

Explore the meanings of the i am sayings religion essay



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Introduction

For the children of Israel the term ‘ I am’ was very significant, for it was with this name that God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush encounter when He had commanded him to deliver the people of Israel, (Exodus 3: 6, 14). In this case God would be seen as a mighty deliverer or the one who brought salvation to His people from their bondage. In Johannine context, whether it is in the predicate or absolute form the ‘ I am’ sayings essentially were written to reveal God through Christ so that Israel and by extension the world could receive salvation.

The purpose of this discourse is to explore the meanings of the ‘ I am’ sayings and their implication for salvation. To accomplish this, the work of various authors along with relevant scriptural passages will be examined and a balanced conclusion will be reached. To accomplish the above objective the writer will explore the two forms of the ‘ I am’ sayings, i. e. the predictive and absolute forms and explain their significance to salvation.

The Significance of the ‘ I am’ Sayings

The ‘ I am’ sayings are associated with the Greek word, egoeimi, which means, ‘ it is I’, and this suggest that it is a way of identifying oneself.[1]The ‘ I am’ saying’ are two fold in nature, one is with the pronoun ego used for emphasis. This is essentially the ‘ I am’ sayings with predicates or those followed by a noun. Bauckham cited in Longenecker, argued the predicates were used by John to describe Jesus as the one through which people could receive salvation. The other set of ‘ I am’ sayings were characterized as the

absolute which the author stated were used by John to reveal Jesus' divinity or deity.[2]

The predicated ' I am' sayings include examples such as: I am the Bread of Life, I am the Light of the World, etc. These sayings represent descriptions of Jesus as the source of the eternal and the unity of the Godhead, for example, as in John 6: 33.[3]Bauckham cited in Longenecker also pointed that the seven predicated ' I am' sayings, were significant in Jewish culture. He concluded that seven represented completeness in Jewish culture, thus the seven ' I am' sayings above represented completeness in Christ.[4]This point of view although debateable, speaks to the inadequacy of Judaism.

Kysar examined the sayings from a cultural-historical context and argued that the, ' I am' sayings was an essential part of Hellenistic religious thought, thus John may have intentionally written them in that way as a method of affirming Jesus' identity in contrast to the claims of Hellenistic gods.[5]This probably means that John got the attention of the Hellenist because he wrote about something that they were familiar with but from a different perspective, which was to introduce Christ. The author concedes to this view when he argued that the ' I am' sayings introduced Jesus as the divine revelation of God, for example, the use of predicates like the Good Shepherd, promoted Jesus in both the Hellenist and Jewish traditions. For followers of the Jewish tradition it meant that just as Yahweh is one True God, so is Jesus the one True Revealer, ' none other is comparable.'[6]Mc Grath showed correlations of John's ' I am' sayings in Old Testament traditions. For example, he claims that they allude to fundamental themes in the Old Testament, and apply them to Jesus. Thus when God revealed Himself as ' I
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am' to Moses and Jesus uses the term, ' I am' He is implying that He is God or He was declaring His divinity.[7]

It would seem that there was a correlation between the ' I am' sayings and some of Jesus' miracles. The resurrection of Lazarus is an example, perhaps this miracle was used to allow the audience to see that He is truly Lord. This may be seen in the number of days for which Lazarus was had been dead.

A similar view is proposed by Kaysar who conceded that the ' I am' sayings were concurrent with the signs or miracles performed by Jesus for example, the feeding of the five thousand and Lazarus' resurrection were both used to declare different aspects of the person of Christ.[8]

From the above it is seen that the ' I am' sayings, were essential in revealing Jesus in a descriptive way so that the audience could connect to His divinity. The degree to which this aim was achieved is sometimes questionable because a large section of the Jews appeared oblivious to Jesus' declaration which culminated in hostility and eventually His crucifixion. At this juncture the predicted ' I am' sayings will be discussed.

The predicated ' I am' Sayings

1) I am the Bread of Life- John 6: 35

This saying refers to Jesus as the source of eternal life. It also implies that the human race is in a perpetual state of hunger, searching for food to satisfy the soul, this hunger refers to the emptiness that a person feels without Jesus in their lives.

The above view is supported by Quast, who suggested that Jesus used this saying to make a comparison between Himself and Moses in terms of the temporal nature of the Manna which Moses offered. According to him Moses' manner was used to satisfy the physical hunger, whilst Jesus as the Bread of Life satisfies spiritual hunger. Additionally Quast noted that Jesus used this saying to prove that He transcended Moses, perhaps hinting to His deity. The author also makes reference to other Old Testament links to this sayings, by proposing that it is related to the Wisdom tradition of Solomon, as seen in (Proverbs 9: 5) and Isaiah, (Isaiah 55: 1) where God is described as 'Bread.' [9] This wisdom then can be seen as a way of giving life because much prominence is given to it in the Proverbs, for example, Proverbs 1: 7, Proverbs 2: 12 and many more. Quast added a different perspective to this view when he concluded that this is more evidence of Jesus deity which shows that He pre-dated the prophets of old. [10] Perhaps this is indication that Jesus was ready to usher a new paradigm which the Jews were not ready for, which is, belief in Him would result in their salvation and satisfaction so that there would be no need to keep looking for salvation in the works of the Law.

Some authors have theorized that Jesus used this saying to invite the Jews into an intimate relationship with Him. This is seen when He challenges them to eat the Bread of Life and drink His blood, (John 6: 53). [11] This intimacy would result when the Jews came into a relationship with Jesus, but they clearly missed the point as indicated in the negative reaction of some of the Jews, (John 6: 66). This confirms that they had an ulterior motive for following Jesus who was seeking to address their error in thinking. This also

shows that there was a lack of sync between Jesus' proclamations and the understanding of what He meant, clearly, He was having a difficult time reaching them.

This passage has been reinterpreted as communion for the Christian; however, this view has come under attack from Casey who contended that it was meant to focus on Christ and belief in Him.[12]Casey's criticism is weak because in communion the focus is on Christ, (1 Corinthians: 11).

The main message of this saying is that anyone, who receives Jesus, will have eternal life. Thus there will be no need to search for alternative means of satisfying this spiritual hunger.

2) I am the Light of the World – John 8: 12

This saying suggests that Jesus is the only true Light, as indicated by use of 'the'. The use of the word 'a' light would have conveyed, something different, meaning one of many lights with no special significance. Thus it is this one True Light who is able to give salvation, the rest of the explanations below provides support for this viewpoint.

When Jesus refers to Himself at 'the Light,' He is indicating that He is the source who can bring illumination in the lives of people. This illumination means that He can bring profound spiritual understanding in the lives of men and women which can lead to salvation.[13]This is seen in the healing of the blind man in whom both physical healing and spiritual insight about Jesus' deity was received. Furthermore it underscores that Jesus is seeking to cure the inner blindness of man which can lead to eternal death. Winstanley

confirms this view by concluding that, Jesus is able to give deliverance from '<https://assignbuster.com/explore-the-meanings-of-the-i-am-sayings-religion-essay/>

inner blindness, darkness and ignorance to the insight and vision of faith.’[14]The idea of Jesus giving spiritual insight is testament of His deity.

Ridderbos took a more critical view of this saying by signifying that it shows a contrast between day and night. Day in this context means opportunities for Jesus to work; presumably to bring the Jews toward Him as the Light, where as darkness refers to the limitations of time which constrained how much could be achieved.[15]This view is confirmed in John 12: 35. Clarke also presented a pessimistic view by suggesting that Jesus’ intentions were to use His authority to bring condemnation and to expose all their iniquities and sins.[16]Clarke’s idea shows a clear deficiency in understanding of Jesus’ motive. Jesus boldly stated that He does not pass judgment in John 8: 15.

Some of the Jews rejected Jesus’ attempt to bring illumination into their lives. Winstanley contended that despite the Light of the Gospel presented to people they may still fail to learn and understand.[17]This is probably because people may prefer to remain in bondage than to receive deliverance.

3) I am the Gate for the Sheep – John 10: 7

I am the gate for the sheep; this phrase parallels the mass exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus12: 13). This deliverance was accompanied by the sprinkling of the blood of a spotless lamb on the door post of every Israelite (Exodus12: 13). Keller postulated that everyone who went through this sprinkled door was guaranteed protection from God’s judgement. He further claims that a person went out through that door to liberty, freedom and a new dimension of life under God’s direction.[18]Keller’s claim is

synonymous with Jesus' salvation, for example, the door way in Israel's case is similar to Jesus as the way or gate to salvation. Similarly, the blood on the doorpost parallels the blood of Jesus which was shed. Consequently, when an individual comes through Jesus salvation is received, (John 10: 19).

Weaver concurred with the above analysis by stating that this saying implies that Jesus is the only way to salvation, He is the gateway to the Father.

[19] This is probably because many others proclaimed another way, they are referred to as thieves, strangers because they cannot give salvation. Jesus thus had the task of correcting the falsehood associated with Jewish religious tradition but they fail to perceive His intentions. Weaver suggested that Jesus' explanation may have been ambiguous because of the use of Greek terminology, ' paroimia' which means proverb. He claims that this may have been deliberate on Jesus' part because this saying was intended for His disciples.[20]

4) I am the Good Shepherd – John 10: 11

Here Jesus is seen as the ultimate guide to the Father, the extraordinary love for the sheep or humanity led Him to become a lamb so that this guidance to the Father may be possible.

Harris confirms the above by suggesting that ' for a literal shepherd with a literal flock, the shepherd's death would have spelled disaster for the sheep; in this instance it spells life for them.' [21] Tiat argued from a similar persuasion by noting that Jesus became ' a lamb to save the sheep.' [22]

O'Grady proposed that Johns' use of the word shepherd was to convey ' the reciprocal relationship between Jesus and the individual sheep.' According to <https://assignbuster.com/explore-the-meanings-of-the-i-am-sayings-religion-essay/>

him this signifies intimacy in the Christian Jesus context and in the unity which is characteristic of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. This union is what leads to eternal life.[23]A similar idea is proposed by Brown who suggested that this intimacy qualifies the shepherd to ' perform duties on behalf of the sheep.[24]MacLaren added that these duties included; ' guidance, guardianship, companionship, sustenance....' He continued by stating that in response to these duties the sheep simply obeys and trusts the shepherd.[25]This idea suggests that Jesus is able to meet all the needs of the person who will trust in Him, Tait stated that this is because the ' Shepherd has intimate knowledge of the sheep,'[26]this intimate knowledge is only possible with someone who is Omniscient, thus proving that divinity of Christ, as seen in the many instances where He was able to perceive what people thought, Luke 11: 17.

Jesus identified Himself as a true shepherd which denotes exclusivity, i. e. He is the only shepherd who can give eternal life, and all the others are false. Sanders cited in Barrett supported the above by noting that the Sheep referred to Israel who was bombarded with many false messiahs.[27]Thus it is seen that Jesus used this saying to set Him apart from the false messiahs so that Israel may believe on Him.

This salvation is not only exclusive to Israel but is extended to the entire world. This is seen in John 10: 16, the idea conveyed by use of the term, ' other sheep,' is that salvation is extended to the Gentile world.[28]

5) I am the Resurrection and the Life – John 11: 25

This saying was in conjunction with Lazarus' resurrection. This showed that Jesus has authority over death and able to give life beyond the natural, which is basically eternal life.

Guardini's work confirms the above when he stated that, ' mortality has no foothold on Jesus.' [29] He extended his view by proposing that the person who is in Christ has a life which will transcend death. The authors view clearly confirms that the eternal life and resurrection of the Christian is only possible in Jesus. Clarke developed this argument by examining the concept of life, which he contended is the life of the soul which surpasses the thought of death and only attained in Jesus. [30] In response to this claim Micklem concluded that ' our redemption is completed beyond the grave, but it must begin in our hearts now.' [31] Micklem's view suggests that external life and the resurrection on the last day is only possible when a person has received Christ in this lifetime.

This resurrection also infers the glorified body that the Christian will have when resurrected. Martini supports the above by noting that Christians ' will one day possess the physical and spiritual embodiment of a resurrected life just like Christ.' [32] This is the culmination of eternal life for the Christian, escape from eternal damnation which is described in Matthew 25.

