THE "I AM" OF JOHN 8:58

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There are no texts in the New Testament that say in so many words that Jesus is of "one substance" with God the Father and therefore the second person of the Trinity. Neither is there any passage in which he is explicitly stated to be equal with the Father. However, trinitarian theologians and biblical exegetes have long held that by the use of what is called the "I am formula" or the "absolute I am" at John 8:58, Jesus was claiming to be "very God of very God." The following article is an attempt to evaluate that assertion.

The Greek text of John 8:58 is: εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γένεσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί.[1] Literally translated into word for word English, this reads: "Said to them Jesus: 'Truly, truly I say to you: Before Abraham became, I am.'" Long used as a trinitarian proof text, it is quoted by Athanasius, the famous, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, in his *Orations against the Arians* . There he held that when Jesus used the words "I am" (ἐγὼ εἰμί), he was asserting that he was everlasting and without beginning before every age."[2] From this assertion, it is not surprising that over the centuries scholars have read into this

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[1] Rather than transliterating the Greek in this article, I have left it in the original for two reasons: first, I believe those having some knowledge of that language will find it more straightforward, and, second, those without such knowledge may find it easier to locate the biblical passages that I quote in interlinear translations of the Scriptures should they choose to do so. However, I have given Hebrew words in their proper transliterated forms. After all, Hebrew is much more difficult for the average English reader to follow in interlinear texts than is Greek. Wherever I have used other European languages in either the text or the notes of the article, I have translated them except where their meaning has already been given or is obvious.

[2] See Book 1, Sections 12 and 13 as published in William G. Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 7

passage a reference to Exodus 3:14, where Yahweh is commonly translated as having called himself "I am that I am," or to a number of Old Testament passages in which Yahweh declares "I [am] He."

Referring to John 8:58, William Barclay says: "It was then that Jesus made the most staggering statement: 'Before Abraham was, I am.' We must note carefully that Jesus did not say: 'Before Abraham was, I *was* ' but, 'Before Abraham was, I *am* ....' Here is that claim that Jesus was timeless ...." Then, a few lines farther on in the same commentary, Barclay proclaims: "There is only one person in the universe who is timeless; and that one person is God .... In Jesus we see, not simply a man who came and lived and died; we see the timeless God, who was the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, who was before time and who will be after time, who always is. In Jesus the eternal God showed himself to men."[3] Raymond Brown says much the same sort of thing in the Anchor Bible translation and commentary of the Gospel according to John. He argues: "In this verse the distinction is obvious between *ginesthai,* which is used of mortals, and the divine use of *einai*, 'to be,' in the form 'I AM.'"[4] In further detailed comments, he remarks: "...the concluding 'I AM' of vs. 58 represents an inclusion. No clearer implication of divinity is found in the gospel tradition."[5] Yet despite such dogmatic claims, there is much counter evidence which makes it seem highly unlikely that Jesus was claiming to be God at John 8:58.

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[3] William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Edition: The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), vol. 2, p. 36

[4] The Anchor Bible: *The Gospel according to John I-XII. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* by Raymond E. Brown (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1983), p. 360

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 367

EXODUS 3:14

In the first place, there are real difficulties in relating Jesus' "I am" at John 8:58 to Exodus 3:14. It is true, of course, that a number of important Bible translations make that connection either obliquely or openly. The King James Version certainly does, for it has Exodus 3:14 read in full: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM; and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." In similar fashion the Douay Version reads there: "God said to Moses: I AM WHO AM. He said: Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS, hath sent me to you."[6] In a footnote on this verse the Douay also says: *"I am who am* . That is I am being itself, eternal, self-existent, independent, infinite, without beginning, end or change, and the source of all other beings." However, neither the Greek Septuagint Version nor the Hebrew Masoretic Text supports the translations given in the King James and Douay Versions, nor does the Hebrew lend credence to the Douay's footnote.

The Septuagint Greek of Exodus 3:14 reads: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωυσῆν 'Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν. καὶ εἶπεν Οὕτως ἐρεῖς τοῖς υἱοῖς Ισραηλ 'Ο ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς. Thus the key words ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν read in translation "I am the Being" (or existing One); and it is not ἐγώ εἰμι (I am) who sends Moses to the Israelites but, rather, ὁ ὤν (the Being or existing One). So it seems that if John the Evangelist wanted to quote Jesus in a way which would have made him appear to allude to Exodus 3:14 at John 8:58 (at least according to the Septuagint), he should have quoted him in some way as having referred to himself as ὁ ὤν rather than just having used the words ἐγώ εἰμι.

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6 In its translation, the Douay Version follows the Latin Vulgate slavishly. The Vulgate of Exodus 3:14 reads: "Dixit Moysen: EGO SUM QUI SUM. Ait: Sic dices filiis Israel: QUI EST, misit me ad vos."

The Masoretic Text presents even greater difficulties for those who would tie John 8:58 to Exodus 3:14. The Hebrew from which the I AM THAT I AM of the King James Version is translated is *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* (אהיה אשׁר אהיה), a clause which is an attempt to explain the divine name Yahweh by allusion to the root *hayah* (היה) or "to be." As K.-H. Bernhardt says, the meaning of *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* is disputed and unclear. Yet after having noted that, he goes on to show that translations should not emphasize Yahweh's Being or existence as such but, rather, his being present in relation to his people, Israel. After a careful analysis of the way in which *'ehyeh* is used in the Old Testament, he remarks: "This situation suggests that the correct translation of Ex. 3:14 should be 'I will be who I will be.' The ancient versions of Aquila and Theodotion understood the Hebrew text in this sense (*ésomai hós ésomai*). Such an interpretation is also supported by the appearance of the expression 'I will be with you' in Ex. 3:12. This *'ehyeh im,* the fundamental promise in the election relationship between God and his people, would then be taken up in v. 14 to explain the name and nature of Yahweh."[7]

Others take an even stronger stand on this matter. For example, Rudolf Kittel says concerning *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh:* "The idea conveyed is 'I, who manifest myself, reveal myself,' representing therefore not an abstract something, but a being who corresponds to a concrete need. Out of this flows a rich harvest of suggestion of Yahweh as the one living fact, out of which the form of the oath of Israel is derived - 'as Yahweh liveth.' God did not intend in this passage to assert his existence, for that was self-evident; the intention was to define himself as regnant in nature and history, revealing himself in life and force, rich in help for his people."[8]

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[7] K.-H. Bernhardt, היה in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978) vol. III, p. 381

[8] Rudolf Kittel, "Yahweh" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), vol. XII, p. 471

Thus from Luther to the present a number of scholars have rendered *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* in a dynamic sense with the words "I shall be what I shall be."9 And even some of those who feel that the idea of static existence is present in those words indicate that they should not be taken to suggest pure metaphysical existence in a Greek philosophical sense - the sense which was taken by Jesus' contemporary, Philo, and many Christians from at least the third century to the twentieth. Speaking on Exodus 3:14, Roland de Vaux says: "One must take care not to introduce ideas elaborated by Greek philosophy"; "'to be' is first and foremost 'to exist' in terms of existential philosophy, a *Dasein* [a state of existence or presence in time and space]."10 James Barr makes the following comment also: "At Exod. 3:14, as at Gen. 6:6, the context in both Greek and

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9 Luther's Version reads: "Gott sprach zu Mose: *Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde.* Und sprach: So sollst du zu den Kindern Israel sagen: <<Ich werde sein>> der hat mich zu euch gesandt." (God said to Moses: *I will be who I will be.* And [he] spoke: So you shall say to the children of Israel: [It is] *I will be* who has sent me unto you.) Among English versions that follow this tradition of translation are those of Isaac Leeser, James Moffatt, Steven Byington and the Watch Tower Society's New World Translation. In addition, various other versions in English and other languages give the translation "I will be what I will be" or something similar in footnotes. These include the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, The New English Bible and La Bible en français courant (1982) as published by the Canadian Bible Society in 1986. In its footnote, La Bible en français courant points out that while it translates *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* by the more common "JE SUIS QUI JE SUIS" (I AM WHO I AM), it also notes: "other translations: 'I AM HE WHO IS', in opposition to other gods who are not...." (translation mine) Rotherham's Emphasized Bible give the translation "I Will Become Whatever I Please" and has Yahweh command Moses to say to the children of Israel: "I Will Become hath sent me ...." In addition, Rotherham has a whole section on the meaning of the "Incommunicable Name" in his introduction to the Emphasized Bible in which he says: "The Name itself signifies 'He who becometh'; and the formula by which that significance is sustained and which is rendered in the Authorized Version 'I am that I am', expresses the sense 'I will become whatever I please'; or, as more exactly indicating the idiom involved, 'I will become whatever I may become.'" (p. 26) While his arguments concerning the meaning of *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* are now quite old, they have largely stood the test of time.

