

Yhwh in John
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John 18:6

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(RSV)

ὡς οὖν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ἐγώ εἰμι,
ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω καὶ ἔπεσαν χαμαί. When he said to them, “I am he,”
they drew back and fell to the ground.

Notice *egō eimi*, “I am,” in line 1. The first word of line 2 is composed of *apo* and the Aorist of *erchomai* “to go,” forming “to go away.” An opisometer is backwards+meter, an instrument for measuring nonlinear lines. *Chamai* is an adverb, “to the ground.”

Traditionally, there are seven I Am sayings of Christ in the gospel of John. Sometimes candidates for ministry are asked to recite these (so pay attention, you seminarians!): I am the Bread of Life (6:48), the Light of the world (8:12), the door of the sheep (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1). Amen.

The fountainhead of meaning for the I Am sayings is John 8:58, “before Abraham was, *egō eimi*.” After saying this, the Jews immediately took up stones to kill him. This is because Jesus no doubt was applying to himself the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God, Yhwh. When Moses asked God at the burning bush what his name was, the answer in Greek was in part, *egō eimi* (Exod 3:14). Jesus makes the point so clearly in John 8:58 that I wish we would talk about the eight I Am sayings in John and not just seven.

Once it is recognized that *egō eimi* is a claim to deity—a claim to actually be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who met Moses at the burning bush

and delivered the Hebrews from Pharaoh—then this claim can be seen echoed in all of the I Am sayings. “I am the good shepherd” then connects with the divine name. “I am the light of the world” evokes Godhead. Thus the full divinity of Jesus is implied in all of these sayings. Hallelujah!

But in John there are far more instances of *egō eimi* than eight. One is our verse. Of course, Jesus probably spoke Aramaic to them, which the gospel renders as *Egō eimi*. He asked the Jews whom they sought, and they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Then Jesus said something translated by “*Egō eimi*,” and they fell to the ground. They pulled themselves back up to an upright position. He hit them again with the same question, and (I imagine) they tentatively and with some apprehension gulped, “Jesus of Nazareth.” This time he countered, “I told you that ***egō eimi***. So, if you seek me, let these men go!” And they did. One cannot help but read this as a demonstration of his power—connected with the use of the divine name.

Not every occurrence of *egō eimi* connects with the divine name in John, but most can. The woman at the well mentioned the Messiah, and Jesus replied, “*Egō eimi* the one speaking with you” (4:26). His disciples were afraid when they saw him walking on water, and he said to them, “*Egō eimi*, do not fear” (6:20). He said, “*Egō eimi* the one bearing witness (Greek, the *martyr*)” (8:18). He also said, “Unless you believe that *egō eimi* you will die in your sins” (8:24). “When you have lifted up the son of man, then you will know that *egō eimī*” (8:28). “I tell you now before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe that *egō eimī*” (13:19).

To know that Jesus is the great *Egō Eimi* is to know that he will keep his promises. *Egō eimi* told Moses to go to Egypt, where he set his people free from bondage. Our incarnate *Egō Eimi* tells us that if he makes us free, we will be free indeed (8:36). And we know that he does what he says.

“I am” is found elsewhere in the New Testament of course, and also in another Johannine book: Revelation. “*Egō Eimi* the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is coming” (1:8). He is the one who is coming. Notice it doesn’t use the verb “to be” there, as it does for the past and present tenses. Instead of saying, “I will be,” he says, “I am coming.” Every day brings *Egō Eimi* closer. On that Day we will know with consummate fullness what Jesus means by claiming *Egō Eimi*.

Now get out there and live that that is true!