6) I am the Way the Truth and the Life – John 14: 6

In this saying Jesus points to Himself as the only path to salvation.

Martini suggested that term 'I' implies 'exclusiveness,' meaning that Jesus is the 'only means to salvation, the only truth and the only life.[33]He went on to describe 'Way' as the direction and process of salvation which involves acknowledgment of the 'Way' and then repentance. Micklem agreed, by hinting to Jesus' mediatory capacity in which He leads those who receive Him to the Father.[34]

In addition Martini concluded that Jesus illustrated truth by making predictions which came to pass in other words, 'He substantiated everything He said about Himself.'[35]Micklem added the saying means deliverance from 'falsehood', 'error', 'judgement' and 'blindness from the truth'. He continued by stating that Jesus exposes the truth of the soul in relation to the Truth of God.[36]This implies that He exposes the hopelessness of the soul without Him and His ability to give eternal life. This exposure of the 'Truth' of soul sometimes produces hostility as in the case of the Pharisees, thus there must be a corresponding acceptance of 'Truth' for salvation to occur.

7) I am the True Vine – John 15: 1

This imagery shows that Jesus as the Vine gives life to the branches, thus the Christian can only be sustained in Him.[37]Meyer makes a similar observation by noting that the use of the word 'True' is used to make a distinction between the 'eternal and the temporal.'[38]This is perhaps to contrast the temporal nature of Judaism or religion with the enduring nature of Jesus' salvation.

The branches or the Christians are also sustained by producing fruit. Talbert speculated that this refers to evangelism and ' manifesting all the fruits of the Christian life.' [39] O'Grady and Hylen reached a similar conclusion by noting that fruits refer to love which is a sign of Christianity. This love is able to sustain the Christian. He also noted that the Christian is able to bear fruit only if they remain faithful to God's word. [40] This suggests that the bearing of Fruit has eternal implication which is if a Christian does not live a holy life the result is eternal damnation.

The Christian is pruned to promote fruitfulness. [41] This pruning is necessary for salvation, John 15: 2, 5-6. Thus, the only guarantee of salvation is to remain in Christ daily, not merely receiving Him and living carelessly. This is perhaps because God expects the Christian to make disciples as is commissioned in Matthew 28: 19-20.

1) The Absolute Sayings

The absolute sayings essentially relate to Jesus' divinity. However some have ordinary meanings, for example, John 6: 20, ' I am' should be understood as Jesus identifying Himself to the disciples to calm their fears. This is in contrast to the reactions of the soldiers at Gethsemane who fell to the ground when Jesus used the term. ' I am'. [42] The reaction of the soldiers clearly proves the deity of Jesus. The ' I am' sayings in the absolute sense prove the deity of Christ as is seen in John 8: 39, where Jesus established that He predate Abraham, [43] a statement which prompted the Jews to accuse Him of blasphemy. This reaction probably shows that they were clearly not prepared for the change which Jesus was ushering.

Some authors have attacked the validity of the 'I am' sayings by hinting to its absence in the other synoptic Gospels.[44] Casey noted that in some instances Jesus appeared to be ambiguous which probably led to a misinterpretation on the part of the Jews. From this view this misinterpretation informed their unbelief. Barrett also noted that some of the sayings lack clarification such as 'I am the Good Shepherd,' which is difficult to understand. According to him this is because John combines several themes which do not express a clear thought.[45]

Brown criticized this view by stating that the 'I am Sayings,' are 'full of truth and of grace too. They are transparently clear and unfathomably deep.'[46] Brown's view holds relevance because the criticisms above do not apply to all the sayings which in many cases correlated with miracles to inspire the Jews to believe, so that if the sayings were ambiguous then the miracles would provide clarity; thus, it is the Jew who chose to disbelieve.

Conclusion

The main theme of the 'I am' sayings is salvation through Christ. These sayings promote various aspects of Jesus' character and deity and simultaneously show how people could resist the gospel because of religious traditions or ideology. In other words the pride produced by self righteousness can be a major hindrance to a person's salvation. This is because in such instances the individual defines themselves righteous; consequently, the gospel may be seen as an offense to them. Thus the method used to present the Gospel should be one where Christ is the central message and not an attack on religious ideology.