10 Quoted in G. H. Parke-Taylor, Yahweh: *The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1975), p. 54. For an extended discussion of the meaning of *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh,* see Parke-Taylor, pp. 51-55.

Hebrew makes it impossible to understand ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν as intended to suggest pure Being or some other remote and unchanging deity."[11]

Of course all of this may be difficult to understand for the ordinary person. But what it means is simply this: Hellenistic Greek philosophy, particularly middle and late Platonism, had the idea of God as a remote, pure, unchanging Being. Thus it was this concept which was taken up by Philo and incorporated in part into his brand of Judaism.[12] Furthermore, in the next several centuries, various Christian theologians, including Origen, were influenced by it;[13] and for Athanasius it became central to his whole system. It was, in fact, the anchor to which he tied his doctrines of the nature of God, of Christ, of man, of salvation and of the universe.[14] But from what has been said above, Yahweh's description of himself does not indicate that he is to be understood in that essentially Platonic fashion. Rather, it seems clear that what he was saying to Moses was that he would be whatever he would wish to be in relation to his chosen people Israel. Hence the whole impact of *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* seems to be that he is God, living and active with respect to mankind in history. So Jesus' use of ἐγώ εἰμι at John 8:58 - if it implies Being as is claimed - simply does not reflect how Yahweh explains himself at Exodus 3:14.

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11 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 253. Barr's comment is most important since it is he who has argued most forcefully that the Hebrew verb *hayah* usually translated "to be", has both a *static* and a *dynamic* meaning. See *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, pp. 68-72.

12 For Philo's concept of the nature of God, see his "On the Unchangeableness of God: in the Loeb Classical Library edition of *Philo*, F. H. Colson and G. H. Witaker trans. (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press and William Heineman Ltd., 1981), vol. III.

13 For a short overview of the impact of Platonism on early Christian thought, see the articles on "Platonism and Christianity" and "Origen" in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, vol. IX, pp. 88-92 and vol. VIII, pp. 268-73 respectively.

14 For an excellent overview of Athanasius' doctrinal system and that of Alexander, his predecessor as Bishop of Alexandria, see Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), Chap. 5 *in toto*.

THE "I AM" FORMULA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The formula 'ani hu (אני הוא) or "I [am] He" appears in a number of Old Testament passages along with similar statements such as "I [am] Yahweh," "I [am] God" and "I [am] El Shaddai."[15] Significantly, from the standpoint of those who use Jesus' statement at John 8:58 to assert that he was claiming to be God, the usual translation of 'ani hu in the Septuagint is ἐγώ εἰμι. What, however, does this prove? For as will be demonstrated below, the ἐγώ εἰμι of John 8:58 has a meaning far removed from any of these 'ani hu statements or their equivalents. Despite a long and complex argument based in part on the work of Rudolf Bultmann, after trying to relate a number of Jesus' ἐγώ εἰμι statements in John to Yahweh's Old Testament 'ani hu sayings, Raymond Brown is forced to admit: "This whole discussion is predicated on the more usual view that the hu in the Hebrew 'ani hu is the pronoun 'he,' so that literally we have in Hebrew 'I He' with the copula understood. The Gr. ego eimi would then give a slightly different thrust from the Hebrew."[16] Then, too, it is rather arbitrary to suggest that because both Yahweh and Jesus refer to themselves with a particularly strong declarative "I" that they are one and the same God. After all, as Ethelbert Stauffer points out in Kittel's *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, "... the I-style of Dt. Is. [Deutero-Isaiah] is adopted and developed in the I-sayings of heavenly wisdom in Prv. 8."[17] And while wisdom was either

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[15] For an examination of many of these texts, see Raymond Brown's Appendix IV in The Anchor Bible: *The Gospel According to John* I-XII, pp. 531-8. On the use of 'ani hu at Isaiah 43:10-13, see also Claus Westerman, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 122 and H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah* - Volume II (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), pp. 84, 85.

[16] Brown, p. 536 in the footnote at the bottom of the page.

