

PERSPECTIVES ON TRIAL: THE FOURTH GOSPEL'S TRIAL MOTIF AND "I AM"

DECLARATIONS

by

MARK R MAYFIELD

(Under the Direction of Wayne Coppins)

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an analysis of how the Gospel of John uses and interprets Second Isaiah. In particular, it addresses how and why the Fourth Gospel uses a trial motif, as well as the function and significance of the "I am" statements. Due to the nature of the investigation, it is necessary to work from a relatively broad understanding of dependence and background. I frequently return to Richard Bauckham's approach to Second Temple Judaism's understanding of God by means of a unique divine identity as a methodological basis. David Ball's literary critical approach, as well as Andrew Lincoln's understanding of the trial motif, is also given a majority of attention. Their ideas are then brought into dialogue with other scholars. The conclusion of this study highlights the evangelist's creative reworking of the inherited Jesus traditions, contemporary Jewish thought, and the Jewish Scriptures of which Second Isaiah played a major role.

INDEX WORDS: Fourth Gospel; Gospel of John; Trial Motif; "I am" declaration; Second Isaiah; New Testament interpretation

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Introduction: The Scope and Approach

It is not possible to put forth a study of Christianity or the New Testament without regard for early Judaism and the role it has played in their development. A study of the Gospel of John must take into account its dependence on a variety of traditions and texts including the Hebrew Bible, the Qumran community and literature, the Greco-Roman thought world, and incipient Gnosticism, to list a few. And yet, upon investigation, it becomes abundantly clear that these are only tools and traditions which, in the creative hands of this evangelist, have been shaped for specific purposes.

Intertextuality is at the root of this thesis. Where does the Fourth Gospel find its authority? Does it propose a completely new interpretation of the Christ, one that is distinct from early Jewish expectations? Does the gospel draw upon the Hebrew bible and developing traditions of Wisdom, Honor and Shame? All these questions deserve investigation, and the aim of this work is to draw out just how, and to some extent why, the evangelist has chosen and shaped the traditions that he did.

In particular, I am concerned with the Fourth Gospel's use of Second Isaiah through the adoption of a trial motif and the self-declaration, "I am." This is perhaps the most ambitious of the gospels as evidenced by the care and attention the evangelist has given to developing such themes. The topics addressed here are inseparable from the narrative, without which the gospel would fail in its purposes.

But not only are they inseparable from the narrative and one another, they were specifically developed in order to strength and encourage its readers in the light of hardships perceived by the intended audience.

Major works have already been done on the trial motif and the “I am” declarations. The former has been addressed by Andrew Lincoln in a comprehensive and recent work, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel*.¹ The latter has been approached by many scholars over the years, most notably, E. Schweizer, R. Bultmann, and R.E. Brown. More recent studies have been done by D.M. Ball, P.B. Harner, and C. Westermann.² This thesis will address many of the positions held by these scholars but gives a majority of attention to Lincoln and Ball, as the others are brought into dialogue with these. Richard Bauckham also plays a significant role in this study, which brings his method of a unique divine identity to the forefront of many of the following discussions.³

While some attention is given to the “I am” in the trial motif chapter, the scope and importance of it in the gospel necessitates a separate chapter. Thus, just as both of these issues are inseparable from the gospel, they are, moreover, inseparable from each other.

¹ Andrew Lincoln. *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000).

² Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB, 29; New York: Doubleday, 1970-1971), Rulolf Bultmann, ‘Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen Mandäischen und Manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums,’ *ZNW* 24 (1925): 100-46., Eduard Schweizer, *Ego Eimi: Die religionsgeschichtliche Herkunft und theologische Bedeutung der johanneischen Bildreden, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Quellenfrage des vierten Evangeliums* (FRLANT, 56; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939)., David Mark Ball, “I am” in John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implication (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)., Philip Harner, *The “I am” of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970)., Claus Westermann, *The Gospel of John in the Light of the Old Testament* (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998).

³ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

The Trial Motif

The trial motif chapter begins with a necessary discussion on the history of legal language and traditions in the Hebrew Bible. It is by means of such traditions that a trial motif is effective for the authors of Second Isaiah and the Gospel of John. These legal traditions include the covenants, Deuteronomistic laws, and covenant lawsuits.

The fact that ancient Israel was rooted in a religio-legal system is essential to understanding such uses in the Gospel. There is a reason that the evangelist chose a trial motif as a primary literary device to drive home his message. Its precedent in Second Isaiah helps us to understand what he is doing, by understanding the tradition that he is joining. When, during the Babylonian exile, the Israelites began to doubt the sovereignty of YHWH, the writer of Second Isaiah used trial-like language to reassert God's sole claim to authority. Legal language was a central language by which Israel related to God.

Thus, when the early Christians, after Jesus' death, were placed in uncertain circumstances—the threat of expulsion from the synagogue and exclusion from temple worship—the evangelist turned, once again, to the trial motif to argue for belief and faith in Jesus' relationship with the Father.

Typical of John, the motif functions on two levels. The first is a cosmic level, as introduced in chapter one: Jesus is sent from God as his agent on earth. His task is to make the Father known by provoking the world to belief in himself and to pass a judgment of life through his death. On the second level is the earthly trial in which "the Jews" try and ultimately condemn Jesus. Both trials are carried out via

encounters with accusers, appeals to witnesses, and a judgment/verdict. The two levels do not function independently but play off one another through irony and misunderstandings.

The “I am” Declarations

One of the most powerful witnesses in the trial motif is Jesus’ declaration, “I am.” These sayings are present throughout the Gospel and come in two forms—those with a predicate and those in an absolute form. In general, the predicates refer to Jesus’ role among humanity, while the absolute statements are concerned with Jesus’ identity. This identity is stressed through his appropriation of the God of Israel’s self-revelatory formula.

The sayings’ background is in Second Isaiah, where God uses this formula to distinguish himself from the pagan gods. It is in connection with this formula that Second Isaiah declares YHWH to be the only savior, the sole creator, and the sovereign ruler.

This second chapter will focus on how the evangelist is using these declarations. The absolute sayings will be discussed first, followed by those with a predicate. I chose this approach over one that takes them chronologically because it gives the material a more clear focus. Where the chronological placement of two sayings is significant for interpreting another, it will be discussed regardless of distinction between predicate and absolute forms (this is the case in Jn. 8:12 in which the light of the world saying helps to inform the absolute declarations in close proximity).

Chapter 1: Perspectives on Trial: The Fourth Gospel's Trial Motif

The author of the Gospel of John employs a trial motif as a primary literary device. In order to understand its significance and why this was appropriate for his audience, it is necessary to look at ancient Israel's legal traditions and the ways in which these traditions informed their relationship to God. This background is crucial because it provides a framework for understanding the trial motif in John and the elements that he borrowed from the Hebrew Bible. From here, I will address the circumstances surrounding the community which produced this gospel, explaining why the trial motif is an effective literary device. Once this has been established, the development of the motif and its use within the narrative is addressed.

The Religio-Legal Background

Ancient Israelite identity is rooted in laws and legal traditions. Some of the earliest sections of the Hebrew Bible, such as the Deuteronomistic laws, are religio-legal texts, which define the relationship between one person and another. This includes one's relationship with other Israelites, foreigners, and even God himself. Covenants, in addition to the hundreds of laws, inform ancient Israel's identity. Within the Hebrew Bible, covenants are the impetus moving along the Israelite story. For instance, Abraham makes a covenant with God; in return for his obedience, God promises to make Abraham into a great nation (with many descendants) and to bless the world through him. This covenant is reiterated three

times in Genesis making it clear that Israel's founding father's relationship to God is established in legal terms—the covenant.⁴

At another turning point in Israel's history, God gives them the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai.⁵ This is the second major covenant between God and Israel, and scholars have discovered that it takes the form of a *rib*, an ancient Near East legal document. Richard Elliott Friedman, in his commentary on the Torah writes, “there is a formal similarity between the Israelite covenant and international legal documents of the ancient Near East countries. The treaty documents, dictated by regional kings (suzerains) to the local city kings (vassals) who were subject to them, formalized the relationship between the two.”⁶ In continuity with Abraham, the Israelites use a covenant to express their relationship with God, this time, though, it follows a specific ancient Near East form.

A *rib*'s form consists of an introduction declaring who the suzerain is—i.e., “I am YHWH your God” (Exodus 20:2a)—followed by an historical prologue stating the achievements of the suzerain as well as his relationship to the vassal: “who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves” (20:2b) The third and fourth elements to the treaty are the prime stipulation, which demands loyalty to the suzerain—“You shall have no other gods before me” (20:3)—and the other stipulations, tributes and services required of the vassal—these are depicted in the ten commandments (20:4-17). Other aspects of a *rib* are present in the Mosaic

⁴ See Genesis 12, 15, and 17. Much of my understanding of the role covenants play in the Hebrew bible comes from Dr. Friedman's lectures.

⁵ Exodus 19-24.

⁶ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah : With a New English Translation*, (1st ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 234-236.

covenant, but from the ones shown above, it is clear that this covenant once again defines the relationship between God and Israel in legal language. Friedman concludes his discussion of the rib by pointing to this relationship; he writes, “Thus Israel’s relations with its God are conceived in the legal terms of that world. The words of the Ten Commandments [...] are not only orders that must be obeyed. They are legal corpora, concluded contractually between the creator and a human community.”⁷

With a nation so rooted in legal traditions, it is not surprising that an institution developed whose job was, in part, to keep power in check and to advocate on behalf of God and the disadvantaged. This group was the prophets. When an Israelite king, or the people themselves, began to drift from God, the prophets were often the ones to speak out against them. For instance, Elisha challenged Ahab because of Jezebel; Ezekiel “indicts his people for not keeping their covenant with God;”⁸ and Amos accuses the wealthy of abusing the poor, widows, and strangers.

Amos’ reproach against Israel takes the form of what scholars consider a covenant lawsuit. This is when “the prophet acts as a prosecuting attorney in a divine court, accusing the people of breach of their contract with God.”⁹ As God’s spokesmen, the prophets often use trial imagery as they call forth witnesses against the accused. Their purpose is to remind the offenders that God is sovereign and will bring justice.

⁷ Ibid., 234-236.

⁸ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987), 168.

⁹ Ibid., 168.

Second Isaiah, like Amos' covenant lawsuit, employs a trial motif, but rather than condemning Israel, he attempts to encourage their faith. Its famous opening line states, "Comfort, O Comfort my people, says yours God."¹⁰ He goes on to depict YHWH calling a trial(s) against the pagan gods. His intent is to defend God's sovereignty in light of the Babylonian exile and thus to ensure Israel that God is in control.

