

THE DIVINE NAME IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

By Robert A. Snyder

At the burning bush on Sinai, God revealed his name to Moses in three forms: “I AM WHO I AM” (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה), “I AM” (אֶהְיֶה), and “Yahweh” (יהוה)—the latter appears in an English Bible today as “the LORD” in capital letters, according to the post-exilic Jewish custom of substituting the title “Adonai” (אֲדֹנָי) for the sacred name (Exod 3:14–15). God then told Moses, “This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations” (3:15 NASB). Accordingly, the Old Testament has over six thousand occurrences of the divine name, “Yahweh”, significantly more than any other title, including “God.”¹ In contrast, the New Testament appears to mention the divine name only in its shortened form at the end of “hallelujah” (Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6). On the surface, this omission would suggest some discontinuity between the religion of Moses and the religion of Christ. If the divine name is God’s “memorial-name to all generations,” then why did the Christian community fail to remember it?

The New Testament provides at least two explanations for this omission. First, Christians continued the practice of substituting the title “LORD” for the name “Yahweh”, but then applied this title directly to Jesus Christ as a common label for his divinity.² Second, Jesus himself asserted his divinity through the phrase “I am”, especially in the Gospel of John. In these two ways at least, the divine name has been remembered in Christianity. This present essay examines the second way in detail.

¹ G. H. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1975), 4–5, 9–10.

² E.g. Joel 2:32 (Rom 10:13; cf. Acts 2:21, 26, 37–40); Isa 40:13 (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Rom 11:34); Isa 8:13 (1 Pt 3:15); cf. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, 104.

The Gospel of John deliberately applies the divine name “I am” to Jesus Christ. Three lines of argument support this assertion. First, in the Prologue (John 1:1–18), the phrase “full of grace and truth” refers to the divine name and thus creates the expectation that the name will appear in the rest of the book. Second, the absolute “I am” statements, which lack an explicit predicate, often speak of the safety provided by the divine name, which is an explicit theme from the Old Testament (e.g. Prov 18:10). Third, the predicate “I am” statements appear with the absolute “I am” statements according to the same pattern as the development of the divine name in the book of Exodus. From these three lines of argument, it is reasonable to conclude that the Gospel of John remembers the divine name and provides continuity for Christianity with the Jewish religion of the Old Testament.

1. The Divine Name in the Prologue (John 1:14–18)

By all appearances, John’s Prologue echoes the wilderness theophany of Exodus 34 (cf. 33:18–23; 34:6–7). The “verbal echoes” and related concepts include the words “tented” and “glory” (John 1:14), the phrase “full of grace and truth” (1:14; cf. 1:16), the giving of the law (1:17), and the concept of not seeing God (1:18).³ In addition, the Greek translation of the divine name (ὁ ὢν) begins a significant clause in John 1:18 about the Son being “in the bosom of the Father”—not as a child on a lap, but as a friend leaning against a friend during a shared meal (cf. 13:23).⁴ Such ties have led most commentators to affirm the wilderness connection. Indeed, regarding

³ Ardel B. Caneday, “Glory Veiled in the Tabernacle of Flesh: Exodus 33–34 in the Gospel of John,” *SBJT* 20 (2016): 56, 68; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 57; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 45.

⁴ The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), translates the divine name in Exod 3:14 as Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (“I AM WHO I AM”) and ὁ ὢν (“I AM”). Regarding the idiom, see Ridderbos, *John*, 58.

Exodus 34, Anthony T. Hanson concluded, “It would be impossible to find a scripture passage which contains more fundamental elements in common with John 1:14–18. I find it inevitable to conclude that the one is the basis of the other.”⁵

Regarding John 1:14 in particular, J. Ramsey Michaels claims that the text “evokes the Exodus,” but lacks any “*direct* reference” to it.⁶ While acknowledging similarities in imagery (“encamped”) and terms (“glory”), he notes that other occurrences of the verb “encamped” (σκηνώω) in the New Testament emphasize location, not temporary residence (Rev 7:15; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3).⁷ Moreover, the phrase “grace and truth” actually refers to the “Spirit of truth,” who is God’s gift (“grace”) to the Son—a phrase akin to “grace and power” in Acts.⁸ Regarding the Exodus, Michaels claims, “When the author wants us to think of Moses or the desert wanderings explicitly, he will mention Moses by name (v. 17).”⁹

Based on Michaels’s own principle, John 1:14 must also refer to Moses, because verse 17 cannot be extricated from its context.¹⁰ Regarding the verb “encamped,” the comments from Revelation are valid but irrelevant. The temporary nature of the Word’s residence “among us” is

⁵ Hanson divides scholars into three groups: “(a) those who do see a reference to Exod. xxxiv in this passage—by far the largest number of those scholars whom I have consulted; (b) those who are doubtful about a reference to Exod. xxxiv, but who allow that χάρις και ἀλήθεια in i. 14 and 17 does reproduce the familiar phrase ΠΝΗΞΙ ΤΩΝ; (c) those who deny any connection at all, a very small group indeed” (as quoted by Ridderbos, *John*, 57, n. 135).

⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 79.

⁷ Michaels, *John*, 78-79.

⁸ Michaels, *John*, 81-82.

⁹ Michaels, *John*, 79-80.

¹⁰ Two links tie v. 17 to previous verses: first, the chain of “because” statements in vv. 16 and 17 supports v. 14 (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 134), and second, the articles on “grace” and “truth” refer to their immediate antecedents in v. 14 (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, AB 29 [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 16). Daniel B. Wallace, however, claims that the article is due to the abstract nouns (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 250, 227).

plain from the Gospel itself, which ends with Jesus’s departure.¹¹ Moreover, in rabbinic thought, the verb σκηνώω related to the *shekinah* glory, which first appeared as the pillar of fire and then “filled” the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35). Perhaps the verb implied that “Jesus is now the *shekinah* of God.”¹² Regarding the phrase “grace and truth,” it likely echoes the familiar Old Testament phrase “lovingkindness and truth” (Exod 34:6), even though John uses “grace” (χάρις) instead of “mercy” (ἔλεος), the normal translation for the Hebrew word “lovingkindness” (טוֹן)—a word with no direct equivalent in Greek. Many have noted that John’s translation of the Old Testament often departs from the LXX.¹³ John may be offering his own translation, an inspired interpretation of the Hebrew phrase. Therefore, the phrase “full of grace and truth” likely corresponds to the divine name “abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exod 34:6)—another echo of the wilderness theophany.¹⁴

If this conclusion is correct—that Exodus 34 is the background to John 1:14–18, and that “full of grace and truth” refers to the explanation of the divine name in Exodus 34:6—then John’s elaboration of that fullness in his Prologue may prove critical to an understanding of the divine name in his Gospel: “For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For

¹¹ Cf. Ridderbos, *John*, 51; Köstenberger, *John*, 42. Contrasts between tabernacle and temple (mobility versus stability) must not be pressed too far. Both refer to the incarnation (John 1:14; 2:19–21), and even in Israel’s history, the “temporary” tabernacle resided in the land for centuries and the “permanent” temple experienced more than one destruction.

¹² Brown, *John*, 33.

¹³ See Brown, *John*, 14 who cites J. A. Montgomery; Ridderbos, *John*, 54, who cites Anthony T. Hanson.

¹⁴ Caneday claims that despite the LXX having πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός (lit. “much-mercy and genuine”) for “abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (תַּמְנִי טוֹן־בֵּר) in Exod 34:6, many have “reasonably” argued that “full of grace and truth” actually “reflects John’s own translation of the Hebrew text (“Glory Veiled,” 59); cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 44–45. For support, Caneday cites Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), ix; Alexander Tsutserov, *Glory, Grace, and Truth: Ratification of the Sinaitic Covenant according to the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 39–161.

the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16–17). Two concepts are stressed: first, a universal reception of grace from the fullness (“we...all”); and second, the historical transition from Moses to Christ. The second supports the first. Every Christian perpetually receives grace from an infinite supply, because true grace has now come in Christ. This truth needs exegetical examination.

First, receiving from the “fullness” is explained by the phrase “grace upon grace” (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος). This phrase may either refer to replacement (“grace in place of grace”), accumulation (“grace upon grace”), or correspondence (“grace for grace”).¹⁵ Lexically, the preposition ἀντί best fits the first option, a meaning common to the Greek fathers, who often interpreted the phrase as the “grace” of Christ replacing the “grace” of Moses.¹⁶ This interpretation seems odd in light of the next verse, which links the “Law” to Moses and “grace” to Christ. Specifically, although the law is said to be “given” and thus could be considered a “grace,” the text explicitly says that “the grace” of verse 16 “came into being” (ἐγένετο) through Christ—just as through him “all things” came to be (John 1:3; cf. 1:5, 14).¹⁷ The emphasis is on historical realization. Therefore, just as the fullness was beheld after the incarnation of Christ (1:14) and is said to be “His” (1:16), the grace-replacing-grace experience of the fullness is also connected to Christ, not Moses. This fullness in Christ is truly experienced individually as grace-replacing-grace. The “living water” given in Christ becomes a continuous “well of water

¹⁵ Brown, *John*, 16.

¹⁶ Carson agrees: “We have seen his glory, John writes, *because* from the fulness of his grace and truth we have received grace that replaces the earlier grace—the grace of the incarnation, of the Word-made-flesh, of the glory of the Son ‘tabernacling’ with us, now replacing the grace of the antecedent but equally promissory revelation” (*John*, 134).

¹⁷ Michaels, *John*, 91.

springing up to eternal life” (4:14), just as believers feed again and again on Christ, the “bread of life” (6:48–51, 52–58).¹⁸

Second, the transition from Moses to Christ is not necessarily a contrast. Many commentators note that the clauses in John 1:17 are in juxtaposition, not formal contrast.¹⁹ If there is a contrast, it is between the concepts themselves— “the Law” versus “the grace and the truth,” and “given” versus “realized.” In a masterful Johannine way of expressing profound meaning through simple forms, these clauses represent both continuity and discontinuity. For example, historical realities are said to come both “through Moses” and “through Jesus Christ,” but in different ways—Moses is the agent for a divine passive (ἐδόθη), but Jesus is the agent for new existence (ἐγένετο). Moreover, while both “the Law” and “the grace” are gifts, the latter is added to the former and surpasses it—not as replacement, but as fulfillment, just as marriage fulfills an engagement. The purifying jars of the law were not emptied and then replaced with wine; rather, they were filled and then transformed into wine, with an excellence and an abundance that speaks of true grace (John 2:1–11). Similarly, both the temple and its sacrifices find their fulfillment in the Word incarnate as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29; 2:19–21).²⁰

Third, easily overlooked in the discussion of John 1:16–17 is the importance of John 1:15. Although verse 16 likely grounds verse 14, as seen in the verbal reiteration of “full” with “fullness”, the parenthetical insertion of verse 15 provides necessary information for

¹⁸ The present tense of “he who feeds” (6:54, 56, 57, 58) carries the aspectual nature of the indicative and speaks of “the *person who...does*” (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 614, 620).

¹⁹ Carson, *John*, 134; Köstenberger, *John*, 47–48; cf. Ridderbos, *John*, 57.

²⁰ Instead of a discontinuity in both location (outside the camp or “among us”) and visibility (seeing the glory or not), Köstenberger argues for continuity, but in different degree: “Rather than offend the Gospel’s Jewish audience, this verse is designed to draw it in: ‘If you want an even more gracious demonstration of God’s covenant love and faithfulness,...it is found in Jesus Christ’” (*John*, 47). Similarly, Ridderbos maintains that the real contrast is between the partial dispensation in Moses versus the “fullness” in Christ (*John*, 57).

understanding the two verses that follow.²¹ In verse 15, two ideas are intimately connected: contrary to appearances, the Word incarnate is *before* John the Baptist in *rank*, because the Word himself was *before* John in *time*. Regarding rank, the Word must be greater than John, because John owes his existence to the Word (cf. 1:3, 6). Regarding time, in order to create John, the Word must predate John—and he does. By parity, the Word incarnate must also be greater than Abraham (8:53), Jacob (4:12), and Moses (1:17), and predate them all. As Jesus himself will testify later, “Truly, truly, before Abraham was born (ἐγένετο), I am” (8:58).

Therefore, in light of this chronology and fulfillment in continuity (1:15, 17), could it be that “all” in verse 16 includes even Moses himself? While the “fullness” came only through the incarnation of the Word, perhaps Moses had a foretaste of the divine name before the incarnation. For example, when Moses prayed, “If I have found favor (LXX, χάρις) in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor (LXX, χάρις in Your sight)” (Exod 33:13). What is this except favor leading to favor, that is, “grace upon grace” (John 1:16)? Similarly, while the law condemned the Israelites and threatened their annihilation, if Yahweh—the “consuming fire” (Isa 33:14)—were to dwell in their midst (Exod 33:5), the “grace and truth” of the name of God provided the possibility of his presence with safety (Exod 32–34).²² It was not the law that brought “lovingkindness” (τὸν) to Israel in the wilderness, but the *name* of Yahweh, the name that predates the giving of the law. This name was *spoken* to Moses (Exod 34:6–7), but now in Christ it is *seen* (John 1:14, 18; cf. Job 42:5)—ironically, both

²¹ For a similar “interruptive” concept in Hebrew narrative, regarding the waw-disjunctive, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 651.

²² According to Tremper Longman III, the story arc of Exodus is “Absence to Presence” (*How to Read Exodus* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009], 39). Relatedly, J. A. Motyer sees a chiasmic structure in Exodus, with “Building for Pharaoh” ultimately ending in “Building for God” a tabernacle for his dwelling among them (*The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, *The Bible Speaks Today* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005], 26).

revelations were given in the context of the people rejecting God (Exod 32:1ff; John 1:10). This name of “grace and truth” is something different than “the Law” and provides continuity with the New Testament experience of salvation in Christ.

Therefore, the Prologue to the Gospel of John highlights the divine name as the essence of the divine glory. If Ardel B. Caneday is correct, that the twice-mentioned word “glory” in John 1:14 is “the featured echo around which other echoes seem to collocate and are swept into pericopes through John’s Gospel via the prologue as the portal,” then the threefold echo of “grace and truth” as the essence of that glory must imply a coordinate theme.²³ From the Prologue, the reader expects to find the divine name in the Gospel of John.

2. The Absolute “I Am” Statements in John

According to the Old Testament, the divine name provides safety for God’s people: “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe” (Prov 18:10; cf. 29:25). In contrast to the rich man whose wealth is like a “strong city” and “a high wall” in his imagination (18:11), the righteous man finds safety through habitually running to the divine name.²⁴ In Psalm 61:3, this image of God as a “tower of strength” is parallel to God as a “refuge”, which is another common image for having safety in God (e.g. Ps 2:12; 5:11–12; 18:30; 34:22; 37:40). Significantly, the prophet Zephaniah reports that the humble remnant will “take refuge in the name of the LORD” (3:12).

²³ Caneday, “Glory Veiled,” 56; cf. John 1:14; 2:11; 17:6.

²⁴ The contrast between the righteous and the rich is made by juxtaposition; cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 75-77; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 128–29. On the habitual non-perfective, see Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 506.

Jesus also associated the divine name with safety. At the end of his ministry, he prayed, “Holy Father, keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me” (John 17:11; cf. 15). It was this name that Jesus “manifested” and “made...known” to those whom the Father had given to him (17:6, 26); and it was this name that he would continue to make known, even as he testified, “While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled” (17:12). In the Gospel of John, the safety found in the divine name is primarily communicated through the absolute “I am” statements, which lack an explicit predicate.²⁵

At first glance, the most obvious place to start the discussion would seem to be Jesus’s striking statement, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58). Surely, Jesus provides here an undeniable self-identification with the divine “I AM” of the Old Testament. After all, as Victor P. Hamilton quipped, it is doubtful that the Jews’ angry response can be explained as a reaction to poor grammar.²⁶ Herman N. Ridderbos, however, asserts that only an explanation that includes the eschatological redemption of Christ can “do justice to the context” of his “day” (John 8:56).²⁷ The “I” in this “I am” statement does not point to God abstracted from history—a mere reference to the divine essence—but to the Word made flesh in

²⁵ Brown divides the “I am” statements in John into three categories: (1) “The absolute use with no predicate” (e.g. John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19); (2) “The use where a predicate may be understood even though it is not expressed” (e.g. John 6:20; 18:5); and (3) “The use with a predicate nominative” (e.g. John 6:35, 51; 8:12 (9:5); 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; with 8:18 and 8:23 on the “borderline” (*John*, 533–34). For purposes here, uses (1) and (2) have been combined into the absolute “I am” category. For a thorough discussion see Brown, *John*, 533–338, “*EGŌ EIMI*—‘I AM’”.

²⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 64.

²⁷ Ridderbos, *John*, 323.

Christ.²⁸ The strength of this argument comes from the demand to do justice to the context. The same context, however, also speaks of the Jews attempting to stone Jesus (8:59). Later, when the Jews attempt to stone Jesus “again” (10:31), they explain why: “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out *to be* God” (10:33). Therefore, the absolute “I am” statement contains both a reference of good news for Abraham as well as an assertion of divinity.²⁹

This combination of divine identity and good news is also seen in the prophetic uses of the phrase “I am,” especially in the later chapters of Isaiah. According to Raymond E. Brown, while it is “difficult to find pagan parallels,” the Old Testament “offers...the only good examples of the absolute use.”³⁰ These examples include “I am Yahweh” (translated by the LXX as ἐγὼ εἶμι in Isa 45:18), “I [am] He” (always translated by the LXX as ἐγὼ εἶμι), and statements where “I am” in the LXX could be understood as a divine name, such as “I am ‘I AM’ who blots out transgressions” (Isa 43:25), “I am ‘I AM’ who comforts you” (Isa 51:12), and “My people shall know *my name*; in that day (they shall know)...that I am *egō eimi* is the one who speaks” (Isa 52:6; cf. Isa 43:10; John 8:28; 13:19).³¹ Interestingly, while the LXX is said to stress “the unicity of God” and his “divine existence” (e.g. Exod 3:14, “I am the Existing One”), it is all the more striking to see the LXX in Isaiah associate ἐγὼ εἶμι with blotting out transgressions and

²⁸ Ridderbos, *John*, 323.

²⁹ John Calvin recognized that both divinity and redemption were included: “That the grace of the Mediator flourished in all ages depended on His eternal Divinity” (quoted in Ridderbos, *John*, 323).

³⁰ Brown, *John*, 535.

³¹ Brown, *John*, 536.

comforting people.³² Therefore, there is canonical precedent behind the absolute “I am” statements speaking of good news for God’s people and not simply that God exists.

Regarding physical safety, the absolute “I am” significantly appears when Jesus walks on the water (John 6:16–21). Although this miracle ranks as one of John’s seven signs, it is easily overlooked and its function within chapter six left unexplained. After all, the feeding of the five thousand clearly fits thematically with Jesus’s later words, “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48). Why would John insert a second miracle as the background for this long discourse? After examining the use of “I am” within the miracle pericope, a possible function for its use will be proposed.

First, the miracle. After three to four miles of rowing at night on the stormy Sea of Galilee, the disciples were frightened by the sight of Jesus “walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat” (6:19). Interestingly, instead of parting the sea, as Moses did, Jesus simply walks across. As a comfort, Jesus said to them simply, “It is I; do not be afraid” (6:20). The Greek text is simply ἐγώ εἰμι with no predicate provided in the context. In the Synoptic Gospels, a possible predicate is provided (“It is a ghost!”), but it makes no sense—as if Jesus were responding, “Yes, I am a ghost!” (Matt 14:26–27; cf. Mark 6:49–50). While the phrase could also be interpreted as “I am Jesus” (e.g. CEV), the subsequent behavior of the disciples makes this interpretation unlikely. Once Peter returns to the boat with Jesus, having walked together on the water, the winds mysteriously stop and those in the boat *worship* Jesus, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!” (Matt 14:32–33). This response of worship corresponds well to Jesus’s use of “I am” as a

³² Brown, *John*, 536; cf. Carson, *John*, 578.

statement of his divinity.³³ Moreover, the disciples' verbal response foreshadows the famous confession of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). This association of the divine name followed by a confession of faith may provide the clue for the function of the absolute "I am" statement in John chapter six.

If the absolute "I am" only signified self-existence, then announcing it to imperiled disciples seems odd. However, if this statement also carries the Exodus emphasis on divine presence and the Isaiah emphasis on forgiveness and comfort, then such an announcement conveys safety and it begins to make sense. In John 6, however, the safety of the divine name extends to more than just the wind, the sea, and the night. The next day, Jesus offered his first predicate "I am" statement: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48). This statement offended his audience, including many of his disciples, who then "withdrew" and walked with him no more (6:41–42, 52, 60, 66). In contrast, the twelve stayed. What made the difference? Contextually, the most likely cause is the nighttime theophany, in which Jesus asserted his divine presence and the twelve believed. After all, the disciples "saw" (θεωροῦσιν) Jesus in a theophany (6:19)—a sight necessary for saving faith (6:40)—while the crowds merely had "seen" (εωράκατε) Jesus (6:36). Therefore, in contrast to the apostate disciples, who were asking in effect, "Who does this man think he is?" (cf. 8:53), Peter confessed, "We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (6:68–69)—a confession made, as in the Synoptic Gospels, after a private theophany. In effect, the sign on the sea provided the absolute "I am" and the sign of the loaves provided the predicate, "the bread of life," and altogether, the divine name protected the twelve from the sea and from apostasy.

³³ Later in the Synoptics, Jesus's use of "I am" draws the charge of blasphemy (Mark 14:62; cf. Luke 22:70). In light of these synoptic parallels, it is likely that John 6:20 is an assertion of the divine name, followed by a statement that often accompanies theophanies, "Do not be afraid"; see Brown, *John*, 533, 538.

The protection on the sea strongly resembles the protection later in the garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1–9). Again, it is night. Soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus, but instead of waiting for them to act, Jesus asks, “Whom do you seek?” (18:4). When they answer, “Jesus of Nazareth,” Jesus again responds by saying, “I am *He*” (ἐγώ εἰμι), after which the soldiers withdraw and fall to the ground (18:5–6). When the question and answer is repeated, Jesus then demands that the disciples go free, thereby fulfilling his own prophetic word, “Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one” (18:7–9).

Some commentators shy away from assigning full weight to the absolute “I am” in John 18:5–6. For example, while D. A. Carson acknowledges that ἐγώ εἰμι “can bear far richer overtones,” as in the divine assertions of Isaiah 40–55, he finds it more likely here that the words simply mean “It is I” (self-identification) or “I am Jesus” (the appropriate complement).³⁴ According to Carson, the expression ἐγώ εἰμι has “maximum weight” when it is either “absolute (8:58) or the object of what ought to be believed (‘if you do not believe that *I am*’ or the like, 8:24, 28).”³⁵ In the garden, however, several facts argue against an assertion of the divine name: the expression is ambiguous; the context “provides a perfectly adequate complement;” the Jews, if they had heard the divine name, would have tried to stone him (cf. 8:58–59); the normal posture before a theophany is not to draw back, but to “fall prostrate;” and if this narrative *were* a theophany, then it is “painfully clumsy” (they still arrest Jesus) and unnecessary (there is no need to “score theological points” with a “formally incomprehensible narrative”).³⁶ Therefore, Carson concludes that while the “overtone” of deity may be “undoubtedly present” for the enlightened

³⁴ Carson, *John*, 578. Brown notes that Codex Vaticanus reads, “I am Jesus” (*John*, 810).

³⁵ Carson, *John*, 321.

³⁶ Carson, *John*, 578.

reader and perhaps even for some soldiers, most of the soldiers probably fell for psychological reasons (e.g. “they are staggered by his open self-disclosure”) and, in doing so, “their physical ineptitude was another instance of people responding better than they knew” (cf. 11:49–52).³⁷

Interestingly, the text itself interprets this scene—Jesus fulfilled his earlier words about protecting his own: “I was keeping them in Your name” (17:12; cf. 18:9).³⁸ Because only one other text in John speaks of Jesus’s words being fulfilled (18:32), the insertion here is rare and may anticipate possible interpretive confusion. Therefore, John explicitly identifies ἐγώ εἰμι (“I am”) with the divine name. Moreover, Carson’s idea of “people responding better than they knew” is helpful and fits a Johannine pattern (e.g. 11:49–52).³⁹ Nothing in the text requires that the divine name be *understood* for it to have physical effect. In fact, the physical effects may align with prophecy (Ps 27:2; 35:4).⁴⁰ And even if the soldiers had understood Jesus’s words as blasphemy, seeking to arrest Jesus is apparently an alternative to stoning in this Gospel (cf. 10:31, 39). As for the odd effect of *drawing back*, the Greek perfectly echoes the effect of the divine name on the crowd in chapter six: “As a result of this many of his disciples withdrew (ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω) and were not walking with him anymore” (6:66; cf. 18:6). In chapter eighteen, the accompanying effect is more graphic—instead of simply “not walking,” the opponents actually “fell to the ground” (18:6). Significantly, the withdrawal in the garden included Judas Iscariot (18:5), who, despite his devilish nature, had earlier remained with Jesus (6:67–71).

³⁷ Carson, *John*, 578, 579.

³⁸ Brown concludes, “The sparing of the disciples fulfills the theme of xvii 12” (*John*, 818).

