

Johannine Studies

Lecture 6 Study Notes – March 4, 2008

1. **The “I am” sayings:** What are they? The normal way in which one would say “I am” in the Greek is “eimi.” The first person pronoun, I, is implied in the form of this verb. For emphasis, one might add the first person pronoun, ego in front of it. The result is literally saying something like “I, myself am!” Hence, we have “ego eimi.” (see Greek handout)

2. This emphatic construction appears on Jesus lips in three ways:

- a. The first is with an explicit predicate: meaning it tells what the verb gives action or meaning to. An example of this is 6:35, “I am the bread of life.”
- b. Another form is the “I am” with what appears to be an implied predicate. An example is 6: 20 when Jesus says “It is I, don’t be afraid.” Much like saying “I am he.” But in the Greek the emphatic form of “ego eimi” suggests that the writer of John had something special in mind.
- c. The special meaning is obviously intended in the so-called absolute “I am” saying, those without any predicate or an implied predicate. John 8:24 says: “For you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am He.”

3. Most people agree that “ego eimi” is more than just emphatic. They believe that John is using them in a profound Christological way. Let’s look at why.

4. First, all the Gospel of John has two sets of sayings of Jesus that include the words “I am.” In one set as already mention before, there is an explicit predicate or noun that follows it. The seven sayings are as follows:

- a. I am the bread of life. (6:35, 41, 48)
- b. I am the light of the world. (8:12; 9:5)
- c. I am the gate for the sheep. (10: 7, 9)
- d. I am the good shepherd. (10: 11, 14)
- e. I am the resurrection and the life. (11:25)
- f. I am the way and the truth and the life. (14:56)
- g. I am the true vine. (15:1)

Remember what makes these seven passages distinctive and therefore special is the emphatic emphasis of the double pronoun and its verb. To me, it is like some people today will say “I am!!!!!! The Man!!!!!! The emphasis is in their voice and how long they hold the syllables out. Not bragging, but for emphasis in John’s writings, John has Jesus saying “I am!!!!!! The bread of Life!!!!!! However, there is more to it than that, we’ll see that in a minute.

5. Let’s look at the second series of “I am” sayings of Jesus. These are known as the “absolute I am sayings.” Again they stand alone without the predicate or maybe, in some instances, an implied predicate. They are not always easy to identify so there is some disagreement over whether they are just ordinary usages or not. The seven passages in which the “I am” stand-alones are: 4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 8:28; 8: 58; 13:19; 18: 5,6,8.

6. The best known of these saying is 8:58. Notice that after this saying, “Truly, truly, I tell you, before Abraham, I am,” the Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill Him (verse 59).

7. Why did they try to kill Him? If it were because of Him saying that He pre-existed before Abraham, they would have just thought that He was crazy (which they did anyway). But when He added the “ego eimi,” they wanted to kill Him because they thought He was being blasphemous. Why?

8. Let’s do a little review on the Old Testament. What language was the original Old Testament written in? Hebrew. How about the original New Testament? By the time Jesus walked the earth, the Hebrew language was

pretty much a non-functioning language. The spoken language of Jesus' day was Aramaic. It was the ancient Semitic language that predates the Hebrew. It is believed that when Israel invaded the Land of Canaan, they spoke more Aramaic than Hebrew. However, during the exilic and postexilic era (6th century) the spoken language of the Jews became Aramaic. Hebrew remained the religious and scholarly language of the Jews. However, after 300 B.C.E. Greek came to replace the Hebrew in religious circles, because Jews were scattered deep in the Greek world. This Greek translation of the Old Testament was called the Septuagint (Latin for book of seventy. The legend is that 74 scholars translated the entire Hebrew cannon to Greek in 74 days. For reason no one knows it was called the Book of the Seventy or LXX). (reference Mercer Dictionary page 808)

9. The point being that the LXX was the Old Testament scriptures that the writers of the Bible used. In all likelihood, it was the translation that Jesus used. John and His readers were even more likely to be familiar with the LXX than the Hebrew translation of the Old Testament.

10. Now let's turn to Deuteronomy 32:39. In this scripture the writer says: "Behold I, even I am He" meaning that I am unique. In the LXX, the words for "I, even I am He" are "ego eimi;" the very words that Jesus used about Himself in John. Other scriptures, especially those in Isaiah 40-55 (41:4; 43:10; 46:4), also used "ego eimi" to describe God. So the phrase "I am He" is an extra-ordinarily significant one. It is a divine self-declaration, encapsulating YHWH's claim to unique and exclusive divinity (see The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple by Richard Bauckham page 246-248). In other words, God is saying there is no one like me; nothing measures up to who I am.

11. The passage in Deuteronomy 32: 39-43 is frequently regarded as an eschatological prophecy of the salvation that God would achieve for His people (read). And it is linked closely to the prophecies of Isaiah 40-55. So much so that His great act of eschatological salvation will demonstrate him to be the one and only God in the sight all the nations, revealing his glory so that all the ends of the earth will acknowledge him as God and turn to Him for salvation.

12. Let's look at Exodus 3:14. It is interesting that the LXX does not use "ego eimi," but another Greek word. This scripture is however instructive because it gets at what the rest of the "ego eimi" passages are saying: namely that God is unique so much so there is nothing to compare Him. After all, names are just there to compare and contrast whom we are from someone else. They help establish our identity, but who is there to compare to God? What helps God to establish and contrast His identity? No one, therefore He is simply but profoundly "I am who I am." (See Isaiah 45: 21-24)

13. In John, Jesus is this unique God who, like His heavenly Father, is seeking to bring salvation to all the earth.

14. John's "I am" sayings "with the predicates" are ways Jesus metaphorically describes Himself as the one who gives salvation. Where the "absolute sayings" are general declarations of God's unique greatness, the "predicates" are specific ways in which Jesus is revealing God's name and nature. By all means these are not all the ways, but it is seven ways in which Jesus says God's name is working out our deliverance.

15. There are also 7 signs in John's Gospel which, compared to the seven "I am" saying with a predicate, are practical concrete expressions of the ways in which Jesus demonstrates his power of salvation. Jesus feeds the 5,000 and declares himself to be the bread of life. Jesus opens the eyes of the blind and says He is the light of the world; Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and says he is the "resurrection and the life."