[17] Vol. II, p. 346 under "εγω"

possessed by or created by Yahweh - depending on one's translation of Proverbs 8:22 - Wisdom is distinct from Yahweh.[18]

THE CONTEXT OF JOHN 8:58

Up to this point the context of John 8:58 has been ignored, but it must be examined to determine whether the assertion that Jesus was claiming to be God at that passage has any validity or not. When discussing context, however, it should be noted that that term may imply the broad context of the entire Gospel of John, the verses immediately surrounding John 8:58 or both. So in order to give a complete contextual picture, I will attempt to survey briefly how John describes Jesus in a christological sense throughout his gospel and then look more closely at the latter part of chapter 8 specifically.

Admittedly, it should be stated that it is in John alone that we find what is commonly called Logos christology. At John 1:1 the pre-existent Jesus is called the Logos or Word of God. Furthermore, there are quite a number of additional passages in which Jesus is described as having originated in heaven. (John 3:13, 31; 6:38, 51; 17:5) Then, too, it is only in John that Jesus is indisputably described as divine. (John 1:1 and 20:28), a fact which is taken, generally, to mean that he is God *per se* and one with the Father and holy spirit in substance. Yet after having noted these points, it is equally clear that there is a distinction between God and Jesus. John quotes Jesus himself as addressing the Father as "the only true God" who is obviously distinct from the one whom he sent forth - Jesus Christ. (John 17:1-3) In John, Jesus also makes a point of his

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[18] This is made clear by the context of this verse, particularly verse 24 in which Wisdom is said to have been brought forth with labor pains. Because Jesus seems to be referred to in at least two places in the New Testament as the Wisdom of God (Matt. 11:19 and Luke 7:34, 35), and because there is a close connection between the Word of God and the Wisdom of God both in the Old Testament and the apocryphal books of the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, it is not surprising that the Arians applied Proverbs 8:22 to Christ. Since the Septuagint translation clearly says that Wisdom was created ($\check{\epsilon}\kappa\tau\iota\sigma\check{\epsilon}\nu$), they were able to posit that the Logos, and therefore the pre-existent Christ, was a created being.

subordination to the Father. (John 5:30; 6:38; 7:16, 17; 8:54; 12:44; 14:28) When he is accused of making himself God or a god, he does not reply that he really is the Almighty; he quotes Psalm 82:6 in which others besides Yahweh are spoken of as being gods. (John 10:33-35) So while it is evident that John understands Jesus to have had a heavenly pre-existence as the Logos or Word, that he is both the messianic "Son of man" and the "Son of God" and that he is divine (at least since his resurrection[19]), it is equally clear that he does not see him as God in the same sense that the Father is God. Although Jesus is quoted as saying "I and my Father are one" at John 10:30, a comparison with chapter 17, verses 20 and 21 shows that that oneness may be understood as a moral or spiritual unity rather than a substantial one.

If we examine the latter part of chapter 8 in which Jesus' famous "I am" statement is located, we see that it is fully consistent with the rest of the Gospel of John. It deals specifically with a bitter exchange between Jesus and certain Jews in which he proclaims that God is his Father but theirs is the devil. It is true that in verse 59 the Jews take up stones to throw at him, a fact which has caused Raymond Brown to infer that this is for blasphemy - supposedly for his claiming to be God.[20] But were not Jesus' claims to being the "Son of man" (verse 28), to being the "Son of God" (verses 19, 42, and 54) and to having been pre-existent (verses 23 and 55) quite enough to cause his Jewish adversaries, whom he had just insulted in caustic terms, to consider him worthy of execution? But whether this is the case or not, another point needs to be made here.

At verse 54 Jesus states: "If I glorify myself, that glory of mine is worthless. It is the Father who glorifies me, he whom you [Jews] say 'He is our God', though you do not know him." Now if

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[19] A point generally missed by those who stress the doctrine that Christ was both wholly God and wholly man from conception onward is that references to his being divine in John relate only to times *prior* to his becoming flesh and *after* his resurrection.

[20] Brown, p. 367

Jesus is God - true deity in the fullest sense - this is a very strange remark for him to make. After all, how can it be possible for God to say of himself: "If I glorify myself, that glory of mine is worthless"? Of course some may say that here Jesus is speaking out of his humanity, not his deity. Yet this does not solve the problem. For if this position is taken, we really have a schizoid Christ with two persons in one body. So like the gospel as a whole, the immediate context of John 8:58 really does not support the idea that by using what has been called the "absolute ἐγώ εἰμι formula" Jesus was implying that he was Yahweh.

