their very eyes: For, in their own generation, he would come up out of the grave before Abraham would! (⁶)

In this way Jesus as their Messiah is greater than even Abraham, for he is the one who pre-existed in God's promised salvation for us (e.g. **Gen. 3:15** in what Bible scholars term "the proto-evangelium"). Abraham saw it all in advance and believed!

This is why Jesus did NOT say, "Before Abraham existed, I AM WHAT I AM"! And even if we do accept that the best translation option is the popular one, **"Most assuredly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am he"**, then at most Jesus was claiming (as in all previous and subsequent occurrences of **ἐγὼ εἰμί**) that in God's plan he really is the long-promised Messiah.

⁶ For an additional and slightly different take on the faith Jesus himself was displaying in **John 8:58** see my article **DID JESUS REALLY LIVE BY FAITH?**

STRONG CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE

Putting all this evidence together, we see how the contextual congruence favors the translation where Jesus is saying he is the one who answers to all of Abraham's and Israel's Messianic hopes! God has designated *this* Jesus to be the Messianic Lord to govern the new world to come.

When we add to this evidence the grammatical agreement where John's use of the adverb **πρὶν** with the aorist infinitive **γενέσθαι** *always* refers to what is still to happen in the future, our case strengthens!

And finally, when we add the consistent teaching of the entire NT position that only at the future Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, **all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth ... including Abraham** (Jn 4:24-25), I am positive we have a strong case that Jesus' intention in **John 8:58** should be translated;

Most assuredly I tell you, before Abraham comes to be, I am *he*.

Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί