

# “I am he”

Ralph Green

*In the Gospel of John Jesus uses the phrase “I am he”. It is suggested that he was not speaking of the Name of God, ‘I am’, but identifying himself as the seed of the woman of Genesis 3:15.*

**I**N THE BEGINNING, when the serpent had persuaded Eve to disobey her Creator by eating of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, the Lord God declared war between those represented by the seed of the serpent and those represented by the seed of the woman. This war was to have a successful conclusion, however, indicated by the prophetic statement, “it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

The bruising of the serpent’s head by the seed of the woman meant the death of the serpent; that is to say, the cessation of that which the serpent represented, namely, disobedience to Divine law, or sin. In this process the representatives of the serpent would bruise the heel of the woman’s descendant. In this conflict a bruise in the heel, though painful, would not be fatal.

From time to time Divine instructions have been given to God’s people that would throw light on the meaning of these mystical terms, so that, when the fulfilment of this prophecy was accomplished, they would become plain to the thoughtful. The identity of the one who should fulfil the role of bruising the serpent’s head would be the subject of discussion and possible conjecture as time passed.

## Jesus the seed of the woman

When Jesus came to fulfil his ministry he came also to fulfil this prophecy of the Lord God given in the Garden of Eden. He came to bruise the head of the serpent. In explaining this to his contemporaries he told them of the need to believe in him as the saviour of the world. One such passage reads as follows: “he said unto them . . . ye are of this world; I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins” (Jno. 8:23,24).

It is suggested that, by the phrase “I am he” contained in this verse, Jesus was identifying himself with the seed of the woman of Genesis 3:15 who was to bruise the serpent’s head and

so take away sin. When Jesus was asked, “Who art thou?” (Jno. 8:25), he did not answer their question immediately. His answer is given in verse 28: “When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he”. Jesus was predicting his death by crucifixion.

Jesus had earlier informed Nicodemus that his death was foreshadowed by Moses when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. His words were, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (3:14,15).

A notable repetition of this teaching occurred during the last week of his ministry. With his impending death in mind, Jesus was thinking how his crucifixion would glorify his Father in heaven by his obedience. To his request, “Father, glorify Thy name”, there came a reply from heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (12:28).

Jesus commented that the voice spoke for their sakes, that they might understand the meaning of the crucifixion. Enlarging on this, he added, “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die” (vv. 31-33).

Who or what was the prince of this world? Was it not that innate characteristic of natural man that wants to disobey God? How was that cast out? Surely by the voluntary submission of Jesus, who did no sin and died by crucifixion. The metaphorical serpent’s urge to sin and disobey God came to an end in Jesus’ death. To believe in this is to qualify for inclusion in the group of those who shall “not perish, but have everlasting life” (3:16).

## “I am he”

You may have noticed that in the AV rendering of John 8:24 the personal pronoun ‘he’ in the phrase “I am he” is printed in italics. This is done because, in the Greek, a personal pronoun is not used, and so it is added in English to make sense. When Jesus said, “When ye have lifted up the Son of

man, then shall ye know that I am he", the Jews made no objection: "As he spake these words, many believed on him" (vv. 28,30).

When, however, Jesus declared, "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death" (v. 51), the Jews objected on the grounds that this would be impossible. Then Abraham was introduced into the argument by the Jews, and Jesus interjected, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am [he]" (vv. 56-58).<sup>1</sup> Because the construction of the Greek is exactly the same as before, it appears that the Jews, wanting to find fault with Jesus, assumed that on this occasion he was appropriating the Name of God, that is, 'I Am'. Jesus probably anticipated this and took action to avoid being stoned.

Where there is any ambiguity a translator will be influenced by his own previously acquired bias. Take, for instance, the case of the blind man who said that Jesus had cured him, as described in John 9. The man's identity was queried by his neighbours; on the question as to whether he was the blind beggar they knew, some said, "He is like him", but he himself said, "I am he" (v. 9), the "he" being printed in italics. Though the Greek is literally "I am", no one, far less the blind man, thought he was using the Name of God.

When, however, Jesus said, "I am he" (to be consistent in translating) in 8:58 we may well understand that he is referring to the seed of the woman promised in the Garden of Eden who would bruise the serpent in the head. This was promised before the time of Abraham and was

also the subject of the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus referred to twice in the same chapter.

Viewing such an inconsistent translation of John 8:58 as "I am" from another point of view, what point would Jesus have in appropriating the Name of God other than to arouse the wrath of the Pharisees? Not only were they making a serious mistake if they thought Jesus was using the Name of God, but it would be a sentiment quite foreign to the tenor of all his previous utterances describing his relationship with his heavenly Father. Two examples are, "my Father is greater than I" (14:28) and "The Son can do nothing of himself" (5:19).

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul presents the humble character of the Lord Jesus to his followers in his letter to the Philippians as an example to be followed. This is the exhortation:

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:5-11).

---

1. "I am he" is so translated by Benjamin Wilson in the *Emphatic Diaglott*.