Curiously, after having alleged that by calling himself "I AM," Jesus was using the divine name, even Raymond Brown admits that no one can be certain that that was the case. He wonders: "...we may ask whether there is any likelihood that Jesus made such a public claim to divinity as that represented in vs. 58, or are we dealing here exclusively with the profession of faith of the later Church?" Then, after another attempt to give evidence that he did, Brown has to admit candidly: "But how can we determine scientifically what the blasphemous element was in Jesus' stated or implied claims about himself? In the clarity with which John presents the divine 'I AM' statement of Jesus, is he making explicit what was in some way implicit? *"No definitive answer seems possible on purely scientific grounds*"21 (Italics mine)

THE SYNTAX OF JOHN 8:58

After presenting the above critiques, is there still not a serious problem with the language of verse 58? The statement, "Before Abraham became, I am," is very strange English and therefore certainly does seem to denote something dramatically different. But

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21 *Ibid.,* p. 368

does it say that Jesus is God? In a final attempt to answer that question, let us look at the syntax of the words πρὶν ' Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγώ εἰμί. But before doing so, a few words need to be said about the use of ἐγώ εἰμι in other instances.

In most cases ἐγώ εἰμι means pretty much in Greek what "I am" means in English. Often it is followed in Greek, as in English, with a predicate nominative as, for example, at John 8:12 where Jesus says: "I am the light of the world." However, ἐγώ εἰμι is used more often in Greek without a stated predicate nominative than is "I am" in English. Often where we would say, "I am he" or "It is I," Greek syntax allows the speaker to say simply, ἐγώ εἰμι. A case in point is found at John 9:9. In the preceding verses Jesus has just healed a man of blindness that had afflicted him from birth, something which many found astounding. Thus some said that it was not really the former blind man that they now saw, while others said that it was. Yet the man himself insisted, ἐγώ εἰμι, which appears in the King James Version as "I am he" and in the New International Version as "I am the man." But at John 8:58, the εἰμί there may more sensibly be treated as a complete predicate meaning "exist" or, as I will attempt to show below, "have existed." Hence there is more to the matter.

In the sentence πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγώ εἰμί the main clause is ἐγώ εἰμί; and we must note that it follows an adverbial phrase of past time - a fact which changes its meaning rather dramatically. Why? Because in Greek when an adverb of time is followed by a statement which denotes continuing action which began in the past, Greek uses the present tense where English ordinarily uses the present perfect.

Dana and Mantey make this clear in their well-known New Testament Greek grammar when they state: "Sometimes the progressive present is retroactive in its application, denoting that which has begun in the past and continues into the present. For want of a better name we may call it the present of duration. This use is generally associated with an adverb of time, and may best be

rendered with the English perfect."[22] A. T. Robertson says much the same thing. Referring to what Dana and Mantey call the "present of duration" under the name "progressive present," Robertson says: "This is a poor name in lieu of a better one for the present of past action still in progress. Usually an adverb of time (or adjunct) accompanies the verb .... Often it has to be translated into English by a sort of 'progressive perfect' ('have been'), though, of course, that is the fault of the English."[23]

At this point many may have difficulty in following what is being said, but a few concrete examples from the New Testament should make it reasonably clear. So what I will do to illustrate the point in question is take several examples of the present of duration or the progressive present in Greek with adverbs of time and then give (a) a word for word translation in English with the present tense as it is in the Greek followed by (b) the translation of the originals as they appear in the Revised Standard Version.

Luke 13:7:

> Ἰδοὺ τρία ἔτη ἀφ' οὗ ἔρχομαι
> Behold[.] Three years [it is] since I come
> Lo, these three years I have come.

Luke 15:29:

> Ἰδοὺ τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω σοι
> Behold [.] So many years I serve you
> Lo, these many years I have served you

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22 H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual of Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 183

23 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 879

John 5:6:

> πολὺν ἤδη χρόνον ἔχει
> much already time he has
> he had been lying there a long time

John 14:9:

> Τοσούτῳ χρόνῳ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι
> so long time with you I am
> I have been with you so long

John 15:27:

> ἀπ' ἀρχῆ μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐστε
> from [the] beginning with me you are
> you have been with me from the beginning

2 Corinthians 12:19:

> Πάλαι δοκεῖτε
> already you think
> Have you been thinking all along

2 Timothy 3:15:

> ἀπὸ βρέφους [τα] ἱερὰ γράμματα οἶδας
> from a babe sacred writings you know
> from childhood you have been acquainted with
> the sacred writings