The Community behind the Fourth Gospel

Clearly legal traditions are integrated into much, if not all, of the Hebrew Bible. But do these precedents explain why, centuries after Second Isaiah was written, the author of the Gospel of John would consider a trial motif as a primary literary device in his gospel narrative? To understand what made such a trial motif appeal to the author and his audience, one must consider the situation of certain Jewish-Christians in the first century. Many scholars have drawn assumptions about the experiences of the community behind the text by paying attention to what concerns the narrative addresses.

For instance, one of the primary concerns in the Fourth Gospel is that of excommunication or, as it is referred to in the text, being thrown out of the synagogue. Scholars are divided as to whether, as the narrative describes, this actually happened during Jesus' ministry. Lincoln doubts the historicity of claims that Jesus' contemporaries were expelled from the synagogue. He believes this

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:1

material is anachronistic and represents later tension between the Johannine community and synagogue authorities.¹¹

Regardless of exactly when these circumstances began, my thesis requires only that the community to which the evangelist is writing perceived or expected hardship as a result of their faith. Lincoln, along with Horbury,¹² describes the experience of being expelled from the synagogue as a serious crisis, the effects of which would have extended beyond the synagogue and into all areas of life. They believe exclusionary practices reflected in later rabbinic texts could have occurred informally during this time, including prohibitions against eating with *minim*, reading their books, or having business dealings with them. Essentially, Jewish Christians would have been socially ostracized, affecting not only their religious lives but their jobs and relationships. On the one hand, followers of Jesus had many reasons to denounce their beliefs and to rejoin the majority Jewish community, but on the other hand, this situation is what positions the Fourth Gospel to be a potentially powerful narrative.

One way the author of John attempts to help his readers remain faithful to their confession is by offering them an alternative perspective. On the surface, they are condemned by “the Jews” as blasphemers with Christ. The verdict/judgment that is prophesized in places like John 16:1-2, condemns followers of Jesus to

¹¹ Other scholars, notably Martyn, point to an outside source, the *birkat ha-minim*, a Jewish Benediction, which he argues was recited in the synagogue, as the impetus for the separation. Martyn believes this benediction contains a curse against Jewish Christians and was thus used to discover or test suspected believers in the early church. However, this is a highly debated issue, especially when it comes to dating the benedictions. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹² See Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 282. William Horbury, “Extrication and Excommunication,” *CT* 35 (1985): 13-38.

expulsion and possibly death. However, the Fourth Gospel offers a different perspective, a heavenly one, which promises a verdict of eternal life instead of death: “I [Jesus] give them eternal life and they will never perish.”¹³ Not only does this verse address eternal life, but Jesus goes on to say, “and no one will snatch them from my hand,” which contrasts their expulsion from the synagogue to their inclusion with Jesus. This is a necessary alternative for people faced with expulsion and persecution; Lincoln writes, “in confessing their allegiance to Jesus, they stress that this confession, far from leading to a sentence in which they pass from the realm of life to that of destruction and death, in fact entails the opposite. The cosmic lawsuit allows the verdict to be reversed.”¹⁴

In addition to the fears of excommunication, the Johannine community was concerned with the issue of honor and shame. Many of Christianity’s opponents pointed to Jesus’ shameful death and humiliation as uncharacteristic of a Messianic savior. However, the Gospel of John repeatedly shows that, in this too, there is a different perspective from which to view honor and shame. Rather than view Jesus’ crucifixion as shameful, the Gospel would have its readers understand his death in a more Greek perspective. The Greeks, in particular, thought the best ending to a blessed life was dying on behalf of one’s country—this was the epitome of honor.¹⁵

However, it is not easy to simply ask a people who are burdened with fears of excommunication and the shame of Jesus’ death to adopt a new perspective.

¹³ John 10:28

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 282.

¹⁵ I do not intend to argue that this Greek understanding was necessarily explicit in the Evangelist’s mind but that in a Greco-Roman world, its connection is possible. This will be discussed more towards the end of the chapter.

Everything hangs upon the author's ability to employ successfully the trial motif in such a way that the community of believers takes it to heart. He does this, not by merely asking them to view honor or death in a different way, but by suggesting an entirely new system of thinking. This motif acts as an appeal to a higher court. The reader is drawn out of their earthly place and given a seat in the cosmic proceeding; its opening lines are, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God."¹⁶ The purpose of a trial is to expose the truth, and as we will see, this includes the truth concerning Jesus' identity as the Son of God, blindness and sight, and honor and shame. Incorporating this new way of thinking into the community's identity offers them hope that things are not always as they seem.

The Motif in John: General Remarks

Once it has been shown that a trial motif is a logical device to employ in this gospel narrative, one can look to how the motif itself developed within the text. The implementation of the motif is crucial because the pressures facing the Johannine community were tangible and powerful, and this narrative must likewise present an equally powerful alternative. That being said, it can be difficult at times to see the full effect of the motif in the narrative. This is primarily because the motif lacks the kind of structure which would allow it to be read as a clear trial progressing in the background of the text. For this reason, one should not expect to read a trial directly off the pages. It is not the author's intent to develop a neat and clean trial with proper roles and categories, and likewise, it does not hold to a linear

¹⁶ John 1:1

framework. Instead, as with motifs, there are images of it here, language alluding to it there, but often only parts of a trial.

For instance, there are certain key components which are necessary for any trial. They require a judge, witnesses, accusers and the accused. Each of these exists within the Fourth Gospel, however, such roles are not set in stone—a witness can simultaneously act as a judge, and the accused may become the accuser. To further complicate the motif, there are multiple trials going on at once, which often lead to misunderstanding within the narrative. A final note to the reader interested in understanding how the author uses the motif is not to get caught-up in the circularity of arguments.

To fully appreciate the affect of the trial motif, the reader should allow for the occasional circularity, and give the author his assumptions. Though it may seem contradictory to a trial, the author does not always take care to make his arguments logically sound. In such situations it is best to consider what point the author is trying to make.

The Dual Trials

In the backdrop of the narrative is a cosmic trial. This is the one for which Jesus came to earth as God's agent. For the Evangelist, this trial's purpose is to reveal the knowledge of God, which can only be gained by belief in Jesus. Through belief and knowledge of God, believers may share in a verdict of life.¹⁷

Simultaneous to the cosmic trial is an earthly one in which Jesus is not the divine agent but the accused. "The Jews" accuse Jesus of claiming divine

¹⁷ Cf. John 3:16-17

prerogatives and thus of making himself equal to God.¹⁸ The earthly trial is most often manifested in interrogations and mini-trials, which take place throughout the narrative. Misunderstandings often arise when Jesus is talking about the cosmic trial, but “the Jews,” limited in perspective, are focused on their earthly trial.

These two trials represent a dualism which is present throughout the narrative. As will all dualities, the trial motif is not complete without both sides. Indeed, the two trials work off one another. The readers share in a privileged perspective, which they gain from the prologue, and the asides of the narrator and what they learn in the course of the narrative. This informed perspective gives them special insight when misunderstandings develop in the mini-trials. Many times, the most important insights are brought forth from the misunderstandings and are meant to be understood by means of the readers’ privileged perspective. If the Fourth Gospel only developed a cosmic trial, it would lack much of the insight gained when the two come into conflict.

The author takes great care throughout the Gospel to inform the reader how each character plays into the dual trials. However, the roles and categories are not set in stone. A judge is responsible for deciding and carrying out the verdict—either condemnation or life. Since this responsibility is considered a divine prerogative, God should be the only judge (this is especially true of the cosmic trial). Yet, while the prologue makes clear that Jesus is “sent from God,”¹⁹ in the narrative, Jesus shares in the divine prerogatives. This allows him to say things like: “For the Father

¹⁸“The Jews” is a somewhat flexible term in the Fourth Gospel. However, for this paper, and the majority of the Gospel, it is meant to identify those whose encounter with Jesus is defined by unbelief or an incomplete belief. As a result, this term may reflect more upon the religious leaders.

¹⁹ John 1:6

judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.”²⁰ With respect to the earthly trial, “the Jews” and Sanhedrin act as judges. In particular, after Jesus raises Lazarus, the Sanhedrin “from that day on they resolved to kill him [Jesus].”²¹

While judgment is important, witnesses are the key to any trial, and the Fourth Gospel has no shortage of them. The role of the witness is to testify to the truth—what they have seen, heard or know. Jesus, as the divine agent, serves as the most powerful witness because only he has seen the Father.²² This position allows Jesus to say, “Even if I witness about myself, my witness is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going.”²³ John the Baptist, the disciples and the Father are all included as witnesses to Jesus. However, the witness that creates the most controversy are the signs, of which Jesus says, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If not, believe the works that I do.”²⁴ These works witness to Jesus because, as the man born blind points out, “How can a sinful man do such signs?”²⁵

Division arises when Jesus apparently breaks laws to perform miracles. “The Jews” accuse him of being a sinner, but others see the good works and believe. For the ones whose eyes have been opened, the works testify to who Jesus is: “We know that God does not listen to sinners [...] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”²⁶ In contrast, the blind, unbelieving Jews, point to Moses and the law as

²⁰ John 5:22

²¹ John 11:53

²² Cf. John 6:64, 1:18

²³ John 8:14. According to Deuteronomy, a testimony requires at least 2-3 witnesses.

²⁴ John 14:11

²⁵ John 6:16

²⁶ John 9: 29-33

their witness, claiming, “We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this man is from.”²⁷

While the opposition claims that someone who breaks the law cannot be from God, Jesus asserts that if they understood Moses’ law properly they would see Jesus as its fulfillment. He says, “the one who accuses you [“the Jews”] is Moses on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses you would believe me, because he wrote about me.”²⁸ In this way the cosmic and earthly trial work off each other to reveal what the author considers proper perspective. According to him, when one reads Moses properly, one is enabled to understand Jesus’ role in the cosmic trial. However, if someone cannot make this step, they remain in darkness. Thus, for the Evangelist, even the opposition’s witnesses in fact testify on Jesus’ behalf.

The role of the witness is the centerpiece of this narrative and runs much deeper than has just been briefly described. Not only does the author use characters to give direct testimonies like John the Baptist’s, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him [...] I myself have seen and have testified that this is the son of God,”²⁹ but he weaves into Jesus’ teaching subtle words, which perhaps carry the highest claims made by any witness in the narrative.

Second Isaiah was briefly mentioned with respect to its place in Israel’s legal tradition, but it is also where the Fourth Gospel drew this powerful testimony. In Second Isaiah, the words הוא אֲנִי / ὁ γὰρ ἐμὺ serve as YHWH’s self-identification as

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John 5:45-46

²⁹ John 1:32-34

the one true God.³⁰ Isaiah 45:18 is one of many instances where the self-identification is used: “For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who formed the earth and made it [...] ‘I am [ἐγώ εἰμι] the Lord, and there is no other.’” Later in the same chapter God says, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am [ἐγώ εἰμι] God, and there is no other.”³¹ The ἐγώ εἰμι formulation both ascribes certain attributes to God and emphasizes that there is no other God but he.