³⁹ Carson, *John*, 579.

⁴⁰ Brown, *John*, 811. In contrast to Carson, Brown sees a deliberate act of forced worship: “The reaction of falling back in confusion at Jesus’ answer is not simply spontaneous astonishment. The adversaries of Jesus are prostrate on their face before his majesty...and so there can be little doubt that John intends ‘I AM’ as a divine name” (*John*, 818).

Therefore, Jesus's use of the divine name in the garden is intentional and corresponds perfectly to his earlier pronouncement on the sea. In both instances, the "protective power" of the name is stressed, as pictured in the tower image of Proverbs 18:10.⁴¹ Although some have objected to the physical aim of this protection, as if such were unworthy of Jesus's statement (John 18:9),⁴² the Gospels tell us that more was at stake than drowning at sea or being slain in the garden. Jesus's theophany on the sea protected his elect from falling away the next day due to his amazing self-assertions, and Jesus's theophany in the garden protected his elect from their inability to follow him at that time (cf. 13:36). Even though Peter objected, his subsequent denials revealed the danger—in the Synoptics, Jesus prays to keep Peter from being sifted by Satan (Luke 22:31–32), and in John's Gospel, Jesus prays that the Father would "keep" the disciples in his name, specifically from the "evil one" (John 17:11, 12, 15). The physical and spiritual are intertwined in such a way that protection by the divine name applies to both areas.

The Gospel of John ends with two gardens. Literary echoes lead to a comparison with subtle parallels. In the first scene, the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is approached by his enemies and by Judas, the traitor. In the second scene, the garden of the new tomb, Jesus approaches a weeping woman. In both scenes, Jesus asks whom they are seeking. In the dialogue with his enemies, Jesus asserts the divine name and protects his people. In dialogue with the weeping woman, Jesus mentions not *his* name, but *her* name, "Mary." Interestingly, her full name "Mary Magdalene" begins and ends the pericope (John 20:1, 18), as if the town of Magdala somehow contributes to the meaning of this scene. In Aramaic, "Magdala" likely derives from ܡܓܕܠܐ, the

⁴¹ Brown, *John*, 764.

⁴² Carson mentions this objection and answers it (*John*, 579).

Hebrew word for “tower.”⁴³ Mary Magdalene would then be “Mary of the Tower,” a name not unlike Sally Hightower or Victor Godwin in connotation. Although admittedly speculative, an Aramaic name can have theological significance in the Gospel of John (e.g. John 9:7).

Accordingly, this believing woman is already in her strong tower. She is kept safe and enjoys the fellowship of the Lord—a fellowship where believers are no longer regarded as slaves, but as friends, known by him and talking with him face-to-face, like Moses, on a first-name basis (John 15:15; Exod 33:11–12).

3. The Predicate “I Am” Statements in John

The development in John from the absolute “I am” statements to the predicate “I am” statements strongly resembles the development of the divine name in Exodus. To see this resemblance, the pattern must first be shown in Exodus, then in the Gospel of John.

Regarding the divine name in Exodus, scholars have debated both its translation and its meaning. With regard to translation, “I AM WHO I AM” (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) has nine possibilities, due to three translations for the verb (“I was” or “I am” or “I will be”) and three translations for the relative pronoun (“who” or “what” or “that”).⁴⁴ The name “Yahweh” (יהוה) presents its own problems. Presumably, it should be the third-person form of the first-person form אֶהְיֶה, similar to other names in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaac, Jacob, Israel, Jephthah). However, the expected third-person form for the verb היה in the *qal* stem would be יְהִי (“he was” or “he is” or “he will be”), not יהוה. This oddity has led some scholars to speculate that the verb is in the causative *hiphil* stem—perhaps even an “early Canaanite causative”—meaning “I

⁴³ BDB, 153–54.

⁴⁴ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 64.

cause to be,” referring to God’s creative governance of nature and history.⁴⁵ In response, there is no known *hiphil* usage of this verb in Scripture, and the first-person form הִיְהִי־אֲנִי is definitely in the *qal* stem, not the *hiphil*.⁴⁶ With regard to meaning, the LXX translators apparently understood the divine name ontologically. Instead of “I AM WHO I AM,” the LXX has “I am The One Who Is” (Ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ὢν), as if a philosophical statement were being made.⁴⁷ If this is correct, then God is asserting his self-existence, his aseity. He alone is essential Being, contingent on nothing. While this assertion is true theologically (cf. Rev 4:11 et al.), it is also possible that the LXX simply reflects the difficulty of translation.⁴⁸

Given these uncertainties, a more promising approach to ascertaining the meaning of the divine name comes from its form. Scholars call it *idem per idem*, a form that stresses the freedom of the subject.⁴⁹ Because this form of the name is used later when God himself “proclaims” his name (33:19; cf. 34:6–7), it seems best to let the form drive the interpretation.⁵⁰ If so, then the shortened version (“I AM”) most likely carries the same meaning, because Moses is simply told to relay the name he has just heard to the people (Exod 3:14). Similarly, the

⁴⁵ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 121; cf. Brown, *John*, 536. Additional support for the *hiphil* comes from the theophorus names in the Old Testament that end in *-iah*, implying that the shortened form of the divine name (יהי) most likely would have been pronounced *yah* (as in *hallelu-yah*); cf. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, 3, 6.

