



I Am: Comparing Passages in Exodus and John

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Introduction

- Exodus 3:14 and J ohn 8:58 often compared
- Many translations of J ohn 8:58 capitalize “I am”
 - Often pointed to as a declaration of the name of God by J esus
- Quite a frustrating argument
 - In a vacuum, the verses are not obviously connected
 - In context it is confusing
 - The language does not allow for it

Introduction

- What are these verses actually saying?
- Which interpretation(s) are most likely to be true?
- Are they related at all?
- How have views of these verses shifted over time?

Overview

- First, we will consider Exodus 3:14 and relevant interpretations
 - What is God saying here?
- Second, we will look at John 8:58 and relevant interpretations
 - What is Jesus saying here?
 - Are there any connections to Exodus 3:14?

Main Argument

- Exodus 3:14 is a vague statement meant as an unexpected answer to Abraham questioning him
- J ohn 8:58 is an emphatic statement of J esus being the Messiah, not God
- Exodus 3:14 and J ohn 8:58 are not connected in any meaningful way

Background of Exodus 3

- A lot of Genesis deals with the relationship of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
- Promises have been made to the new nation of Israel
- Genesis ends with the death of Joseph and the children of Israel living in Egypt

Background of Exodus 3

- The nation of Israel (descendants of Abraham) had lived as sojourners and slaves for hundreds of years
- Hebrew children were killed, and out of this massacre arose Moses (Ex. 1:16; Ex. 2:10)
- Moses fled from Egypt (Ex. 2:15)
- God hears the cry of the nation of Israel (Ex. 2:24-25)

Exodus 3

- This is the first of three prophetic visions of Moses, first a fire, then an angel, then the presence of God
 - Gradual revelation to Moses, as to help him to handle seeing the light
- God first introduces himself to Moses in Ex. 3:6

“He said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’”

Exodus 3

- God is quite clear with Moses
 - My people are suffering in Egypt (Ex. 3:7)
 - I will rescue them (Ex. 3:8)
 - I will bring them to a great land (Ex. 3:8)
 - I have chosen you Moses (Ex. 3:10)
- Moses holds two serious questions in his mind

Exodus 3

- Moses' first question

“Moses replied to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?’”

- God's response

“And He said, ‘For I shall be with you – and this is your sign that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.’”

- Translation: What qualifies you is that I shall be with you!

Exodus 3

- Moses was uncertain of what qualified him to go on behalf of God
 - We often carry similar insecurities about ourselves
 - Stems from the meekness of Moses
- By the time God has chosen you to do something, you are more than qualified
 - God's plan extends from the beginning
 - It is certainly an unanticipated answer

Exodus 3

- Moses' second question

“Moses said to God, ‘Behold, when I come to the Children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your forefathers has sent me to you’, and they say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ – what shall I say to them?’”

- God's response

“God answered Moses, ‘I Shall Be As I Shall Be.’ And he said, ‘So shall you say to the Children of Israel, ‘I Shall Be has sent me to you.’ God said further to Moses, ‘So shall you say to the Children of Israel, ‘YHWH, the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has dispatched me to you. This is my name forever...’”

Exodus 3

- Translation: Moses feels God's introduction is vague
- In Ex. 3:6, God refers to himself as elohe which is a vague term
 - Many men are called Elohim (mighty one) in the Old Testament including Moses himself
 - Moses should know who this God is based on the rest of Ex. 3:6
- Moses asks for a name to prove himself to the people

Exodus 3:14 - Hebrew

- What exactly does this mean?
- Exact phrase: אהיה אשר אהיה (ehyeh asher ehyeh)
 - I am what I am (most Christian translations)
 - I will be what I will be (CJ B)
 - I shall be what I shall be (Artscroll Tanakh)
 - I will ever be what I now am (Koren Tanakh)
- Hebrew is ambiguous, future focused language preferred by some Jewish scholars