According to Richard Bauckham, the Hebrew Bible has seven “I am” statements, six of which occur in Second Isaiah. Likewise, the Gospel of John also has seven statements.³² Concerning the ubiquitous nature of the declarations, D.M. Ball writes, “The great variety of setting in which the words ἐγώ εἰμι are used by the Johannine Jesus show that it is a phrase which pervades the whole Gospel.”³³ Some of John’s “I am” statements have predicates and reveal what Jesus offers to humanity, i.e. “I am the bread of life,” while the absolute sayings witness to Jesus’ identity.³⁴ Concerning their relation to Second Isaiah, Ball points out “that it is not only in the words ἐγώ εἰμι that John points back to Isaiah, but also in the way that those words are presented.”³⁵ He goes on to discuss how a method of exegesis, possibly dating to the first century BCE, used verbal analogy to connect a few words in one passage to whole verses elsewhere.³⁶ Considering the “I am” formulations in

³⁰Translated, “I am.” אני הוּא is from the Masoretic text; ἐγώ εἰμι is from the LXX. See Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13; 46:4; 48:12; 52:6

³¹ Isaiah 45:22

³² Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 55. The 7 statements in John refer to the absolute ones.

³³ David Ball, *I Am*, 160-176.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 178. Rabbi Hillel, around 30 CE, is alleged to have used this method.

John, Ball thinks that the words, “ἐγώ εἰμι,” can refer to Isaiah by formal parallel, but that upon careful inspection, it is evident that the sayings are also connected in thought.

Ball traces each of the Johannine “I am” sayings to what he believes are their parallels in the Hebrew Bible and, often, Second Isaiah. To clarify how these statements work as one of the most powerful testimonies in the trial motif, I will give his analysis of the first “I am” statement in John 4:26. Jesus is at a well with a Samaritan woman, and she asks about his identity: “Are you greater than our father Jacob?”³⁷ As the conversation develops, she says that she knows the Messiah is coming and that he will explain everything. Jesus responds, “I am [ἐγώ εἰμι], the one who is speaking to you.”³⁸ Ball points out that Jesus’ response is awkward and that, “I am the Messiah” might be a more clear reply. However, for Ball this awkward reply points the alert reader to an almost direct parallel in Isaiah 52:6: “Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking; here am I.” Following Ball’s approach, which looks beyond the formal parallel, this source suggests Jesus is claiming more than the messiahship; he is taking YHWH’s words for his own, including himself in the divine identity. The verses following 52:6 reference YHWH’s salvation of Zion, which further informs what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

If this method of exegesis is legitimate for understanding the Fourth Gospel, which seems likely, this is one of the more subtle and powerful testimonies made by a witness in the narrative. Thus, it is no stretch to understand why, after one of

³⁷ John 4:12

³⁸ John 4:26

Jesus' "I am" statements, "the Jews" attempt to kill him.³⁹ Presumably they see him appropriating the self-designation of YHWH to himself; in John 8:58-9 Jesus says, "'Truly, Truly, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him."⁴⁰ Understanding that Jesus' oneness with the father stands on trial, the "I am" statements are a central testimony in the proceedings because they include him in the divine identity.

In addition to appropriating God's self-predication, Jesus places himself at the center of many traditional Jewish symbols. He testifies that he is the bread of life, the living water, and the true vine, as well as the way, the truth and the life, some of which are images associated with the Torah and Israel. According to Andrew Lincoln, this is significant because the ostracized believers needed a method of coping with their exclusion from their religious traditions. For instance, Jesus' teaching during Sukkot draws upon the images of water and light present during the feast and portrays himself as the source of living water and the light of life.⁴¹ While the Johannine Community may no longer have been able to participate in such traditions like Sukkot, Jesus' fulfillment or embodiment of these images offers the believers an alternative perspective. Their loss is mitigated upon understanding these traditions as pointing to Jesus.

In her review of Lincoln's commentary, Adela Reinhartz challenges his assertion that expulsion from the synagogue likewise meant exclusion from Jewish practices, including Jewish observances and festivals. She argues that the synagogue,

³⁹ John 8:24, 28, 58; 18:5, 8

⁴⁰ John 8:58-59

⁴¹ John 7:38; 8:12

during Second Temple Judaism, was a place of Torah study and prayer.⁴² And while the expelled Jew may not be able to continue in those practices connected to the synagogue, other essential practices to Judaism, such as observing the Sabbath, dietary laws, and circumcision, were still feasible. Her criticism focuses on Lincoln's dependence upon a reading of Second Temple Judaism for which he does not provide appropriate support. Regardless of the experiences behind the Johannine community, the effect of Jesus' connection with Jewish symbols is a powerful witness.

Though not as essential to the trial as the witness, the accuser is an important element to the motif. They are the ones who bring forward an allegation against the accused. Jesus, who might seem to be an accuser, often distances himself from the role and instead points to Moses and the law as the ones who will condemn the nonbelievers. Jesus says that he was not sent into the world to condemn it but to save it. Instead, "whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."⁴³ While Jesus may be distanced from the role of accuser, the Gospel suggests that his presence and words have a similar effect: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin."⁴⁴ Concerning the earthly trial, "the Jews" are obviously accusers; they charge Jesus with being demon-possessed,⁴⁵ with breaking the Sabbath, and of making himself equal to God.⁴⁶

⁴² Adele Reinhartz, "Why Comment? Reflections on Bible Commentaries in General and Andrew Lincoln's the Gospel According to Saint John in Particular" JSNT 29 no. 3 (2007).

⁴³ John 3:17-18

⁴⁴ John 15:22

⁴⁵ John 8:52

⁴⁶ John 19:7

The accused parties, Jesus and the world, are the ones who stand trial and will carry the weight of the verdict. Ironically, since the nature of a trial is to expose to the truth, by accusing Jesus, “the Jews” set into motion a trial which will ultimately condemn them and affirm Jesus’ identity. Once again, the dualism between the earthly trial, in which Jesus is accused, and the cosmic trial work as foils to expose the truth. The very accusations against Jesus work as the platform from which Jesus’ identity is revealed.

While in the cosmic trial the world is accused, Jesus makes clear that the devil, though not often mentioned in John, is on trial as well. Jesus says, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”⁴⁷ The devil’s role in the Fourth Gospel is vague. It is mentioned as the force influencing Judas to betray Jesus and as the father of those who oppose him (Jesus). In a way, the cosmic forces in the narrative are God and the devil. If someone is of God (meaning one believes in Jesus) they are of the light, but if they oppose Jesus they are of the devil, loving darkness and lies.⁴⁸ Lincoln’s commentary points out the typical Johannine reversal behind the devil being thrown out; he writes, “the one behind the world’s driving-out of Jesus and the synagogue’s driving-out of Jesus’ followers (cf. 9.34) is himself driven out.”⁴⁹ Therefore, though the devil has a limited role in the narrative, he is a significant figure who is accused and condemned.

⁴⁷ John 12:31

⁴⁸ John 8:44; 3:19

⁴⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries 4 (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. ed. ([Peabody, Mass.] London; New York: Hendrickson Publishers; Continuum, 2005).

The final role in this trial is that of the jury. They are those who come in contact with Jesus and make a decision about him based on their experience. The narrative portrays these jurors in three ways: those who make a full Johannine confession (that Jesus is one with God); a partial confession (that Jesus is a prophet of sorts); or, those who deny his Christological claims. These jurors include characters like the Samaritan woman, Nicodemous, and “the Jews” respectively. Yet, the readers are also a jury. The author has been preparing them from the beginning with witnesses and testimonies and with examples of other characters that have believed in Jesus. All of these were to guide the readers—the real jury—to true belief.

A person’s decision about Jesus is central to the trial because it will decide his or her verdict. The earthly verdict is delayed throughout the narrative because it is bound by God’s timetable and must happen in conjunction with the cosmic trial’s verdict. This is evident when Jesus says, “My hour has not yet come,” before his first miracle at Cana, and again when his disciples ask him if he will go to Jerusalem for the festival.⁵⁰ He initially refuses the requests, saying his hour had not yet come, but later acts upon it, emphasizing that he works on God’s time, not on the world’s time. The narrator also draws attention to Jesus’ hour when he is threatened with death/arrest. Jesus is said to have escaped because “his hour is not yet come.”⁵¹ In this way, the author submits the earthly verdict to wait upon God’s cosmic trial. Only after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and his Christology has been completely developed, is the earthly trial allowed to wrap up in the last trial scene before Pilate.

⁵⁰ John 2:4, 7:3-10

⁵¹ John 8:20

However, just as the juxtaposition between the earthly and the cosmic trial deliver insight about Jesus' identity, so the verdicts are juxtaposed with one another. The narrative has been preparing for the verdicts since the beginning, emphasizing that Jesus' glorification is inseparable from his death and humiliation. Through being "lifted up" on the eve of Passover, Jesus is associated with the Passover lamb, the suffering servant and bronze snake in the desert.⁵² By preparing the reader to view Jesus' death in this way, the Fourth Gospel helps them to reconcile the burden of the earthly verdict with the cosmic trial's verdict.

Furthermore, the narrator takes advantage of Jesus' trial—or mistrial—before Pilate to further the juxtaposition through irony. For instance, when Pilate asks if they would like Jesus released, they shout in reply, "Not this man but Barabbas."⁵³ The narrator goes on to say that Barabbas was a bandit, which should remind the readers of Jesus' teaching about the good shepherd and the bandit. By alluding to this teaching, the narrator is showing how the Jewish authorities choose the bandit over the good shepherd. After this, Pilate mocks "the Jews'" inability to enforce their laws, and, eventually, they give in and declare, "We have no king but Caesar."⁵⁴ The Johannine irony here is that, in trying to defend God from a blasphemer, they themselves blaspheme (deny God) by professing allegiance to Caesar.

The juxtaposition of the trials, as well as Jesus' willingness to lay down his life, keeps God's sovereignty intact. Not only does Jesus' knowledge of his death

⁵² Isaiah 52:13—suffering servant. John 3:14—bronze snake.

⁵³ John 19:15

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18:40.

alleviate some of its humiliation, but the narrative once again offers an alternative way of understanding death. According to Herodotus, the Greeks considered a blessed life to end in an honorable death—death on behalf of one’s country.