⁴⁶ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 64–65.

⁴⁷ Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, 53; Brown, *John*, 536.

⁴⁸ Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46; cf. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, 53.

⁴⁹ “By leaving the action unspecified the force of this idiom is to preserve the freedom of the subject to perform the action in whatever way he pleases” (John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 82).

⁵⁰ “The circular *idem per idem* formula of the name—I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious—is closely akin to the name in Ex 3:14—I am who I am—and testifies by its tautology to the freedom of God in making known his self-contained being” (Brevard S. Childs as quoted by Piper, *Justification*, 82).

juxtaposition of “Yahweh,” the proper form of the divine name, to the *idem per idem* formula both here (3:14, 15) and later (33:19; 34:6) shows that the meaning of “Yahweh” should also be understood with this *idem per idem* formula in mind, rather than simply by the verb “to be.” The emphasis is not on being in general, but on the sovereign freedom of God to be whatever he wants to be.

By itself, this freedom would appear to be a problem for humans as created beings. God is not like the deities of the ancient Near East, who were bothered by the noisy humans whom they had created to do their work and whose sacrifices they greedily ate.⁵¹ In contrast, the “Mighty One, God, the LORD” (Ps 50:1) tells his people, “If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains” (50:12). As Paul told the Greeks on the Areopagus, “Nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything” (Acts 17:25). As self-existent and sovereignly free, God is beyond all coercion and manipulation. How then can humans be sure that this God will not simply act capriciously or arbitrarily, as he sometimes appears to act during times of human suffering?⁵² While some have philosophically tried to infer God’s moral goodness from his sovereignty, it seems hard to build a case for a certain future of goodness based on the principle of sovereign freedom alone.⁵³

In response, three observations give humans some initial reasons for hope. First, the fact that God has a fixed name shows that in *some* sense he does not change, and his character is

⁵¹ See the summaries of the *Epic of Atra-hasis*, the *Enuma elish*, and the *Erra Epic* in A. S. van der Woude, ed., *The World of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 85–88.

⁵² For an interpretation of Job that claims, “God’s management of the universe is arbitrary,” see Raymond P. Scheindlin, *The Book of Job* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 9–44.

⁵³ For example, Jonathan Edwards once argued: “It is most evident by the works of God, that his understanding and power are infinite....God being infinite in power and knowledge, he must be self-sufficient and all-sufficient; therefore it is impossible that he should be under any temptation to do any thing [*sic*] amiss; for he can have no end in doing it....So God is essentially holy, and nothing is more impossible than that God should do amiss” (as quoted by John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 76).

predictable.⁵⁴ Second, a name can be known. Just as people introduce themselves by name, so God in Exodus introduces himself by name, thereby showing some desire for relationship. The revelation of himself becomes the basis of faith: “Those who know Your name will put their trust in You” (Ps 9:10). Third, somehow the message Moses is told to give must be good news: “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14). The source must correspond to the gift; and as the gift is deliverance from oppression and inheritance in a new land, surely the name must mean something good, perhaps even the assurance of divine presence.⁵⁵

Later in the book of Exodus, this suspicion of good news is confirmed. In the context of rebellion, after the Israelites had “exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass” (Ps 106:20), God not only spared them, but freely chose to place his tent in their midst, in response to the bold intercession of Moses (Exod 32:1–33:17). Apparently, in seeking confirmation of this bold grace—a grace not unlike returning to live with a spouse who had committed adultery on the honeymoon—Moses prays, “Show me Your glory!” (33:18).⁵⁶ In response, God promises, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion” (Exod 33:19). As the common

⁵⁴ For example, although he is not uncommonly said to relent in Scripture (e.g. Exod 32:14), his very relenting is sometimes listed among his unchanging attributes of his name (e.g. Joel 2:13; John 4:2; cf. Jer 18:7–10).

⁵⁵ For example, Motyer sees three things implied in the divine name: (1) “the God ever-present, ever-active, interventionist for good” (based on the verb “to be”); (2) “the ever-independent, sovereign God” (based on *idem per idem*); and (3) “the inexhaustible God” (based on the non-specific, open-endedness of the name, which “conceals at least as much as it tells” (*Message of Exodus*, 68-71); cf. Hamilton, *Exodus*, 66).

⁵⁶ Both Piper and Caneday say it is for confirmation (Piper, *Justification*, 80; Caneday, “Glory Veiled,” 56). The fact that Moses repeated his initial prayer request after the theophany supports this understanding (cf. Exod 33:12–16; 34:9).

chorus in Israel celebrates, goodness is at the heart of the divine name.⁵⁷ Perhaps this fact could have been inferred from previous promises, but now it is being “proclaimed” by God himself. Moreover, this goodness, this divine name, consists of sovereign freedom in grace and mercy. The bare *idem per idem* form of “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod 3:14) gains specificity and doubles in size: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion” (33:19). It is not as though God no longer punishes sin—the fuller proclamation of the name makes this fact clear (Exod 34:6–7)—but his wrath is not central to his character. Consequently, the divine name offers hope to all, even to the rebel. Here then is the answer to humanity’s question whether the freedom of God can be trusted: “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered” (Joel 2:32). Truly, the name of the LORD is a strong tower.

