CHAPTER 6

THE MEANING OF *EGŌ EIMI* IN JOHN 8:58

In this passage NWT reads, "Before Abrahm came into existence, I have been." TEV reads, "Before Abraham was born 'I am.'" The last two Greek words ("I am") are the crux of the passage, being translated from the Greek *egō eimi* (the personal pronoun "I" together with the present of the auxiliary "to be"). The question is whether these words are used in an everyday sense, as reflected in the NWT, or whether they are used in a mystical, theological sense, as reflected by the TEV.

GRAMMATICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To get a full understanding of this passage (and the other *egō eimi* passages as well) we must take three different verbal systems into account.[1] Jesus uttered the words in Hebrew (or Aramaic), they were written down in New Testament Greek, and they have been translated into English. Thus, right from the start we are faced with a problem, namely, that these three languages are very different. As to what is grammaticalized, neither Hebrew nor Biblical Aramaic have tenses, but only aspects; Greek has aspects, one possible tense, and one state; some of the conjugations[2] probably have both an aspectual and a temporal value. English has only tenses and not aspects.[3] Thus there are many pitfalls for the one attempting to translate or interpret the passage.

The English reader is first of all interested in the *tense* of the verb in John 8:58. Tense is defined as a grammaticalized

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[1] See the "Excursus on Hebrew and Greek verbs," pp. ????

[2] What this book calls "conjugations" (aorist, present, etc.) are usually called "tense," which is really a misnomer.

[3] The word "aspect" is used here as it is defined in the "Excursus on Hebrew and Greek verbs." Based on this definition, English does not have aspects.

expression of location in time. What then is English present, the tense used most when translating the passages containing *ego eimi*? Speaking schematically, it is a point on a time line diagram representing the present moment, or the intersection between past time and future time. However, it is relatively rare for actions to coincide exactly with the present moment, therefore, present tense situations for the most part "occupy a much longer period of time than the present moment, but nonetheless include the present moment within them."[4] To state it differently, English present may occupy a part of the past as well as of the future but always including the present moment; it can be used for the distant future but hardly including a definite reference point in the distant past.

The Greek present is different from the English present because it is an aspect and not a tense. It portrays a part of the action, not including the end,[5] and is evidently timeless.[6] Greek future probably has about the same meaning as English future, thus being a grammaticalized tense, and the Greek imperfect normally makes visible a sequence of a continuous action in the past. The Greek present stands between the two and usually describes actions which often are translated by English present or present continuous.

Bowman writes that the literal translation of *egō eimi* in John 8:58 is "I am" and that the NWT rendering "I have been" is an attempt to harmonize the passage with the antitrinitarian doctrine of the translators.[7] He even says with reference to the context that the rendering "I have been . . . is not accurate."[8] The usual premise for the claim that only "I am" is a literal translation is that Greek present is a tense with the same

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[4] B. Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 37.

[5] Except in resultative situations, that is, when an action ends with a resulting state following. The resultant state is unbounded.

[6] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 881, 882; S. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 78.

[7] Bowman, *Jehovah's Witnesses*, p. 89.

[8] Bowman, *Jehovah's Witnesses* , p. 111.

meaning as English present, but as we have seen, this is not the case. In fact, in one sense it is accurate to claim that, as I do here, that the choice of English *tense* has nothing to do with being a literal translation. Any English equivalent of *eimi* (to be), regardless of its tense, is a literal translation. Thus "I have been" is just as literal as "I am."[9] To find the best way to render *egō eimi* into English we must look in two directions: 1) at the original words of Jesus and 2) at the context.

JESUS' ORIGINAL WORDS

We know that both Hebrew and Aramaic were spoken in Palestine at the time of Jesus. In his daily conversations he probably spoke Hebrew, which does not have tenses but only aspects. Jesus lived in the period between Classical Hebrew and Mischnaic Hebrew, but there is no evidence that the tense-system of Mishnaic Hebrew was at work during this time. If he spoke Aramaic, the verbal system would have been somewhat different from Classical Hebrew, with participles playing a much greater role; but Biblical Aramaic also does not have a tense system. How, then, did Jesus express the words which John translated with the Greek phrase *egō eimi*?