Jesus’ death can be seen on many levels. On one level, the author wants to show that Jesus came to save the world. The narrative addresses this by using the term *cosmos* in passages like, “I am the light of the world.”⁵⁵ On another level, Jesus is represented as dying on behalf of the Jewish nation. This idea is represented in Chapter 11 when the high priest is said to have prophesied that “Jesus was about to die for the nation.”⁵⁶ Lastly, in Jesus’ farewell address, he says, “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁵⁷ From a Greek perspective, death for any one of these would have been honorable, yet Jesus is shown as dying on all their behalves.⁵⁸ It taught Jesus’ followers how to understand and cope with the apparent shame and humiliation of the cross. Though it may seem that the crucifixion was shameful and calls into question one’s belief in Jesus, in reality, the Fourth Gospel would argue, his death was in God’s control.⁵⁹ As a shepherd and friend who willingly lays down his life, Jesus’ death adheres to God’s timeframe; in fact, Jesus’ “lifting up” is the very moment of his glorification.⁶⁰

As if the Gospel had not made it clear enough, the earthly verdict provides the final witness for the cosmic trial, the resurrection. By his death and resurrection,

⁵⁵ John 8:12

⁵⁶ John 11:51; The prologue also describes Jesus as “coming to his own.”

⁵⁷ John 15:13

⁵⁸ I have written that this was a Greek perspective, but it seems to have been appropriated by Jews prior to the evangelists. Cf. 2 Macc. 7.

⁵⁹ In John 19: 10-11 Jesus tells Pilate, “You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given you from above.”

⁶⁰ John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32; 18:32

Jesus shows his complete continuity with the divine prerogative as he raises himself from the dead—a final witness to his oneness with the father.

The continual references to what the disciples would experience after Jesus' death—expulsion from the synagogues, death, and persecution—all encourage the communities reading this Gospel to hold onto their belief. Without the predictions that they would experience such persecution, the Jewish Christians might be led to think that they had been mistaken. However, by having the Johannine Jesus say that the world will hate them because it hated him and that they will be driven out of the synagogues, the believers can see their suffering as part of God's plan.⁶¹ Jesus, in speaking to the future believers says, "Take heart, I this world you will have suffering, but I have overcome the world."⁶² And if their situation is God's plan, Lincoln suggests, the gospel is implicitly telling its readers that suffering is better than apostasy.⁶³

⁶¹ A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 413.

⁶² John 16:33

⁶³ A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 413.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the Problem of “I am”

The “I am” statements in John have drawn much attention over the centuries for their mutually enigmatic and polemical nature. This is true both of their effect upon the narrative audience and the history of scholarship. Some of the primary questions these “I am” sayings provoke to scholars center around their possible sources and backgrounds. Where one finds the sayings’ background may ultimately affect their interpretation by both the narrative and literary audience. And depending on how one approaches these issues, one may find that the sayings stand in tension with early Jewish monotheism.

Bauckham’s Unique Divine Identity as one Method of Approach

For the present study, I will approach the text and these questions using a method developed by Richard Bauckham, which understands Second Temple Judaism’s conception of YHWH in terms of a unique divine identity.⁶⁴ He proposes this method of understanding Jesus’ relation to the Father as an alternative to the traditional ways of speaking of it, in terms of a ‘functional’ and/or ‘ontic’ relationship.⁶⁵

Bauckham argues that Second Temple Judaism had a clear and unambiguous way of understanding and distinguishing the one true God—YHWH—from the rest of reality. As we find in the exodus story, the God of Israel does not identify himself

⁶⁴ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

via customary methods. As opposed to the Egyptian gods, he neither associates himself with the image of an animal nor a part of nature. Instead, when Moses asks who he should tell the Israelites has sent him, God identifies himself as “I am that I am.”⁶⁶ In a sense, this name, unattached to any symbol or icon, provides a blank slate upon which they will begin to define their knowledge of and relationship to God. One way that scholars have translated the name of God in Exodus in 3:14 is, “I am that which causes to be,” a translation that takes into account the Hiphil form of the word “YHWH” and highlights the God of Israel’s role in creation.

Such a translation could be significant for Bauckham who argues that one of the primary characteristics by which Second Temple Israel identified God was his sole, unaided act of creation.⁶⁷ The other main criteria, or features, of God’s unique divine identity are categorized according to those related to Israel, to the world, and to eschatological expectation.

In the first category, the way in which God’s identity is primarily understood by Israel, one finds the divine name, God’s acts in history and God’s direct revelation to Israel as given in Exodus 34:6-7, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” According to the second category, God’s characteristics towards all reality, God is

⁶⁶ Exodus 3:14 (KJV); Masoretic text, “אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה.” LXX, “ἐγώ εἰμι ὃ ἐγώ.” The NRSV translates this as “I AM who I AM” but also cites alternative translations including, “I AM what I AM” or “I will be what I will be.”

⁶⁷ A translation, such as the one that takes into account the Hiphil form of causative action, fits nicely with this sole act of creation but, of course, provides no direct support for the linguistics behind such a translation.

identified as the creator and sovereign ruler. Lastly, concerning the eschatological expectations, God is associated with the New Exodus as found in Isaiah 40-55.⁶⁸

These characteristics, according to Bauckham's method, represent the central criteria by which Second Temple Judaism identified God. Moreover, he argues that this theology is strictly monotheistic, and he plays down any significance of intermediary figures that seem to be represented as semi-divine. Though, with respect to figures like the Spirit, Word and Wisdom, he claims these are not separate from but included in the divine identity.⁶⁹ They were present with God at the beginning, but because they are included in the divine identity, they do not challenge the strict monotheism. If this is true, the Spirit, Word and Wisdom function as a precedent, making it possible for the evangelist to include Jesus in God's identity without contradicting Judaism. This is not to say that the evangelist is doing something common in Judaism; rather, only that it is possible in terms of Early Jewish Monotheism. Indeed, it remains a novel and unexpected development on the part of the evangelist.

This development by the evangelist is attributed, in part, to creative exegesis, an exegesis continuous with Judaism but novel all the same. Bauckham points out that the most alluded to passage in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1.⁷⁰ However,

⁶⁸ R. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 9.

⁶⁹ A problem pointed out to me by Wayne Coppins, and also addressed by Yarbrow Collins, is the representation of Wisdom's creation in the Proverbs (cf. 8:22), an issue not addressed by Bauckham. This is significant because it is problematic for something to be both included in the unique divine identity and created. Since Wisdom serves as a precedent for Jesus, this is an important criticism. Cf. Adela Yarbrow Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic and Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 213.

⁷⁰ Psalm 110:1, "The LORD said to my Lord 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.'"

in Second Temple literature, it is only referred to once.⁷¹ This supports the claim that, while the New Testament writers remained within the Jewish tradition, their focus and attention was noticeably different.

Sources outside Isaiah and the Hebrew Bible

It seems wise to spend a moment to address the issue of the origin, both as it relates to sources and background, of the “I am” sayings in John. While, as has been indicated by the introduction on Bauckham, this study will proceed with an understanding that they are primarily dependent upon Jewish sources, there are many scholars who would find John’s background elsewhere.

There are two main alternative approaches to background that I will note. The first is that which has held sway for many years but is losing strength with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and a shift in Johannine studies, which take into account literary criticism and more general Jewish themes. This opinion claims that Mandaean Gnosticism is a primary influence upon the Johannine sayings, and it points to the formal parallels for support.⁷² An important criticism of this argument is that these formal parallels exist only in relation to the “I am” statements with a predicate. Mandaean literature has no absolute forms of “I am.” The result is that scholars are then forced to argue for separate backgrounds, one for the predicate and one for the absolute forms. For Ball, this is problematic because, through literary criticism, he finds the predicate and absolute sayings to be interwoven and inseparable in the Gospel’s final form. As a result, he argues that they must share a

⁷¹ R. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 30-31.

⁷² C.f. Claus Westermann, *The Gospel of John in Light of the Old Testament*; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971[1941]);

common background. There are a variety of other arguments against a Mandaean Literature as a primary background, including difficulty dating Mandaean sources, but these examples are sufficient to highlight the central points of debate.

The second opinion is one defended by Margret Davis, who thinks the absolute sayings make sense in themselves and do not necessitate a search for background sources.⁷³ For the sayings with a predicate, she asserts that these have their background in the Jewish Wisdom traditions, not in the prophets. The most obvious difficulty with this understanding is the disregard for the double entendres, which seems apparent in some of the absolute “I am” declarations.⁷⁴ Furthermore, as Ball points out, whatever explanation one has for the background, it must explain the sometimes strange reaction from the crowd. Simple self-identification will not suffice. This is not to say that Wisdom traditions do not have a place in the discussion of background, indeed they do, but I am arguing 1) against Margaret Davis’ strict exclusion of background with respect to the absolute sayings and 2) that the primary background for such sayings is in Second Isaiah, not the Wisdom traditions.

Certainly, there are a variety of views at all levels on this continuum, and some who would take a completely different view altogether, but these seem to me the more popular alternatives to locating the background in Isaiah and the Hebrew Bible.

⁷³ Margret Davis. *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSOT Press: Sheffield, 1992), 85-86.

⁷⁴ Cf. Paul Duke. *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (John Knox Press, 1985); D.M. Ball, *I am*, 117-118.

The “I am” in Isaiah

Before we are able to get into the “I am” statements of Isaiah, we may stop and ask two preliminary questions: how do we get from the Hebrew, אֲנִי־הוֹ , to the Greek, ἐγώ εἰμι , and why jump to Isaiah for background when the first instance is in Exodus 3:14? The first question has a two-part answer. The Septuagint often translates the Hebrew, אֲנִי־הוֹ , to the Greek, ἐγώ εἰμι , which bridges the gap for us to relate John’s use of “I am” to that of Second Isaiah and Exodus 3:14. For instance, אֲנִי־הוֹ is present six times in Second Isaiah and is often translated in the Septuagint as ἐγώ εἰμι (41:4, 43:10, 46:4).⁷⁵ Furthermore, $\text{אֲנִי־הוֹ אֲנִי־הוֹ אֲנִי־הוֹ}$ (Masoretic)⁷⁶ occurs twice and is translated ἐγώ εἰμι ἐγώ εἰμι (LXX, Isaiah 43:25, 51:12). This is not an exhaustive analysis of the names but depicts the synonymous relationship between the various Hebrew formulations of אֲנִי־הוֹ as well as its relation to the Greek, ἐγώ εἰμι .

As to the later question, about the relationship between Exodus 3:14 and the “I am” sayings, it seems most likely that Exodus provides the basis for Second Isaiah’s use but only indirectly for the Gospel. As we will see, this is supported by the numerous parallels in context and usage between John’s “I am” declarations and those found in Isaiah.⁷⁷ Furthermore, with the integration of the statements into the trial motif (also dependant on Second Isaiah), one is compelled to begin there.

Let us move to the “I am” statements as they are found in Second Isaiah. The first time this exclusive monotheistic claim is used is at the height of the trial scene

⁷⁵ P.B. Harner, *I am*, 6-7.

⁷⁶ “I, I am he,” RSV.

⁷⁷ Of course this is not the only approach; formal parallels offer another basis of comparison but this is secondary for scholars like Ball and Bauckham.

between YHWH and the pagan gods (Isaiah 41:1-4):⁷⁸ “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am He (אֲנִי־הוּא)” (41:4). Through this scene, YHWH is portrayed as the one who alone controls history, a quality of Bauckham’s unique divine identity. The second and third time “אֲנִי־הוּא” is used is in the trial scene of 43:8-13.⁷⁹ Here too the emphasis is on God as a sovereign ruler and his sole ability to save and redeem Israel. At a basic level, this statement is used as a polemic against false gods in trial scenes, and through its repeated use, it becomes a formulaic witness for YHWH. In the light of Bauckham’s approach, the formulation is a witness to the various characteristics by which Israel identified God.

אֲנִי־הוּא and its various forms are spoken only by God in Second Isaiah. This is a key point in its polemical use because it sets YHWH apart, even by name, from the other gods. Without the strict limitation of this formula to YHWH alone, it would lose its significance. In Isaiah 47:8, 10, Babylon claims, “I am, and there is no other,” but this “I am” is only “אֲנִי” and not the full “אֲנִי־הוּא” which is reserved for the God of Israel.⁸⁰ H.-M Dion describes a hymn of self-praise which was present in third millennium Sumerian texts.⁸¹ These hymns may be the type of thing Second Isaiah is positioning himself against when he distinguishes the אֲנִי־הוּא of Israel with the אֲנִי of pagan cultures.

The monotheistic claim in this self-revelatory formula is certainly a key feature in its use, but it represents only a part of the unique divine identity that

⁷⁸ P.B. Harner, I am, 8-10.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁰ The Septuagint, however, does not retain this distinction.

⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

Bauckham finds in Second Temple monotheism. As Lincoln points out, we should not limit our scope to where “I am” is directly related to a function of God’s role (i.e. more formal parallels). Instead, to some extent, one should allow the various characteristics of YHWH in Second Isaiah that are found in and among the specific “I am” statements to inform the identity of “I am.” For instance, the fact that “I am” and “do not be afraid” do not occur together in Second Isaiah should not deter us from finding its background here. Indeed, “I am” and “do not be afraid” are found many times in Isaiah 40-55.⁸²

In Second Isaiah, the self declaration, “אֲנִי־יְהוָה,” is tied to the idea that the God of Israel is the God of Creation, History and the Redeemer of Israel. It was אֲנִי־יְהוָה, the creator, who existed before creation and alone caused everything to be (40:28; 41:4; 43:10). It was אֲנִי־יְהוָה, the God of History, who brought Israel out of Egypt and set them down in the land (45:14-19). And because אֲנִי־יְהוָה is creator and Lord of History, he will redeem Israel and restore them to their homeland (42:5, 43:14-16). Yet, it is more than that he can and will redeem Israel, אֲנִי־יְהוָה is alone the Savior, and there is no other (43:11). These may seem like the characteristics of any god, but Harner rightfully points out that “normally the extent of a god’s reality and power was measured by his success in protecting his people and giving them victory over warfare. Second Isaiah, however, abandons these criteria and asks his fellow exiles to accept new arguments on behalf of YHWH.”⁸³

⁸² This may highlight well the difference between a background and a source. There may be no source for “I am, do not be afraid” but Second Isaiah is certainly part of its background.

⁸³ P.B. Harner, *I am*, 13.

One of the more striking features in both Second Isaiah and the Gospel is YHWH's and Jesus' ability to predict the future.⁸⁴ In Isaiah, the fact that YHWH is the only one who has done this, and the only one who can do this, is primary evidence of his sovereignty. Lincoln writes that Second Isaiah is able to defend YHWH's sovereignty over Cyrus' rise and Babylon's fall by "showing that Yahweh has predicted this course of events, since the one who is able in this way to predict future events must also be Lord over these events."⁸⁵ When YHWH calls for the pagan god's to make their case, no one comes forward to predict "the former things." For YHWH, however, Israel, and even the deaf and blind, witness to his power throughout history. Lincoln cites the often quoted passage, Isaiah 55:10-11, which speaks of God's word not returning to him unfulfilled, to highlight this divine prerogative. Thus, when Jesus is shown to know what will happen, as with his prediction that Judas will betray him, he is portrayed with a characteristic unique to God. In Isaiah no one else comes forward who could do this, yet, in John, we have Jesus doing just that. With respect to his portrayal in John, Lincoln writes, "The disciples are to be witnesses to Jesus' sovereign control of the events of the lawsuit, confirmed by his ability, like that of YHWH, to predict the future."⁸⁶ This is perhaps most explicit during his arrest in John 18.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ For declarations about the future see Isa. 41:21-23 (a good passage on God's ability to know the past and future), 42:9, 43:8-13 (a good passage which may connect Jesus' ability to predict the future with his role as divine agent/witness), 44:7-8 (a very monotheistic depiction of YHWH in a trial scene in which YHWH's ability to tell the future acts as a testimony to his sole sovereignty), 46:10. For Shepherd/Sheep types see Isaiah 40:11, for Water/Spirit see Isa. 44:3, for "do not fear" see 41:10.

⁸⁵ A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸⁷ The arrest in John 18 will be elaborated on in the next chapter. For other instances in which Jesus' predictive words support a high Christology, see John 2:22; 14:29; 16:4; 18:32; 21:23.

The “I am” in John: Issues behind Predicate and Absolute Forms

Studies of all kinds have appeared on John’s “I am” statements. Some have addressed only the absolute forms and others only those with a predicate. David Ball has written a monograph which investigates both; he sees them as inseparable to the narrative of John.

Of course, there is debate surrounding almost all areas of this study, including which statements should be considered as absolute. Should a statement with no direct predicate but an implied one be considered absolute? Some have argued this is the situation of Jesus’ first “I am” statement with the Samaritan woman at the well. When she says that she knows the messiah will come and explain all things, Jesus’ response is “I am, the one speaking to you.” In this case, there is no explicit predicate, but some argue that “the messiah” is implied here and thus should not be taken as a true absolute saying. A scholar like Margaret Davis might take this view since she believes all the absolute sayings are sufficient in themselves and can be explained without looking outside the text. Others, including Ball, Lincoln and Duke, want to argue for a double entendre in some of these passages.⁸⁸

David Ball finds a literary critical approach helpful as a means of explaining the function and significance of these sayings. From this perspective, he shows how the author has woven the absolute and predicate statements together in such a way that, while they may function differently at the immediate textual level, at the narrative level they work towards the same end. He argues that this necessitates a

⁸⁸ P. Duke, *Irony*; A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 445; Cf. also, R. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 8.

common background between them. If this is so, it is not possible to separate the absolute sayings' background to Isaiah and the sayings with a predicate to Mandaean literature.⁸⁹ It should also be noted that to split the background between the forms would argue against Bauckham's method of unique divine identity because his method is based on a strictly monotheistic theology rooted in the Hebrew Bible. With such considerations in mind, I will attempt to give attention to the main points of debate without being hamstrung by them.

The Absolute Form: Location and Function in John

David Ball, in "I am" in the Fourth Gospel, writes that the function of the absolute sayings in John points to Jesus' identity and the predicate sayings to his role among humanity.⁹⁰ Such an understanding also aligns well with Bauckham's attempt to classify the divine identity into three categories, those related to Israel, the world, and eschatological expectations. Unique to Bauckham, however, is that he does not stop at Jesus' role and identity but goes one step further and understands that they are pointing to a divine identity. Thus, for Ball and Bauckham, the primary function of these sayings is not necessarily limited to the scope of their formal similarities but to their contextual and functional characteristics that point back to Second Isaiah.

Let us begin by looking at the absolute sayings. There are two basic approaches to these statements; the first is one in which scholars think a predicate

⁸⁹ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 18-20. I use Mandaean Literature as an alternative background for the predicate sayings; however, as mentioned previously, scholars like Margaret Davis would want to look within the Wisdom traditions.

⁹⁰ As Wahlde points out in his review of "I am" in the Fourth Gospel, this insight is not unique to Ball but predates him; Cf. Urban C. von Wahlde, Book Review of R. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, in the SBL, Loyola University of Chicago, 2000.

is implied (or else not necessary to make sense of it).⁹¹ The second approach understands these sayings as complete in themselves, possibly as an appropriation of the divine name and representing a type of theophany—these scholars often allow for multiple levels of meaning.⁹² P.B. Harner, in his study of the Fourth Gospel's "I am" sayings, focuses on the absolute forms. While considering the possibility of the first approach (implied predicates with no need to look elsewhere), he usually finds that the second is most able to explain the situation. Ultimately, he allows that some absolute forms have a surface level meaning (possibly via an implied predicate or natural self identification) but there may also be another level of meaning, which is only available to those who know the Jewish Scriptures.

In a paper on the history of Hermeneutics, Watts argues that even a single word or phrase may have been enough to "alert the reader to an entire thought world," which they shared with the author.⁹³ Watt's theory is similar to a form of midrashic exegesis attributed to Hillel.⁹⁴ The multiple levels of meaning is also supported by Duke's understanding of Irony in the Fourth Gospel, by the trial motif as presented by Lincoln, and by Culpepper's argument that the lack of explanation of these enigmatic statements suggests the audience and reader share a similar conceptual basis.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Cf. E. Schweizer, R. Bultmann, M. Davis, (From Harner, I am, 3-4).

⁹² Cf. C.K. Barrett, C.H. Dodd, D.M. Ball, A. Lincoln, R. Bauckham, (From Harner, I am, 3-4).

⁹³ Watts, "Camelot, Eskimos and the Grand Piano: the History of Hermeneutics in Biblical Studies: the Role of Ideology in New Testament Social Backgrounds [a paper given at the 1990 Tyndale New Testament Study Group in Cambridge.]

⁹⁴ Cf. the previous chapter for a discussion of this method and its possible significance for the trial motif.

⁹⁵ Cf. R. Duke, Irony; A. Lincoln, Truth on Trial, 445; R. Culpepper, Anatomy, 8.

One final note, when dealing with background and sources, a clear understanding of what is meant by the two is important. A source is a specific document or quotation which directly informs the text at hand. Background material may be traditions, modes of thought, which shaped the way the evangelist formed the text. Both are important for understanding the relationship between Second Isaiah and the Gospel of John.

John 4: 4-43 (4:26)

The first “I am” statement has already been mentioned; it is when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Scholars wishing to highlight the Jewish background point to several key elements in this passage. First is the text’s mention of Jacob’s well. Jacob, one of the forefathers of Israel, will not be the last to surface near an “I am” statement. Furthermore, the setting and interaction of Jesus and the Samaritan woman reflects betrothal scenes in the Hebrew Bible. Lincoln lays out the general outline of these scenes: a bridegroom travels to a foreign land and meets a woman at a well; there is dialogue about water (it is asked for and offered); the woman hurries home to report about the man; there is an invitation to visit the father-in-law’s home, and the betrothal is arranged at a meal. In addition to this, Lincoln points out that, in the two betrothal stories in Genesis, the male reveals his identity.⁹⁶ It is obvious that the evangelist is setting this episode up as a Jewish

⁹⁶ A. Lincoln, *John*, 170.

type, while at the same time he is drastically reshaping it. Thus, the first “I am” declaration is steeped in Jewish background.⁹⁷

The structure and progression of the Samaritan woman’s faith is also important with respect to the following “I am” declaration because it will be Jesus’ declaration that brings the progression to a climax.⁹⁸ The woman first identifies him as a Jew, then sir (11), prophet (19), and finally, setting Jesus up for his declaration, she says, “I know that the messiah is coming (who is called Christ)” (25). Jesus’ response completes her progression as he affirms “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (26).

As we said before, some scholars argue that “messiah” is an implied predicate, but I think it is most convincing to allow for a double meaning in this passage. It would seem obvious from the context that “messiah” is implied, especially when the woman returns to town asking, “He cannot be the messiah, can he?” (29). However, as Ball and many others have pointed out, the text surrounding the “I am” statement seems also to point us back to Second Isaiah.⁹⁹ If the first level identifies him as the messiah, the background (second level) informs what kind of messiah he is.

Isaiah 52:6 reads, “Therefore my people shall know my name in that day, because I am the one who speaks: I am here.”¹⁰⁰ There are some obvious parallels here, both in language and concepts to John. There is the formal parallel between

⁹⁷ For Hebrew Bible betrothal scenes see: Genesis 24:1-67—where Abraham’s servant finds Rebekah for Isaac; Gen. 29: 1-14—where Jacob encounters Rachel; Exodus 2: 15-22—where Moses and Zipporah meet.

⁹⁸ This pattern will surface again with other “I am” declarations.

⁹⁹ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 178-180.

¹⁰⁰ NETS translation.

the identification as “I am,” and its immediate context, “the one speaking to you.” However, it has also been noted that Isaiah emphasizes a time of revelation, when “my people will know my name.”¹⁰¹ The knowing in Isaiah stands out to any reader of John, in which knowing is such a prominent theme. In fact, Jesus’ presence on earth is defined by knowing the father and making him known. Thus, especially in the light of the Samaritan woman who “knows” the messiah will come and “proclaim” all things, it fits well conceptually that this Isaiah passage is in view. Ball also points out that the “day” in Isaiah may correlate to the “day” of true worship in John.¹⁰²

The “I am” declaration is also informed by the betrothal type mentioned above. In Lincoln’s commentary on John, he notes that, while it builds on this type, it also redefines it. When the “I am” declaration (as YHWH’s self-revelation) is read in the light of Jesus’ role as the bridegroom, it works to redefine the traditional understanding of Jewish marriage. In the Jewish Scriptures, including parts of Second Isaiah, the “covenant relationship between God and Israel [is depicted] in betrothal and marital terms, where YHWH is husband or bridegroom and the people are wife and bride.”¹⁰³ Thus, when Jesus (as a representative of God through the “I am” declaration) is portrayed in a marriage scene with a Samaritan woman who has been married five times, it suggests a new relationship between God and the Samaritans (and perhaps extending to humanity). The power of such a claim is only possible in connection to the “I am” declaration because it is by this claim that Jesus

¹⁰¹ Isaiah 52:6a

¹⁰² D.M. Ball, *I am*, 178-180. Cf. also Lincoln, *Trials*, 21ff.

¹⁰³ A. Lincoln, *John*, 170. Cf. Isaiah 54:1, 5-6; 62:4-5 for bride/groom depictions.

has authority to recast the traditional marriage type, so important in informing Israel's relationship to God. It could be argued, here, that Jesus is being included in the divine identity by means the role of bridegroom.

It is important that we allow for a double meaning in this "I am" declaration. For, it is by this means that his role and identity are fully expressed. Jesus is not just any messiah but the LORD's and his coming is tied with the redemption of Israel and the Samaritans.

John 6:20

The second "I am" declaration is found in John 6:20. It is interesting that this statement also follows an incomplete progression of faith, as with the Samaritan woman. The preceding episode is the feeding of the five thousand, in which, after seeing the sign, the crowd says, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14). In the next verse, the narrator says that Jesus withdrew from there because they were about to make him king. With these claims of Jesus still in the mind, the evangelist goes straight to the story of Jesus walking on water. At the sight of him, his disciples are terrified and he says to them, "It is I; do not be afraid" (6:20).

There are two very notable elements in this passage that inform how we should take this "I am" declaration. The first is that Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." This is a common formula in the Hebrew Bible and functions as assurance from the Lord.¹⁰⁴ According to Ball, every $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota\mu\epsilon\iota$ /do not fear combination (in which they

¹⁰⁴ Hebrew bible parallels: Gen. 15:1; 26:24; 46:3; Judges 6:23. Parallels in Isaiah: 40:9; 41:10, 13; 43:1,5; 44:2; 54:4 LXX. Lincoln, in his commentary on John, writes that the "do not fear" exhortations

appear together) in the Hebrew Bible comes from the mouth of God.¹⁰⁵ Thus, while on the surface it is possible to understand its function as informing Jesus' human identity, this word pairing suggests more. Lincoln also notes that that while a simple identification is possible, the narrator has already told us that the disciples knew it was Jesus. The source of their fear, then, is not Jesus but the walking on water. Lincoln goes on to argue that the function here is more than an adoption of YHWH's self-revelation but a theophany.¹⁰⁶

The second point to highlight is that this takes place on the water and, particularly, in a storm. In Genesis, YHWH is the one who brings order into chaos, and in Isaiah 43:1-5, 10-11 we find a combination of water/chaos language as well as assurances not to fear, that God alone is savior. Ball writes that there is not an "explicit Christological claim" in this passage,¹⁰⁷ but there does seem to be an adoption of divine prerogatives or at least divine prerogatives are put alongside Jesus. In some way, the evangelist wants the relationship of YHWH's control over the chaotic sea to inform our understanding of Jesus, and the assurance, which is offered in an appeal to God, "do not be afraid, I am," is now an assurance one can find in Jesus.

His ability to save is manifested in their safe return to the other side. This may echo the salvation of YHWH in Isaiah 51:10, "Was it not you [...] who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?"¹⁰⁸

in Second Isaiah are interspersed with the many "I am" declarations in Second Isaiah. Lincoln, John, 218-219.

¹⁰⁵ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 181.

¹⁰⁶ A. Lincoln, *John*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 181.

¹⁰⁸ NASB translation

John 8:18, 24, 28, 58

The following four “I am” declarations form a cohesive unit and should be interpreted together. They are a part of a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world (another “I am” formulation to be discussed later).

John 8:18

Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world brings opposition from the Pharisees who deny the validity of his testimony and his relationship with the father. He responds saying, “I am the one who witnesses about myself”—this is the first of a four part *inclusio*.¹⁰⁹ Ball is not able to find a specific source (formal parallel) for this but does not consider it to be problematic since he is more interested in conceptual parallels than formal ones.

The servant/witness language of Second Isaiah, especially Isa. 43:10, may provide the conceptual parallels he is looking for. In this Isaiah passage, God is telling Israel, “You are my witness, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.” It may be that chapters 42-43 serve as a broad backdrop upon which to understand Jesus’ claim to be a witness in John. Indeed, in light of the parallel trial motifs, this is hard to debate. Rather than speaking explicitly about Jesus’ identity, they instead orient us more towards his role. He is the chosen servant of God, the witness who is fulfilling Israel’s role as a light to the nations. The following “I am” statements in this

¹⁰⁹ ESV translation.

inclusio will strengthen the parallels to Isaiah 43:10, not just by means of the witness but also through “knowing” and “believing.”

8:24

Closely following the previous “I am” declaration, Jesus says, “You would die in your sins unless you believe that I am he” (24). Here, belief is highlighted and described as a requirement to avoid death. Though, it may be possible to supply the predicate, “from above.” Lincoln argues that Isaiah 43: 10b-11 is a more convincing source; “so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he [...] I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior.” He sees the joint witness of Israel and YHWH in Isaiah 43:10 as “meant to lead to the belief that ‘I am’” for the exiles.¹¹⁰ Thus, if Jesus is indeed replacing or representing Israel as a witness, his claim that he and his father’s testimony are sufficient would have precedent in this scene.

While the declaration in 8:18 seems to inform Jesus’ role of witness, this one appears to focus on his identity/nature, by drawing upon the motif of belief. Taking up God’s claim in Isaiah 43, Jesus is declaring that he is LORD and savior (a task only God can accomplish) and that one must believe he is LORD to have life. His association with Savior may at first appear to speak of his role rather than identity, but since Savior a role only God can fulfill, it functions as an implicit claim to his divine identity. All this is accomplished through his appropriation of God’s words.¹¹¹

John 8:28

¹¹⁰ A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 268.

¹¹¹ One could argue that appropriations of Savior, or as we will see later, the ability to tell the future, do not necessitate divinity but agency. This is true, and especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus is meant to be understood as agent. However, I argue that the convergence of Christological claims such as these work to define Jesus as an agent who is also divine.

Jesus' "I am" declaration here is the third of four in this *inclusio* and offers a high Christology by combining the "lifting up" motif with the divine self-identification, "I am." Isaiah 52:13 employs "lifting up" terminology in relation to YHWH's servant, which we have already seen to be a type in which Jesus includes himself. Thus, understood together, the "lifting up" of the "I am" suggests a radically novel addition to the divine identity of YHWH. For Bauckham, this is where the evangelist is really beginning to reshape the unique divine identity of YHWH; it is not only to be found in the exaltation but also in the humiliation. Moreover, the humiliation has become part of the exaltation. This is made possible through the double meaning of "lifting up"—it refers both to the cross and to the exaltation. Bauckham stresses that this is not contrary to Jewish theology but a development intended to offer a more complete understanding of the divine identity.

Ball highlights a possible implication of this passage with respect to Second Temple Jewish thought. He argues that, for Israel, knowing God (i.e. his divine identity) was tied to his acts in history. For instance, it is when God comes in power, as during the Exodus, that they know who he is. Likewise, Ball sees the "lifting up" of Jesus as a new act in history by which humanity will identify God. He writes; "Just as knowledge of YHWH's identity will be revealed in an act of history, so will knowledge of the Son's identification with the father."¹¹² Such an interpretation is not incompatible with Jewish expectation, especially in light of the New Exodus presented in Second Isaiah. If part of the divine identity of the God of Israel was the

¹¹² D.M. Ball, *I am*, 193. Cf. also A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 276.

New Exodus, and other eschatological hopes, it is only reasonable to assume that their realization in Jesus would also be included in this identity.

One final connection may be found in v. 28's relation to v. 24. The Fourth Gospel retains little distinction between belief (24) and knowing (28). Thus, their synonymous usage strengthens the conceptual parallel to Isaiah 43:10, where belief and knowing are both present.

8:58

Jesus says, "before Abraham was, I am" (8:58)

This is the final of the four "I am" declarations in chapter 8, and completes the *inclusio* for this discussion. It, too, is situated in a Jewish setting, a debate about the Pharisees' relationship to Abraham. For both the narrative audience and the reader, it is a climatic statement and one which provokes the Pharisees' attempt to stone him. It is one of the most clearly absolute of the "I am" sayings and appears to continue the allusion to Isaiah 43:10, to which the previous ones have alluded.

To explain this enigmatic statement, many scholars have pointed to the differences in tense between the aorist infinitive γενέσθαι, which depicts Abraham's creation, and the present tense of εἰμι, which refers to Jesus.¹¹³ If one allows Isaiah 43:10 to inform this saying, it may imply preexistence, not only with respect to Abraham, but to all of creation by Jesus' adoption of YHWH's self-revelatory formula. This allusion to Isaiah is drawn, in part, from its similar contrast between the present tense, εἰμι, associated with YHWH and the aorist tense, ἐγένετο,

¹¹³ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 196.

describing the other gods. Isaiah reads, “that you may know and believe me and understand that I am (ἐγώμι), before me no god was formed (γενέσθαι).”¹¹⁴ Of course, the other support for locating the background in Isaiah is the fact that the previous “I am” statements in the inclusio also draw from it.

Lincoln presses the point, writing, “Significantly, there Yahweh’s self-predication in terms of ego eimi is also contrasted with the temporal existence of another being, of whom the aorist tense ginomai is employed [...] Jesus’ claim to be the self-revelation of the one true God is now unmistakable.”¹¹⁵ Certainly, the reaction of the crowd to stone him supports the assumption that he is appropriating the self-revelatory formula of the God of Israel.

The Isaiah Targum might also help to shed some light on the background of this Johannine passage. The Targum expands Isa. 43: 10-13 to include references to Abraham, giving one more point of contact between John 8:58 and Isaiah 43:10-13.¹¹⁶

John 13:19

This “I am” statement identifies Judas as Jesus’ betrayer and introduces a prophecy which will be fulfilled in chapter 18: “In order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, ‘The one who eats my bread has raised his heel against me. I am speaking to you now before it occurs, so that, when it occurs, you may believe that I am.’”¹¹⁷ The

¹¹⁴ Isaiah 43:10

¹¹⁵ A. Lincoln, *John*, 276.

¹¹⁶ In some cases, Abraham takes the place of Cyrus and in others he is added into the text independently.

¹¹⁷ John 13:18-19

scripture being referenced is Psalm 41, which reads: “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.”¹¹⁸

While it seems that the main source for this passage is Psalm 41, it is also connected to some other “I am” declarations through the formula, “when it occurs, you may believe that I am he.”¹¹⁹ This formulation points the reader back to John 8:24, 28: “when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he” (8:28). Since, as we have seen, the background for 8:24, 28 is connected to Isaiah 43:10, we may also be able to allow this background to inform John 13:19. Certainly Isaiah 43:10 is in many ways the theme of the entire gospel, even the evangelist at the end of the gospel writes that the purpose of the whole endeavor is to invoke belief.¹²⁰ The prophecy concerning Judas, which will be fulfilled chapter 18, is no doubt meant to reaffirm one’s belief that Jesus truly is one with God. On this point, Lincoln writes, “Thus, the fulfillment of Jesus’ words will be what enable his followers to believe that he is.”¹²¹ As we noted earlier, this is possible because God was known, as a part of his unique divine identity, as the one who can predict the future.¹²²

The relation between Psalm 41 and John 13:19 could also be indirectly related to the lifting up and vindication. In Psalm 41 the psalmist states, “They think [...] that I will not raise again from where I lie [...] But you, O LORD, be gracious to

¹¹⁸ Psalm 41:9

¹¹⁹ John 13:19

¹²⁰ Cf. John 20:31, “but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

¹²¹ A. Lincoln, John, 374.

¹²² For declarations about the future see Isa. 41:21-23 (a good passage on God’s ability to know the past and future), 42:9, 43:9-10 (a good passage which may connect Jesus’ ability to predict the future with this role as divine agent/witness), 44:7-8 (a very monotheistic depiction in a trial scene in which God’s ability to tell the future acts as a testimony to his sole sovereignty), 46:10

me, and rise me up” (8-10). The term “lifting up” is not used in the Psalm (as it is in Second Isaiah), but the evangelist may be alluding to the concept through the “rise up” language.

Such interweaving of the texts is what Ball claims makes it difficult to study the sayings individually or as separate groups of predicate/absolute. They both build upon one another and look back to previous statements for explication.

John 18: 5,6,8

This is, perhaps, one of the most powerful “I am” declarations, and yet it is difficult to find a specific source for it. It seems to be operating on two levels, the first of which is a simple identification that they have found Jesus, the one they are seeking. On the second level, the evangelist is placing the divine name on Jesus’ lips, and to highlight this, the soldiers and police, who have come to arrest him, “stepped back and fell to the ground” (18:6).¹²³

This resembles a theophany in the Hebrew Bible, in which God reveals himself in some way, and the reaction of those present is to fall on their faces.¹²⁴ For instance, in Ezekiel 1:28: “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD, and when I saw it, I fell on my face.” And if this is not enough, the three-fold repetition continues to push the weight of this declaration upon the readers. It might be that in this event we find the full use of the absolute “I am” declaration.

P. B. Harner finds six distinctive characteristics with respect to “אֲנִי־הוּא” in Second Isaiah. The “I am”:

¹²³ A. Lincoln, *John*, 445. He notes the other double entendres related to “I am” occur at John 4:26, 6:20, 8:28

¹²⁴ Cf. Daniel 10:9; Ezekiel 1:28

1. is always attributed to YHWH,
2. upholds monotheism in light of other Gods,
3. supports God's sovereignty over history and his power to redeem Israel,
4. emphasizes YHWH as sole creator of the world,
5. pushes Israel towards a renewed faith,
6. is short for "I am YHWH"

It is not unreasonable that the evangelist intended some or all of these to be packed into this saying. Jesus' arrest in the Garden begins the climatic phase of his "lifting up" which is a time that is already strongly connected to "I am" declarations. Lincoln takes up language reminiscent of Bauckham when he describes their prostration before "the unique divine agent who is one with God."¹²⁵

As we mentioned earlier, this is also the moment at which the prophecy from John 13:19 (about Judas' betrayal) is fulfilled, a connection which is further strengthened by the mutual "I am" declarations.¹²⁶

Declarations with a Predicate: Location and Function

The sayings with a predicate (or as some call them, an image) can function in two ways or by a combination of both. They either may direct the reader to a specific source in the Hebrew Bible which will inform how one understands the John passage, or they may combine a variety of images scattered across the Hebrew Bible and, in doing so, function more as a fulfillment of a type than fulfillment of a prophecy. As Ball and others have pointed out, the predicates inform Jesus' role

¹²⁵ A. Lincoln, John, 445.

¹²⁶ A. Lincoln, John, 444.

among humanity. For those seeking formal rather than thematic parallels, this approach may be unconvincing.

John 6

Jesus, not Moses' manna, is the true bread from heaven. It seems as though much of the background for this John passage comes from Exodus 16-17 and Psalms 24, 78:24. The Exodus parallel is a particularly strong background for John 6—they use a similar word for “gather;” the crowds are both depicted as murmuring; in Exodus there is flesh and bread to eat while in John the bread is Jesus' flesh.¹²⁷ This connection is strongest in Exodus 16:12-15, which even has an “I am” statement in which God says that the murmuring Jews will know that I am.

Isaiah, however, does have some parallels with this John passage. The satisfaction of people's hunger and thirst in Isaiah 55:1-2, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! [...] Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food,” reflects similar themes in John 6:35: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” In both, the offer is for sustenance that will give satisfaction beyond what they are able to gain by their own means or labors. Allusions to Wisdom have also been drawn here, but Wisdom, rather than completely satisfying people, draws them back for more.

¹²⁷ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 212. The use of the word “barley” may also suggest that the Elisha story in 2 Kings 4:42ff provides further background—a connection pointed out to me by Wayne Coppins.

Another background to this passage (specifically John 6:38) may be found in Isaiah 55:10-11 in which they both point to God's purpose in sending his word into the world.

John 6:38: "for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

Isaiah 55: 11: "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

John 6:41: "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

By connecting these passages, the evangelist is tying multiple types and images together. The Word (cf. λόγος in John 1), which goes forth from God in Isaiah 55, is described in the same fashion as Jesus' embodiment of the true Bread. The Word and Bread both come from God in heaven, and they both have a task to fulfill (to give life to the world; cf. Jn. 6:33). Other types, like the Torah and Wisdom, are compared to bread, food, and/or sustenance in Jewish Scripture and may be connected, to some extent, to this "I am" declaration. If this is so, Jesus is not only the true bread, but he is also the fulfillment of the Torah and Wisdom.¹²⁸

Lincoln discusses the nature of this confrontation between Jesus and "the Jews," which is the context for this "I am" declaration, as a "synagogue homily."¹²⁹ This is a midrashic form of commentary which brings the text into conversation with the present circumstances. During such a commentary, the teacher would cite a

¹²⁸ For evidence of sources which connect the Torah, Wisdom and Logos to bread in first century Jewish thinking, see A. Lincoln, *John*, 226; also, see Keener, Craig, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (2003).

¹²⁹ A. Lincoln, *John*, 223-225.

passage from both the Torah and a prophet and proceed to explicate their meaning for the present day. In this synagogue homily, the Torah passage is Exodus 16 and the prophet reading is Isaiah 54:9-55:5. Lincoln argues that John 6:33-48 is a detailed explanation of the “bread from heaven,” into which are woven allusions to the prophet reading. This is directly cited in John 6:45. Lincoln points out that John: 6:35, 37, 40, 44, 45, 47 use language reminiscent of Isaiah 55:2b-3a.¹³⁰ Thus, this pericope is bringing many Hebrew Bible sources into dialogue with one another, as Jesus offers a new interpretation.

