

'I AM' IN CONTEXT¹

David M. Ball

I. Introduction

This thesis studies all the occurrences of ἐγώ εἰμὶ ('I am') on the lips of the Johannine Jesus. It is over half a century since the thorough investigation of the Johannine 'I am' sayings by E. Schweizer (1939). Although many articles on them have appeared since then, scholarship on the Fourth Gospel has changed in so many ways that a full study of these sayings is long overdue.

The introduction to this thesis surveys the diverse parallels which have been suggested for the 'I am' sayings in John. Rather than attempting a chronological survey of the studies of 'I am', this survey is categorised according to the cultural backgrounds which scholars suggest for the sayings. Although previous studies of this phrase have discovered many formal parallels, it is contended that insufficient attention has been devoted to the function of the words in John. Thus there is a danger of imposing on the Gospel ideas that are foreign to it. The 'I am' sayings should first be studied in the Gospel context to determine their function there. It is then possible to delimit any background material in terms of its relation to John's use of the phrase. It is argued that the text function of 'I am' in the text itself will point to the correct background by which the phrase should be understood.

II. The Function of 'I am' in John

By means of a series of literary studies, this investigation seeks to understand the function that ἐγώ εἰμὶ plays in the Gospel as a whole. Various criteria from the field of narrative criticism are employed to determine the literary function of each occurrence of ἐγώ εἰμὶ within the Gospel. It is believed that narrative criticism can be helpful in determining the function

¹David M. Ball *'I am' in Context: The Literary function, background and theological implications of ἐγώ εἰμὶ in John's Gospel* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Sheffield University 1992), supervisor: Dr A. Lincoln.

that ἐγώ εἰμὶ plays in the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus. Such an approach allows the 'I am' sayings to be studied in the context of the whole Gospel as well as in the context of individual pericopes. These literary studies reveal the contribution the words ἐγώ εἰμὶ make to the portrayal of Jesus as the dominant character of the Gospel and their role in Johannine irony. The studies suggest a greater interaction between different forms of saying than has generally been acknowledged so that a shared conceptual background may be assumed. The literary function of the 'I am' sayings also seems to imply that the Evangelist's world view was thoroughly Jewish.

While the literary studies allow for an interaction between different forms of saying, they confirm the formal distinction between those sayings with an image and those without. The latter primarily concern the identity of the Johannine Jesus. The former primarily concern the role of Jesus among humanity. While it is acknowledged that there is an important interaction between Jesus' role and his identity, so that the identity of Jesus cannot be seen apart from his role, the study of background material for the two types of 'I am' sayings is carried out in terms of Jesus' identity (as revealed through the predicateless sayings) and his role (as revealed through the sayings with an image).

III. The Use of Background Material

It is contended that, by their formulation, the 'I am' sayings without an image appeal to the *ani hu* of Second Isaiah so that Jesus is identified with the words, acts and nature of God. John's phrasing is such that it points to parallels in Isaiah by which Jesus' words are rightly understood, this is not an application of the divine name to Jesus (*contra* Dodd, Brown etc.) but is an allusion to specific Old Testament passages which speak of the exclusive right of Yahweh to save his people. As such these 'I am' sayings operate on two levels at the same time and thus add to Johannine irony. On one level the sayings may simply be used for self-identification (6:20; 18:5). However, the reaction of Jesus' narrative audience combined with an understanding of the Old Testament sayings may at one and the same time point to an identification of Jesus with the salvation of Yahweh.

It is suggested that the 'I am' sayings with an image also allude to the Old Testament or to Jewish expectation, so that Jesus is typologically identified with various Old Testament and Jewish images. Starting from Borgen's suggestion (1965) that the function of ἐγώ εἰμι within John 6 is to take something from the Old Testament and apply it to someone in the first person singular, it is suggested that ἐγώ εἰμι is also used to apply an Old Testament concept to Jesus in John 8:12; 10:11, 14; 14:6; and 15:1, 5. The saying in John 10:7 and 9 is seen to be a development of the Old Testament shepherd imagery while the saying of 11:25 is a current Jewish expectation which Jesus takes upon himself by means of ἐγώ εἰμι. It is suggested that in all these sayings Jesus fulfils aspects of the Old Testament and Judaism. Jesus is thus portrayed as the fulfilment of Jewish expectations which stem from the Old Testament. For John, the irony is that those who claim to see, who claim to be the shepherds of Israel are blind (9:40) and are actually the thieves and robbers of whom Jesus speaks (10:1).

IV. Concluding Implications

In conclusion, this thesis draws out some implications of its findings for other areas of Johannine study. It is suggested that it may have implications for the study of Johannine audience. The Jesus who is proclaimed by the 'I am' sayings is one who fulfils and embodies Judaism and so is to be understood from a Jewish rather than a Gnostic or Hellenistic point of view. There are, however, certain hints within the 'I am' sayings (their allusions to the LXX rather than the Hebrew, their use of irony and possibly the form of the sayings with a predicate nominative) that the audience may not be Palestinian or that it is at least conversant with the techniques of Greek literature. It is noted that the polemical nature of certain 'I am' sayings may also be significant for the study of John's audience. However, it is stressed that this polemical aspect is not the main emphasis of the Evangelist but is the necessary by-product of his proclamation of Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish Scriptures. The sub-clauses of the 'I am' sayings may also have a bearing on the question of Johannine audience since they often form a promise to believers (10:11, 14; 15:5, 6). That some of the promises in the sub-clauses are made to believers may suggest that the words of the Johannine Jesus are addressed to those

who need encouragement in their faith. However, there is another perspective within the Johannine sayings, which deserves due attention. These are the sayings which act as an invitation to those who have not yet joined the narrator's perspective. The offer of life is made not only to believers but also to unbelievers. Thus as the Bread of Life Jesus offers life to those who come to him (6:35; cf. 8:12; 10:9). Any investigation into John's audience should give due weight to this apparently missionary appeal to the reader of the Gospel.

Finally, this thesis addresses the question of how the 'I am' sayings fit into John's Christology. It is argued that the words *ἐγώ εἰμι* are strongly linked with John's view of Sonship. It is suggested in the light of John 8:58 and 10:30 that Jesus' unity with the Father involves an ontological and not merely a functional unity. This is further strengthened by the 'I am' sayings alluding to the *ani hu* of Isaiah. The idea of an ontological identification with God is also seen in the connection between the 'I am' sayings and the concept of the Logos.

The use of *ἐγώ εἰμι* on the lips of Jesus therefore concurs with the soteriological purpose of the Gospel. Through the 'I am' sayings of Jesus, the author wants the reader to find life by believing that such life is in Jesus (1:4), is from Jesus (10:10) and is Jesus (11:25; 14:6). The author also stresses that this life is *only* in Jesus and thus it is *only* in Jesus that the readers can come to the Father (14:6) and to salvation (10:9).