2 Peter 3:4:

> ἀφ' ἧς γὰρ οἱ πατέρες ἐκοιμήθησαν,
> πάντα οὕτως διαμένει ἀπ' ἀρχῆς κτίσεως
> from which [day] for the fathers fell asleep, all things so
> remains from [the] beginning of creation
> For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have
> continued as they were from the beginning of creation

1 John 3:8

> ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει
> from [the] beginning the devil sins
> the devil has sinned from the beginning

Now Jesus' statement at John 5:58 follows the same pattern as do the above passages, and despite claims that we are dealing with an "absolute" ἐγώ εἰμί here,[24] we really have just another instance of the present of duration or the progressive present. Hence if we do with the key words of that verse what has been done with all the other passages given immediately above, we should get the following:

John 8:58:

> πρὶν 'Αβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγώ εἰμί
> before Abraham became, I am
> before Abraham was born, I have existed

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[24] Despite his discussion of the progressive present and his dealing with John 8:58 *under it*, Robertson claims that the ἐγώ εἰμί of that text is really "absolute." See Robertson, p. 880. His reason for asserting such seems entirely theological rather than grammatical.

But the question now arises, is there any support for such a translation among translators of the Bible? The answer is, "Yes, a good deal." Numerous English versions, some highly respected and some less so, indicate that the εἰμί of John 8:58 should not be understood as the simple first person present indicative active verb "am." At least two of such versions, Moffat's and the New World Translation, render it with the English present perfect tense following Dana and Mantey's general rule for what they call the "present of duration" and Robertson's identical one for what he denominates the "progressive present." Moffat has "I have existed before Abraham was born!"; The New World Translation gives "Before Abraham came into existence, I have been." Other English translations, however, translate εἰμί in this case with a past tense. But by so doing they indicate just as much as do Moffat and the New World Translation that they think that Jesus was talking there about his pre-existence rather than his nature. Among these latter versions are The Living Bible - "I was in existence before Abraham was ever born." - The Simple English Bible - "I was alive before Abraham was born!" - Schonfield - "I existed before Abraham was born." - and Murdock - which reads: "Before Abraham existed, I was." The Twentieth Century New Testament gives a very interesting translation. It also renders εἰμί with the English "was," but it then goes on to show how Jesus' past state of being continued up to the time he spoke - to the then present. This excellent translation reads: "Before Abraham existed I was already what I am." Lamsa, translating from the Aramaic, has "Before Abraham was born, I was."

Significant, too, is the fact that certain translators working in other languages recognize that the εἰμί of John 8:58 should not be translated by a simple present tense verb. Two Spanish, Roman Catholic versions demonstrate this clearly. The Nacar-Colunga version reads "Before Abraham was born, I was (era yo)", and that of Agustín Magaña gives "Before Abraham existed, I already existed (ya existía yo)." In both instances, of course, the translators of these

versions have rendered $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ with Spanish verbs in the imperfect tense - a tense denoting ongoing action in the past.

Finally, do these translations fit as well into the context of Jesus' exchange with the Jews as does the more traditional "I am" of the many more "main-line" translations? Actually, the answer is far better.   At John 8:57, just before Jesus makes his $\epsilon\gamma\dot{\omega}$ $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ assertion, the Jews had asked: "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?" So what the discussion was about at that point was not *who* Jesus was but, rather, *about the length of time that he had existed.* So it follows naturally that he would reply: "Before Abraham was born, I have existed" - nothing more, nothing less.

CONCLUSION

A sober examination of the arguments used to support the claim that Jesus was asserting that he was God by using the words $\epsilon\gamma\dot{\omega}$ $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ at John 8:58 shows that such arguments are based on little but the sandy soil of conjecture and partisan tradition. Attempts to tie that $\epsilon\gamma\dot{\omega}$ $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ to either Exodus 3:14 or to the various *'ani hu* statements in the Old Testament are not convincing. The Gospel of John certainly does not support the thought that Jesus was either co-equal with or of one substance with God the Father, and his statement at chapter 8, verse 54 makes him seem far less than God Almighty. It is a study of the syntax of the words $\pi\rho\iota\nu$ $'A\beta\rho\alpha\dot{\alpha}\mu$ $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ $\epsilon\gamma\dot{\omega}$ $\epsilon\iota\mu\iota$, however, that really undercuts what is a venerable but largely indefensible thesis.