A participle of the Hebrew verb *hayā* ("to be")[10] is used only twice in the Hebrew text of the Bible,[11] and of the 50 occurrences of the first person singular of the verb in the Hebrew imperfect, all cases, except possibly 5,[12] have future meaning. So Jesus' use of the Hebrew participle or imperfect is unlikely. The perfect of the first person singular occurs 63 times, but a search revealed only two instances where the Septuagint

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[9] It is true that *eimi*, in most cases, will be translated by the present tense in English, but when the context demands it other tenses can be and are used.

[10] As will be shown later, *hayā* is different both from the Greek *eimi* and the English "to be." It is not a copulative verb but emphasizes existence rather than mere being. In a few instances it is used in way similar to a copulative verb.

[11] Exodus 9:3 and Proverbs 13:19.

[12] Job 3:16; 10:19; 12:4; 17:6 and Ruth 2:13.

translated them by $eimi$,[13] and one instance by $eg\bar{o}$ $eimi$.[14] Jesus could have used the Hebrew perfect, $'ani$ $hay\hat{\imath}t\hat{\imath}$ (or just $hay\hat{\imath}t\hat{\imath}$) as one Hebrew New Testament[15] translates John 8:58. But it is more likely that he used the words found in another Hebrew New Testament, namely, $'ani$ $h\hat{u}$,[16] or that he simply used the single pronoun $'ani.$ The word $'ani$ means "I" and $h\hat{u}$ means "he." In Hebrew the pronoun $h\hat{u}$ could be used as a copula (with the meaning *is*, or more rarely *was* or *will be*) in clauses without any verb. The pronoun $h\hat{u}$ was also used for emphasis ($'ani$ $h\hat{u}$, "it is I" or "I am the one"). In the Septuagint all 9 occurrences of $'ani$ $h\hat{u}$[17] are translated by $eg\bar{o}$ $eimi.$ However, in 160 other instances the words $eg\bar{o}$ $eimi$ in the Septuagint translate the lone Hebrew pronoun $'ani$ (or $'an\bar{o}kh\hat{\imath}$).[18]

Jesus therefore could have used the perfect $hay\hat{\imath}t\hat{\imath}$, the nominal clause $'ani$ $h\hat{u}$ or the lone pronoun $'ani$.[19] But regardless of what he actually used, two important points should be kept in mind:

1) *All three expressions were normal Hebrew without any element of mysticism.*

2) *None of the three expressions contain any element of tense.*

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[13] Job 11:4 and Exodus 2:22.

[14] Job 30:9. There are 18 instances (all with enclitic *waw*) that are assessed as having future meaning, 28 as having past meaning and 17 as having present meaning. Of the last mentioned, 3 are viewed as imperfects of $eimi$ and 11 as active or passive aorists of $ginomai$ ("to come into existence").

[15] Published by The Bible Society in Israel and translated by Norman Henry Snaith.

[16] *The New Testament in Hebrew and English.* Published by The Society for Distributing the Holy Scriptures to the Jews, Edgware, Middlesex, England.

[17] Two instances have $'an\bar{o}kh\hat{\imath}$, a variant of $'ani.$

[18] There are two examples of $'ehy\bar{e}$ rendered by $eg\bar{o}$ $eimi$ in the LXX, namely, Exodus 3:14 and Hosea 1:9.

[19] The Aramaic equivalents in Targum Onkelos/Jonathan for the last two is $an\bar{a}$ $h\hat{u}$ and $an\bar{a}.$ The Hebrew perfect may be expressed in different ways in Aramaic.

Therefore, we conclude that both the original words of Jesus and the Greek rendering made by John did not contain any grammatical element pinpointing time. Thus, the context must decide, and the task of the English translator is to find a rendering of "to be" which is consistent with the context of Jesus' statement.

DOES *EIMI*, WITH *PRIN*, POINT BACKWARDS?

The greater context will be considered in detail later on in this section, but what clues do we get from the verse itself? The time element in the verse is evident, *"before* Abraham came into existence." The Greek word translated "before" is *prin,* and both the Hebrew New Testaments referred to in notes 62 and 63 have *beṯērem* where the Greek text has *prin.* Both the Hebrew and the Greek words mean "before," and *semantically* speaking the phrase "before Abraham" must refer to a time when Abraham was not yet born. How long this "time" was cannot be determined from the grammar or the syntax; it may or may not involve an eternal reference.