Exodus 3:14 - Septuagint

- The Septuagint is a translation of the old testament by 70 Jewish scholars (hence the abbreviation "LXX")
- Translate the name here as $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\omega} \acute{\epsilon}\acute{\iota}\mu\acute{\iota} \acute{\omicron} \acute{\omega}\acute{\nu}$ (ego eimi ho ohn)
 - Translates to "I am The Being"
- The second name to be given to the people was $\acute{\omicron} \acute{\omega}\acute{\nu}$ (ho ohn)
 - The Being
 - Carries specific meaning in Middle Platonism to imply an eternal uncaused being

Exodus 3:14 – Latin Vulgate

- The Latin Vulgate is a translation of the Bible into Latin by Jerome in 382 (mostly...it's complicated)
- Translate the name here as “ego sum qui sum”
 - Translates to “I am who I am”
- The second name to be given to the people was “qui est”
 - Translates to “He who is”
- How have people interpreted this passage?

Philo on Exodus 3:14

- Philo was a Greek Jew living in Alexandria at the same time of Jesus' ministry
- Philo favours the LXX, God is the Self-Existent God and all beings come from him
 - View imported mostly from Middle Platonism
- No name can properly describe God
- God is eternal and contingent on nothing

John Chrysostom on Exodus 3:14

- John was a Christian living in Anatolia in the 4th century
 - Prolific writer only behind Origen and Augustine
- John favours the LXX and Latin Vulgate, God is an eternal being
 - View imported mostly from Middle Platonism
- God is eternal and uncontingent

Rashi on Exodus 3:14

- Rashi was a medieval French rabbi who wrote extensive commentary on the Tanakh
- Ehyeh asher ehyeh is to announce that God will not only be with this people in their current sorrows, but their future sorrows
- The single Ehyeh is chosen to announce to the people as to not burden them with these future sorrows
 - Moses is made aware of the future, but he isn't to relay it yet

Interpretations Summarized

- Most authors seem to interpret God claiming to be eternal here
 - Others use a language of contingency
- Self descriptive language from God would imply these elements, but is this the point?
- We may have jumped the gun

Contextual Explanation – Exodus 3:14

- Moses asks this question because elohe (God) is vague
- Different gods had names that reference a dominion
 - Hadad means “Thunderer”
 - Geb means “Earth”
- God provides another unanticipated answer
 - I do not work like this, whatever I am/will be is what I am/will be
 - I am not therefore to be questioned

Contextual Explanation – Exodus 3:14

- Further, we should look at the follow up verse which answers the question

“He said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’” (Ex. 3:6)

God said further to Moses, ‘So shall you say to the Children of Israel, ‘YHWH, the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has dispatched me to you. This is my name forever...’” (Ex. 3:15)

Contextual Explanation – Exodus 3:14

- Moses almost universally uses the name YHWH when saying who he is speaking on behalf of, not ehyeh (e.g., Ex. 5:1; Ex. 8:10)
 - This is the name Jacob foretold to the nation (Genesis 49:18)
- Moses did not take ehyeh to be a name of God
 - Neither should we!
- If these other attributes are intended by God, probably secondary points

Background of J ohn 8

- The Gospel of J ohn differs from the other three
 - More abstract to reveal spiritual truths
- J ohn consistently speaks in the language of new creation and the plan of God
 - J esus is the penultimate part of this plan, the Messiah
 - Through J esus, we become heirs of promise
- Contains long dialogues between the J ews who are confused by J esus
 - Confusion used to preach higher truths

John 8

- Comes in two parts which happen in or near the second temple
- Dialogue regarding the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11)
- Long commentary between Jesus and the Pharisees in a crowd of Jews (John 8:12-59)