John 8:12 (9:5)

This “I am” statement has already been touched on in its connection to the chapter 8 absolute sayings. Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world has obvious parallels to the servant in Second Isaiah. For instance, Isaiah 42:6, 49:6 and 51:4 all speak of God’s light and its role among the nations. Isaiah 49:6, in particular, expresses YHWH’s desire to expand salvation and redemption by means of a light to the “end of the earth.”

This is significant for redefining the role of the messiah, who is no longer exclusively a figure for Jews but for humanity (something which may point the reader back to Jesus’ fulfillment of the bride/groom relationship via the Samaritan woman at the well). In the Isaiah passages, Israel is intended to be the servant who brings the light to the world, but Jesus, by appropriating the concept of the servant to himself, suggests that he fulfills this role of a light to the nations. Ball writes that “the result of Israel’s witness is ‘that you may know and believe and understand that

¹³⁰ A. Lincoln, *John*, 224.

I am he (Isa 43:10),”¹³¹ but since they have failed in this respect, Jesus is sent. Thus, because only Jesus knows the father and only Jesus can make him known, he becomes the witness/light who prompts knowledge, belief and understanding.

Some debate surrounds the source of this light predicate because it has similarities with Mandaean Literature. However, Ball argues that the Jewish concepts of the servant and the light are such that they outweigh the formal parallels to these sources.¹³²

For instance, just before this declaration, the crowd is debating who Jesus is. Some say he is a prophet, others that he is the Messiah, but some asked “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?”¹³³ This is significant in two respects. First, the conversation about Jesus’ identity resembles that of the Samaritan woman’s progression of understanding Jesus’ identity as well as the crowd’s at the feeding of the five thousand. Both of these are followed by an “I am” declaration to complete the progression. The second point of significance is the question concerning the Messiah and Galilee. Isaiah 9:1-2 supplies the background for such a question, and brings a level of irony to the text. Isaiah reads, “but in a latter time he will make glorious [...] Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Not only does this passage answer the question of if a Messiah will come from Galilee, but it further ties Isaiah to the “I am the light of the world” declaration by means of the “great light.”¹³⁴

¹³¹ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 215.

¹³² D.M. Ball, *I am*, 216. Cf. also Schnackenburg, *John II*, 160.

¹³³ John 7:41

¹³⁴ Though this parallel is not a part of Second Isaiah, it still serves to locate the John passage in Isaiah, of which the author did not distinguish between First, Second and Third Isaiah.

Still, there are other layers of fulfillment which are implied by Jesus' claim to be the light of the world. The first is connected by means of the narrative setting, during the feast of Tabernacles. The Mishnah tells us of four lamps which were lit in the women's court; their light is said to have lit all of Jerusalem.¹³⁵ Thus, when Jesus, at the feast of Tabernacles, claims to be the light of the world, and goes so far as to include it in an "I am" declaration, it proves to be a significant instance of fulfillment on the part of Jesus.¹³⁶

Lincoln also argues that this passage serves to highlight Jesus' fulfillment of Wisdom and Torah through their relation to Light in the Hebrew Bible.¹³⁷ Psalm 119:105 reads, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." According to this passage, the Word/Torah is spoken of as a light, which may position it within Jesus' fulfillment of the true light. It is by means of the convergence of such Jewish concepts and themes that Ball is able to argue against the formal parallels of light predicates outside Judaism.

John 10

Jesus' claim to be the gate and the good shepherd seems neither to refer to a specific Hebrew Bible quotation as in John 6, nor to a passage as in John 8.¹³⁸ However, it is full of biblical allusions, especially with respect to the shepherd imagery in Ezekiel 34. There is also a possible connection with the suffering servant of Isaiah by means of the good shepherd who lays down his life. In Isaiah 53, Israel is

¹³⁵ Cf. Mishnah: Sukkah 5:2-4. Dating the material described in the Mishnah is difficult, but even if the four lamps in the Court of the Women does not date to Jesus' time, it does not affect the author's portrayal of Jesus as the fulfillment of the feast via the feast's other parallels to light and water,

¹³⁶ A. Lincoln, *Truth*, 83-84.

¹³⁷ A. Lincoln, *John*, 265. The method of this fulfillment is similar to Wisdom and the Torah's relation to Bread.

¹³⁸ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 232.

compared with sheep that have gone astray, while the servant is deemed righteous (compare with the good shepherd) and suffers to the point of death in order to “make many to be accounted righteous.”¹³⁹ However, the connection between the good shepherd and the suffering servant does not seem strong enough to support direct dependence. The lifting up of the servant in Isaiah may also have conceptual parallel with the good shepherd laying down his life, but there is little evidence to support a strong connection here.

John 14:6

Jesus’ claim to be the way, the truth and the life seems to be combining many Hebrew Bible types but begins with an allusion to the “way” that John the Baptist prepares and to a quote from Isaiah 40:3: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”¹⁴⁰ Ball also points to a possible connection between the disciples in John 14:5, who do not know the way, and Isaiah 42:16. In the former, Thomas asks Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” and in the latter, God says, “I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them.” Thus, if Jesus is the way, Isaiah’s background explains why no one in the gospel understands from where he came or to where he is going—because God said he would take them by a path they did not know.

Isaiah 59:8 also talks about a Way; this is “the way of peace they do not know.” The verse goes on to describe that “there is no justice in their paths [...] we

¹³⁹ Isaiah 53:11

¹⁴⁰ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 233.

wait for light.” Thus, here we find an overlap of types, as the Way is placed alongside the light (cf. light in John 8:12).

Westermann, who locates all the “I am” statements in an early layer, thinks that the predicate, “way,” is a part of an early tradition; however, he attributes “truth” and “life” to a later layer, derived from Gnostic influences. Ball recognizes that “truth” and “life” lack obvious parallels in the Hebrew Bible but argues that they inform what kind of way Jesus represents.¹⁴¹ He does, however, allow the Qumran literature as a possible background or at least as evidence that such language as “truth and life” was used by Jews in the Second Temple period.¹⁴²

John 15: 1, 5

The concept of the vine is everywhere in the Hebrew Bible. Israel is often described as a vineyard and God as an owner/tender of the vineyard. Psalm 80, Isaiah 5:1-7 (song of the vineyard), and Isaiah 27:2-6 all discuss the relationship of God and Israel in terms of a vineyard. By Jesus’ appropriation of this type, Ball argues that it suggests God has fulfilled his promise to make Israel, his vineyard, fruitful via Jesus.¹⁴³

There is some debate concerning the language of vine and vineyard. Jaubert discourages comparisons of vine in the New Testament with those in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴⁴ He thinks that this requires too much linguistic flexibility. However, Ball responds that vine and vineyard are often interchangeable terms.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, it

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 237.

¹⁴² Ibid., 240.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 244.

¹⁴⁴ A. Jaubert, “L’ image de la vigne (Jean 15), 83, in D.M. Ball, *I am*, 244.

¹⁴⁵ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 244.

would be hard not to consider the Hebrew Bible a viable source for this type; Lincoln points out that the fig, olive, and vine are the three main agricultural symbols in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴⁶

Conclusions on the “I am”

Scholars have pointed to a variety of Literary functions served by the “I am” declarations. They focus the reader on Jesus’ words and claims, and they create irony, which is a particularly persuasive tool, as it draws the reader in and makes them actively seek solid ground.¹⁴⁷ Ball finds that these functions provide a “consistent portrait of Jesus.”¹⁴⁸

These sayings are woven into and inseparable from Jewish topics, about Jewish ancestors and Jewish expectation. On these grounds, scholars like Ball, Bauckham, Lincoln, and even Westermann argue that the Hebrew Bible is the source and background for these declarations. In broad terms, the absolute declarations inform Jesus’ identity and are found almost exclusively in Second Isaiah. Those with a predicate inform Jesus’ role among humanity, and while these predicates are spread across the Hebrew Bible, John 8:12 and 14:6 are particularly rooted in Second Isaiah.¹⁴⁹

In more technical terms, Ball argues that these sayings points to an ontological as well as a functional Christology. He writes, “The Johannine church believed in an ontological identification of the historical person, Jesus, and the

¹⁴⁶ A. Lincoln, *John*, 410-402.

¹⁴⁷ D.M. Ball, *I am*, 256. Cf. also P. Duke, *Irony*, 37.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

Jewish God.”¹⁵⁰ Such a view stands in contrast to Dunn, who finds no ontological relationship.¹⁵¹ Distinct from both, Bauckham is unwilling to speak in terms of an “ontic” or “functional” Christology, but opts instead for the concept of an unique divine identity.¹⁵² Though, in effect, his approach leads to a similar end as Ball’s.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 279.

¹⁵¹ J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM Press, 2nd ed., 1989), 58 in Ball, I am, 279.

¹⁵² R. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 40-42.

Conclusion

If nothing else, a study of these issues makes it clear just how important background can be when trying to understand how a text functions at both the narrative and literary level. Yet, it also makes one keenly aware that we will never have complete certainty about the background. This is truly what has allowed biblical studies to continue for so long; when new evidence for background or sources is discovered, it begins the investigation all over again. And with the influence background has on the interpretation of the text, the result is that our understanding of the bible is continually shifting and adapting.

What would John's trial motif mean, what significance would it hold for the early Christians and for our understanding of it today, if the Hebrew Bible was not steeped in covenants, laws, and covenantal lawsuits? The words on the page would remain, but our understanding of the gospel would not be the same. The background provides the sub-story, highlights where emphasis should be taken, and communicates a point that is only possible when the two layers are brought together.

This thesis has, for the most part, addressed the trial motif and "I am" declarations separately. However, these two literary devices are mutually informing and, as such, inseparable. This has been one of the underlying issues behind the debate between scholars who seek formal parallels and those who allow the context of each passage to direct the search for meaning and background. For, if one fails to

see the connections between the trial motif and the “I am” declarations, it is easy to fall into the trap of seeking formal parallels. Yet, when the Gospel of John is addressed through a literary critical lens, as Ball’s work attempts to do, the significance of such parallels is drawn out.

For the evangelist, the trial motif and “I am” declarations are an essential part of communicating this gospel’s message. The message is one of assurance and hope to the community to which he is writing. They are dealing with similar issues that Second Isaiah’s audience had to deal with: how is our Lord sovereign when it seems like he has been defeated; how do we deal with the shame of this defeat? He answers these questions by directing them to a higher, cosmic, perspective—a perspective in which the humiliation and defeat is actually the glorification for which Jesus was sent.

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