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“I Am” Sayings. A diversity of “I am . . .” formulae in the OT by which Yahweh repeatedly discloses himself. He reveals himself as the God of the patriarchs (Gen. 15:7; 17:1; 28:13; etc.), or as “the LORD [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (e.g., Exod. 20:2 at the beginning of the Decalogue), or more simply in the words “I am the LORD” (e.g., Ezek. 33:29; 36:36). The disclosure of Exodus 3:14, often rendered “I am who I am” or “I am the existing one,” may well be an instance of paronomasia or word play; but more importantly, like the repeated “I am he” or “I myself am he” utterances (Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 45:18; 46:4; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6), Yahweh presents himself in antithesis to the finite gods of the prevalent polytheism. In most instances the context precludes a rendering “I am this or that,” but presupposes something like “I am the Absolute One.” Especially in Isaiah 40–66, the verses surrounding each example show that the meaning of God as the Absolute works out in an array of attributes: he is sovereign, uncreated, unimaginable, personal, master of history, holy, and the universal monarch whose purposes cannot ultimately be thwarted. Moreover, the formula here is *self-revelatory*: Yahweh is not addressed in this way, but uses these expressions of himself, thereby demonstrating that he graciously chooses to reveal himself to men.

In the NT, many “I am” sayings are supplied with a subjective completion (e.g., “I am the light of the world,” John 8:12) and therefore do not qualify as “I am” utterances in the absolute sense. More difficult are the few instances outside John’s Gospel where the text offers a simple *egō eimi* (lit. “I am”) but where the context makes clear that the meaning is “It is I” or “I am he”—with the antecedent of the “I” or “he” apparent in the surrounding verses. These are probably at best ambiguous self-disclosures of deity, hints for those familiar with the OT, and many of Jesus’ prepassion self-revelations adopt such a stance of planned ambiguity. For instance, when Jesus walks to his frightened disciples across the surface of the water, he calms their fears by saying, *egō eimi*. The context demands the conclusion that Jesus is identifying himself (“It is I”), show-

ing that what they perceive is not a ghostly apparition (Mark 6:50). Yet not every “I” could be found walking on water: it would be premature to discount all reference to OT theophany. Again, Jesus warns his disciples against those who will lead many astray by claiming “I am” (Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8); but the context demands this be interpreted as “I am the Christ”—as Matthew 24:5 makes explicit. Jesus uses identical language at his trial (Mark 14:61–62) and similar language after his resurrection (Luke 24:39), his words in each case bearing some ambiguity.

The Fourth Gospel raises new questions. Although many of Jesus’ “I am” utterances recorded by John are supplied with explicit predicates (“I am the true vine,” “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the bread of life,” “I am the resurrection and the life”), two are undeniably absolute in both form and content (8:58; 13:19) and constitute an explicit self-identification with Yahweh, who had already revealed himself to men in similar terms (see esp. Isa. 43:10–11). Jesus’ opponents recognize this claim to unity with Yahweh (John 8:58–59); in 13:19–20, Jesus himself proceeds to make it explicit. These two occurrences of the absolute “I am” suggest that in several other passages in John, where “I am” is *formally* absolute but a predicate might well be supplied from the context (e.g., 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28; 18:5, 6, 8), an intentional double meaning may be involved.

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See also CHRISTOLOGY.

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