John 8

- Jesus makes a lot of “I am” claims throughout John (~10 unique)
 - I am the light of this world (John 8:12)
 - I am from above (John 8:23)
 - I am the Son of Man/the Messiah (John 8:28)
- The last half of this chapter is a debate about origin
 - Pharisees claim to be sons of Abraham and sons of God (John 8:39; John 8:41)
 - Jesus responds, if you are, **WHY AREN'T YOU ACTING LIKE IT?**

John 8

“The Jews said to him, ‘Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?’” (John 8:52-53)

- The Jews are missing the point of what Jesus means
 - Through Jesus we become children of God and heirs to promise (John 1:12)
 - Otherwise we will die in our sins (John 8:24)

John 8

“Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” (John 8:54-56)

- Jesus responds to them on two levels
 - Your Father (God) glorifies me
 - Your father Abraham saw this glory (in the past) and was glad
 - In total, you follow neither of your acclaimed fathers!

John 8

“So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’” (John 8:57)

- This response obviously misses the point of v56
 - Abraham saw the day of Jesus, not the other way around
 - Pre-supposing a physical viewing
 - They are interested in making him look silly irrespective of a response
- This grand-standing is then used to reveal a higher truth

John 8:58

“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’”

- We can also read this as “I am before Abraham was”
 - “I am before Abraham was born”
 - “I am before Abraham existed”
- The word for “I am” here is “ἐγώ εἰμι” (ego eimi)
 - Common New Testament phrase (211 times)
- How have others interpreted Jesus here?

John 8:58 – Jesus as the Divine Name

- Popular modern trinitarian argument
- The phrases in Ex. 3:14 and John 8:58 are similar, coincidence?
 - Some translations even capitalize both to draw on the obvious connection
- The Jews try to stone him for claiming to be God so openly!

J ohn 8:58 – J esus as the Divine Name

- Many issues here
- J ohn was written in Greek and draws upon the LXX
- If J esus is using a divine name found in Ex. 3:14 he'd say "ego eimi ho ohn" or just "ho ohn"
 - Neither phrase is found
- Latin vulgate also differs, neither "ego sum qui sum" or "qui est" used

John 8:58 – Jesus as the Divine Name

- Many issues here
- Historically, this argument is new

Cantea Aurea on J ohn 8:58

- Compiled by Thomas Aquinas in the 1260s
- Attempt to create a coherent 4th century Christian interpretation of scriptures
 - Good litmus test to see what was considered orthodoxy
- The main argument here is that the "I am" is proof of being divine as divine beings have no past or future, but present
- Where are the divine name arguments?

English Translations of J ohn 8:58

- Wycliffe Bible (1388) – “Truly, truly I say to you, before that Abraham should be, I am.”
- Tyndale Bible (1534) – “Verily verily I say unto you: yer Abraham was I am.”
- King J ames Bible (1611) – “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”
- Douay-Rheims Bible (1752) – “Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am.”
- Webster’s Revised KJ V (1833) – “Verily, verily, I say to you, Before Abraham was, I am.”
- Young’s Literal Bible (1862) – “Verily, verily, I say to you, Before Abraham's coming -- I am”
- English Revised Bible (1885) – “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”
- Revised Standard Bible (1946) – “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”
- Amplified Bible (1965) – “I assure you and most solemnly say to you, before Abraham was born, **I AM.**”

- AMP uses I Am to suggest J esus is claiming to be YHWH

John 8:58 – Jesus as the Divine Name

- Grammatically and historically impossible
- In context, it also is suspect
- "Before Abraham was, Jesus"
- Cantea Aurea points to the common trinitarian understanding
 - Not a divine name, just a claim of eternality

John Chrysostom on John 8:58

- Jesus proves himself greater than Abraham
 - Both the Father and Abraham glorify Jesus, but not the Jews who think of him as a lowly carpenter's son
- "I am" is to use ambiguous eternal language like Ex. 3:14 (though a direct connection here is not made)
- To John, this proves Christ is co-eternal with the Father
- Shows the general thoughts about this passage by trinitarians post Nicaea