At this point Bowman has a curious argument, which according to him "is critical and somewhat new."[20] He says that because of the phrase *prin Abraam genesthai* the expression *egō eimi* "does not point forward from Abraham's birth up to the time of Jesus' speaking," but instead "points *backward* from Abraham's birth to the more distant past." Then he puts it another way, saying that "a clause beginning with *prin* cannot specify 'duration' up to the present, since it refers to a period *prior* to the past event specified in the clause."

Where this rule comes from is not stated. What Bowman overlooks is that the Greek verb *eimi* is both stative[21] and is imperfective; a combination which would signify a situation having duration.[22] Says Fanning, "the present aspect with

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[20] Bowman, *Jehovah's Witnesses,* p. 110.

[21] A stative describes a state rather than an action. The Hebrew *hayā* is a stative and *'ani hû* also represents a state.

STATES denotes the *continuing existence* of the subject in the condition indicated by the verb."[23]

The subject of the verse is "I," that is, Jesus, and it is too modest to say it is "somewhat new" to claim that *eimi* refers to the continuing existence of Jesus *backwards* from the birth of Abraham into the distant past. Grammatically speaking it would have been completely new, and if it were truthfully shown that the continuing existence of states could be reversed, it would really revolutionize the study of aspects. But Bowman does not give any examples for his novel view. However, examples of continuing existence in a forward sense, also in clauses with the Greek *prin* or the Hebrew *beṭērem* ("before"), can be found.

In the apocryphal book of Susanna, which late manuscripts of the Septuagint add to the book of Daniel,[24] we find the following Greek parallel to our passage: "O Lord God, the eternal, the one who knows [*eidōs*[25]] all things before [*prin*] they spring forth; you know [*oidas*[26]] that I did not do [*epoiēsa*[27]] this."

The Greek verb *oida* is stative and is formally a perfect, but the verb is generally used as a present. The first occurrence of it

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[22] Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 864, speaks of "PUNCTILIAR (AORISTIC) PRESENT," and he also mentions *eimi* in this context. However, Robertson held the old, erroneous view of aspect where it was confused with *Aktionsart*. In addition, John 8:58 does not fit his description of a punctliar present. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Tesament Greek*, 1990, p. 113, lists the following states: "Verbs of existence, identity, or class-membership," "εἰμί as intransitive (not as copula or with location phrase)."

[23] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Tesament Greek*, p. 137.

[24] Daniel 13:35, according to the *o'* text of the book. Septuaginta *Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Gottingensis editum,* vol. XVI pars 2 Susanna - Daniel - Bel et Draco, 1954 Göttingen - Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, p. 85. (The symbol *o'* stands for the Septuagint text of Daniel.)

[25] Active participle of *oida*.

[26] Perfect indicative with present meaning.

[27] Aorist indicative with past meaning

in the sentence is as an active participle. It is obvious that the knowledge God has about these things, before they spring forth,[28] is not directed backwards nor does it cease at some point before they spring forth. Therefore, Susanna uses the same stative verb when she says, "You know" (at present). What God knew before things took place he also continued to know afterwards, so *prin* in this case does not exclude "duration up to the present."

Let us look at another example. The two Hebrew New Testaments quoted in notes 62 and 63 use the word *beṭērem* where the Septuagint has *prin*. In Jeremiah 1:5 we find this word used twice in a construction quite similar to John 8:58. The Septuagint in both places has *pro tou*, a phrase with basically the same meaning as *prin*. "Before [*pro tou*] I formed you [*plasai*[29]] in the belly I knew you [*epistamai*[30]] and before [*pro tou*] you came forth [*ekselthein*[31]] from the womb I sanctified you [*hegiaka*[32]]."

To "know" is a state of the mind, and the Greek present must indicate a continuing state. The Hebrew perfect has exactly the same meaning.[33] And both in Hebrew and in Greek we find the preposition "before," referring to a time in the past prior to the birth of Jeremiah. From this time to the time when God uttered the words, he knew Jeremiah. It is similar with the parallel clause. To "sanctify" is an act leading into a state. Here a Greek perfect is used, indicating even more definitely that a clause beginning with "before" can signify a state with duration into the present.

THE TRANSLATION OF *EGŌ EIMI*

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[28] This is how the author of Susanna views it.

[29] Aorist infinitive. Hebrew has imperfect.

[30] Present indicative, Hebrew has perfect.

