

REV Bible Commentary for: John 8:58

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am *the one*.”

“I am *the one*.” Many Trinitarians argue that this verse states that when Jesus said “I am” that he was claiming to be God, (*i.e.*, *Yahweh*, the God who revealed Himself to Moses in the Old Testament). But saying “I am” does not mean a person is claiming to be God. The Greek that is translated as “I am” is *egō eime* (ἐγὼ εἶμι), and it was a common Greek way for a person to identify themselves. For example, only ten verses after Jesus said, *egō eime* (“I am”) in [John 8:58](#), the man who had been born blind identified himself by saying exactly what Jesus said; *egō eime* (“I am;” [John 9:9](#)). Thus, Jesus and the man born blind both identified themselves by saying *egō eime* (“I am”), only ten verses apart.

Sadly, unless a person looks at the Greek text, he will never see that “I am” was a common Greek way for a man or woman to identify themselves. In what seems to be a clear case of Trinitarian bias in translating the Greek text, when Jesus says, *egō eime* (“I am”) in [John 8:58](#), our English Bibles read, “I am.” But when Jesus says *egō eime* in other places in the New Testament, or other people say *egō eime* (“I am”), the Greek phrase gets translated differently. So, for example, some English translations of what the man born blind said are: “I am the one” (CJB; HCSB; NASB; NET); “I am he” (BBE; ERV; KJV; YLT); “It is I” (Darby); and, “I am the man” (ESV; NIV). The only commonly used English Bible that has “I am” in [John 9:9](#) is the New American Bible.

There are many other examples of the phrase *egō eime* not being translated as “I am,” but being translated as “I am he” or some other similar phrase. For example, Jesus taught that people would come in his name, saying *egō eime* (“I am he”) and will deceive many ([Mark 13:6](#); [Luke 21:8](#); HCSB; ESV; NAB; NET; NIV).

Jesus said *egō eime* (“I am”), in a large number of places, but it is usually translated “I am he,” “It is I,” or “I am the one,” which are good translations because, as was stated above, *egō eime* was commonly used by people to identify themselves. Examples of Jesus using *egō eime* include: [John 13:19](#); [18:5](#), [6](#), and [18:8](#); Jesus identifying himself to the apostles on the boat: [Matthew 14:27](#); [Mark 6:50](#); and [John 6:20](#); and Jesus identifying himself to the Jews, saying *egō eime*, translated “I am the one I claim to be” (NIV84, [John 8:24](#) and [8:28](#)). All these places where Jesus says *egō eime* but it is not translated “I am” shows that the translators understand that just saying *egō eime* does not mean the person is claiming to be God.

At the Last Supper, the disciples were trying to find out who would deny Christ. They used *egō eime* as the standard Greek identifier. Jesus had said one of them would betray him, and one after another they said to him, *mētiegō eime, Kurie* (literally, “not I am, Lord;” [Matt. 26:22](#) and [26:25](#).) The apostles were not trying to deny that they were God by saying, “Not I am.” They were simply using as the common personal identifier *egō eime* and saying, “Surely not I, Lord”

In [Acts 26:29](#), when Paul was defending himself in court, he said, “I would to God, that ... all who hear me this day, might become such as I am [*egō eime*].” Obviously, Paul was not claiming to be God. There are more uses of the phrase “I am,” and especially so if we realize that what has been covered above is only the nominative singular pronoun and the first person singular verb that we have just covered. The point is this: “I am” was a common way of designating oneself, and it did not mean you were claiming to be God. C. K. Barrett writes:

Egō 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."^a

A major problem that occurs when we misunderstand a verse is that the correct meaning goes unnoticed, and that certainly is the case with [John 8:58](#). If the phrase *egō eime* in [John 8:58](#) were translated "I am he" or "I am the one," like all the other places where Jesus says it, instead of coming to the erroneous conclusion that Jesus is God, we would more easily see that Jesus was speaking of himself as the Messiah of God who was foretold throughout the Old Testament.

Trinitarians assert that because Jesus was "before" Abraham, Jesus must have been God. But Jesus did not literally exist before his conception in Mary, but he "existed" in the plan of God, and was foretold in prophecy. Prophecies of the coming redeemer start as early as [Genesis 3:15](#), which was before Abraham. Jesus was "the one," the Savior, long before Abraham. The Church did not have to literally exist as people for God to choose us before the foundation of the world ([Eph. 1:4](#)), we existed in the mind of God. Similarly, Jesus did not exist as an actual physical person during the time of Abraham, but he "existed" in the mind of God as God's plan for the redemption of man.

It is also important to notice that many people misread [John 8:58](#) and think it says Jesus saw Abraham. We must read the Bible carefully because it says no such thing. It does not say Jesus saw Abraham, it says Abraham saw the Day of Christ. A careful reading of the context of the verse shows that Jesus was speaking of "existing" in God's foreknowledge. [John 8:56](#) 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 (the day of Christ is usually considered by theologians to be the day when Christ conquers the earth and sets up his kingdom—and it is still future). 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](#)). The Bible says Abraham "saw" a city that is still future. 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 (cp. [Gen. 3:15](#)). 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.

Jesus did not claim to be God in [John 8:58](#). In very strong terms, however, he claimed to be the Messiah, the one whose day Abraham saw by faith. Jesus said that before Abraham was, "I am the one," meaning, even before Abraham existed, Jesus was foretold to be the promised Messiah. Jesus gave the Jews many opportunities to see and believe that he was in fact the Messiah of God, but they were blind to that fact, and crucified him.

We see a good example of "I am" being used as a way to identify oneself but without any claim of being God when we compare [Mark 13:6](#) with [Matthew 24:5](#). In these parallel records, Jesus is in the last week of his life, and he is on the Mount of Olives teaching disciples. According to Mark, Jesus said, "Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am,' and will lead many astray." However, Matthew records the same incident as Jesus saying, "many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and will mislead many." In the context of the end times, false Messiahs could identify themselves simply as "I am," but the meaning is clarified in Matthew, "I am the Messiah." In this case, we can see that "I am" means "I am the Messiah."

[Some other sources that comment on [John 8:58](#) and conclude that Jesus' using "I am" did not make him God are: Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*; Mary Dana, *Letters*

Addressed to Relative and Friends Chiefly in Reply to Arguments in Support of the Doctrine of the Trinity (1845; available from Spirit & Truth); Charles Morgridge, *The True Believer's Defence Against Charges Preferred by Trinitarians* (1837; available from Spirit & Truth); Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians*; Don Snedeker, *Our Heavenly Father Has No Equals*; Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?*]

[For more information on Jesus being the fully human Son of God and not being “God the Son,” see [Appendix 10](#), “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son.” For more on “the Holy Spirit” being one of the designations for God the Father and “the holy spirit” being the gift of God’s nature, see [Appendix 11](#), “What is the Holy Spirit?”]

a)

C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 342.