J ohn 8:58 – J esus as E ternal

- Read a lot into a two-word phrase
 - Read metaphysical context of Greek “ho ohn” back into Hebrew and then translate that back into the Greek
- J esus is spoken of in past and future contexts, even by J esus and God
 - e.g. Gen 3:15; J ohn 1:15; J ohn 8:54-56
- The phrase is so common, implies other people are eternal
 - Man born blind (J ohn 9:9)

John 8:58 – Jesus as Eternal

- Misreading of original Hebrew
- As mentioned, ehyeh is ambiguous, can be used for future contexts (vast majority of the usage is future focused)
- Metaphysical context only exists in the Greek
 - The Being (ho ohn) carries baggage from Middle Platonism
- Well, why would the Jews then stone Jesus?

John 8:59

“So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

- Not stated why they want to stone him
- Capital punishment banned at this time, but certainly happened
 - Josephus writes about the stoning of Jesus' brother in 62 AD
- Would sometimes throw people off cliffs to achieve similar results

John 8:59

- The mob tried to throw Jesus off a cliff for offending them (Luke 4:28-30)
- Pharisees try to stone him for claiming to be God's son (John 10:36-39)
- Stoned Stephen and Paul for preaching about Jesus (Acts 7:54-60; Acts 14:19)
- Many nameless stoned for various reasons (Hebrews 11:37)

John 8:58 – Jesus as Pre-existent

- Favoured amongst ontological subordinationist type Unitarians (e.g., JWs)
- Jesus was before Abraham so that they did meet each other
 - Imply this is a straight answer to their question

John 8:58 – Jesus as Pre-existent

- Word used to describe Abraham is *genesthai*
 - Implies the birth or creation in a past tense sense
 - *Ego eimi* does not carry this implication
- We'd expect "I was before Abraham was" if this was a claim of pre-existence

John 8:58 – Other Options?

- Previous interpretations range from unlikely to impossible
- When Jesus uses ego eimi, he is referring himself to something else (either directly or in context)
- Without context, Jesus usually uses ego eimi to identify as the Messiah (John 4:26; 8:24; 8:28; John 13:19)
 - John 13:19 is the closest in construction to John 8:58

John 8:58 – Other Options?

- Word used to describe Abraham is *genesthai*
 - Implies the birth or creation in a past tense sense
 - Also implies the creation in line with the eternal plan
- Jews believed they pre-existed their births by being always present in the plan of God

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5)

“The Lord chose me before your father.” (2 Sam 6:21)

John 8:58 – Other Options?

- Jews also charge Jesus as claiming to be greater than Abraham
- To the Jews, being a child of Abraham was to be an heir
 - Jesus consistently tells them they are not heirs to the promise because of their deeds and spirits
 - Rather heirs of death
- Before here could mean Jesus is speaking about rank
 - Jesus is a higher rank than Abraham

John 8:58 – Other Options?

- What could we understand then in this passage?
- I am the Messiah, part of the eternal plan of God before Abraham was born into this world as part of this plan
 - This is how he has foreseen my day and why he was glad
 - I am the heir of his promises and the saviour of mankind
- I say to you, I am the one who is of higher status than Abraham was
 - Before in the sense of rank
 - Glorified by Abraham and the Father

Exodus 3:14 and J ohn 8:58

- Exodus 3:14 is overblown in importance due to later philosophy
 - Exodus 3:15 is the important part of the answer
- There is no obvious connection
 - Language does not match
 - Doesn't make sense in context
- Maybe a loose connection
 - Vague notion of something eternal in both due to language around the Father, but clearly not the point of either

Exodus 3:14 and J ohn 8:58

- Appears the divine name connection is a uniquely English invention
 - Unclear accounting of the Hebrew and Greek causing confusion
- Most trinitarians favoured an eternal declaration by Christ, but this is highly suspect
 - Terrible proof text
- A reading where J esus is declaring himself as Messiah is the most likely interpretation
 - Two possible interpretations