This pattern in Exodus, where the bare name later receives fuller treatment, strongly resembles the expansion in John of the absolute “I am” statements into the predicate “I am” statements. To see this expansion clearly, let the following debate be considered—whether the primary emphasis in the predicate “I am” statements falls on the predicate or on the first-person pronoun (as if “I” was the predicate). In other words, is the predicate “more a description of what [Jesus] is in relation to man” or is the predicate “an essential definition or description of Jesus in himself,” in which case the “predicate is not true of some other person or thing”?⁵⁸

In response, two contextual facts should be noted. First, in the immediate context, the predicate “I am” statements often answer a misfocus of those being addressed, such as the

⁵⁷ “Give thanks to the LORD, in that He is good, for the reason that His lovingkindness endures forever” (Ps 106:1; cf. Isa 63:7). This translation by the author is based on the different ways the Hebrew particle *וְ* can be used; see Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 665.

⁵⁸ Brown, *John*, 534. For the entire discussion, based on distinctions made originally by Rudolf Bultmann, see Brown, *John*, 533–35.

manna-conscious Jews (6:34–35), the resurrection-minded Martha (11:24–25), or directionless Thomas (14:6). By saying, “I am what you are focused on,” Jesus is clearly stressing that he *alone* is what the predicate signifies. And it is not necessarily an error that is being corrected, but a misfocus. Martha’s true statement about future resurrection is met with a statement of exclusive identity: “I am the resurrection” (11:25). Second, in the overall context, these predicate “I am” statements occur in a book with absolute “I am” statements. By starting each predicate statement with “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι), Jesus brings in the exclusive connotations of the absolute “I am” statements. This observation gains strength by noting that the first predicate “I am” statement (John 6:35) does not occur until after the first “I am” statements (John 4:26; 6:20). Moreover, the resultant statements retain the first-person pronoun “I” (ἐγώ), an emphatic form not necessary in Greek.⁵⁹ Therefore, as in the absolute “I am” statements, so also in the predicate “I am” statements, the emphasis is still on Jesus, the “I” of the statement.

Granted, the predicate “I am” statements are often followed by an explanation of their significance for the believer—an explanation that *appears* to define the statement itself. For example, when Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he immediately explains the significance of “the resurrection” as “he who believes in Me will live even if he dies” and the significance of “the life” as “everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25–26). This pattern of declaration and explanation occurs often in John (e.g. 6:35; 8:12; 11:25–26). Sometimes, the explanation is not a positive statement, but a negative one. In answering Thomas, Jesus declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (14:6). Here the emphasis is not on benefits, but on exclusivity. Both the explicit reference

⁵⁹ According to Wallace, “the nominative personal pronoun is most commonly used for emphasis” (*Greek Grammar*, 321).

to “no one” and the emphatic form in Greek of “Me” (ἐμου) stress the exclusivity of Jesus as *the* way.⁶⁰ This example also highlights the importance of the Greek article, which also occurs in each predicate “I am” statement: Jesus is always *the* entity mentioned. Due to the universal presence of the article, it would be reasonable to conclude that an exclusive, negative statement could have followed each predicate “I am” statement. For example, since Jesus is *the* resurrection, Jesus could have also said that *no one* receives resurrection apart from him. Certainly, this conclusion would have fit well with earlier assertions in John, such as “in *Him* was life” (1:4, emphasis added; cf. 5:21–22, 25–27). Therefore, the predicate “I am” statements stress the exclusive claim of Jesus to that identity, while the follow-up statements explain the significance of that exclusive identity for others, especially believers. As in the purpose statement for the book (John 20:30–31), the focus is on identity (“Jesus is the Christ”), which is followed by a statement of significance for believers (“that believing you may have life in His name”). Therefore, in both the absolute and predicate “I am” statements, the emphasis rests on Jesus’s exclusive claim to each identity.

This coordination in John of absolute “I am” statements with predicate “I am” statements follows the same pattern of the original “I AM” statements in Exodus. The unspecified *idem per idem* statement in Exodus 3 and its shortened form are subsequently given color in Exodus 33–34. God’s sovereign freedom finds ultimate expression in the free grace and mercy he shows to his people, even his rebellious people, without losing any of his freedom. Similarly, in John, the absolute “I am” statements lay the foundation for the name, but the predicate “I am” statements give the name its color in describing what Jesus is for believers.

⁶⁰ “In the oblique cases the longer forms ἐμου...are used as a rule where the main emphasis lies on the pron.” (BAGD, 217).

Therefore, in addition to the Prologue and the absolute “I am” statements, the predicate “I am” statements also manifest the divine name.

The Gospel of John proclaims Jesus as the fulfillment of the divine name of Exodus. As in Exodus, where “He will always be whatever his people need him to be in any given moment, in any given place,” because truly God is both “I-will-be-what-I-will-be” and “I-will-be-what-I-need-to-be-for-you,”⁶¹ so also in John, Jesus is both the absolute “I am” and the predicated “I am your every need.” Jesus is God’s memorial-name forever and our very strong tower. Hallelujah!

⁶¹ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 66.