[31] Aorist infinitive, Hebrew has imperfect,

[32] Perfect indicative, Hebrew also has perfect.

[33] H. W. F. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2d Eng. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), sec. 106, 2 (a).

But how should *egō eimi* be translated into English? As already mentioned, Greek has a verbal conjugation called "perfect," which may be defined as "a state or condition resulting from a completed action."[34] It is often translated with English perfect, but the two may not match exactly. As a matter of fact, the Greek *eimi,* being stative, has no perfect form, so John could not have chosen a perfect for *eimi*, but he did choose the imperfective aspect of Greek present to portray a state lasting from the past and continuing into the present.[35]

English has no grammaticalized imperfective aspect which may portray an action or state that began before a certain point in the past, and which continues into the present. But it does have a present tense which covers situations including the present moment. The English present tense, however, cannot be extended to include a time before a particular point in the past, so English and Greek present may be mutually exclusive in situations where both past and present are combined.

How, then, should we translate the *egō eimi* of John 8:58, into English? Let us consider the alternatives in the light of the following parameters: "grammaticality," "intelligibility," "faithful conveyance of the message," and "addition of elements."

1) *"Before Abraham came into being, I was."* This rendition is grammatically correct, it is intelligible and it does not add any elements that are not found in the text itself. But because the state is confined to the past, before Abraham came into being and Jesus still lived when he expressed his preexistence, the message is distorted. English preterite cannot include a state which is still in effect.

2) *"Before Abraham came into being, I am."* This is the rendition found in most translations of John 8:58, and it is the one preferred by Bowman. But it is the least attractive one, for several reasons. It is ungrammatical

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[34] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 103.

[35] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 21, and others call this the "Present of Past Action Still in Progress."

because English present tense cannot start before a definite point in the past. It is unintelligible and does not convey the message, because an element of mysticism must be added to defend its place in an English translation. Since mystical connotations are evident in the Greek text, it adds foreign elements.

3) *"Before Abraham came into being, I have been."* This is the rendition found in the NWT and some other translations, including the early marginal reading offered by the *New American Standard Bible*. It is ungrammatical because English perfect cannot be used to portray a state which is anchored to a particular point in the past.[36] It is, however, intelligible and therefore it conveys the message. It also does not add any mystical or foreign elements.

The truth is, there is no way to translate this Greek passage into English in a strictly literal way, because Greek is an aspectual language and English is not. In comparing the above translations, we can see that 2), which is the most popular choice, does not fulfill any of the four requirements, while 1) and 3) fulfill three out of the four. My personal preference is for 3), rather than 1), since 3) does not distort the message as does 1).

I recently discussed the problem of translating this passage with two leading Norwegian linguists. Both of them chose 3) without hesitation, for they viewed an ungrammatical but intelligible rendition as better than those who which do not convey the message. While there are faults with the NWT rendition from an English grammatical point of view, in no way does it convey any bias on the part of the translators. By reading this literal translation of the passage, the readers have

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[36] The linguist Carlota Smith, in *The Parameter of Aspect* (Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy 43; London: Kluwer Academic, 1991), p. 149, says, "perfect sentences with specifying adverbials do not appear in English; a sentence such as *'Sam has arrived yesterday'* is ungrammatical, though quite intelligible."

an opportunity to interpret John's record of what Jesus said, for themselves.[37]

There is, however, one way to avoid the problems mentioned above, and that is to allow the addition of just a small element which in no way qualifies as interpolation. This is done by K. L. McKay in his superb translation, "I have been in existence since before Abraham was born."[38]

One point, however, where Bowman is right, is in his criticism of the footnote in the 1950 edition of NWT, for its use of the words "the perfect indefinite tense."[39] Even though the semantic contents of the phrase may be fitting, and the term can be found in old English grammars, it was not standard grammatical terminology in 1950, and therefore does not contribute much to the readers' understanding of the passage or the translation offered. In NWTREF (page 1582) "the perfect indefinite tense" is changed to "perfect indicative."

SUPPOSED OLD TESTAMENT PARALLELS

Bowman highlights what he views as important OT parallels to Jesus' words in John 8:58. The first proposed parallel we will consider is Psalm 90:2.

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[37] NWTREF gives the reader an another advantage in its Appendix 6F, where additional information about the passage is given. The Appendix also gives English translations of three Syriac versions from the fourth or fifth century. One of the versions corresponds to the English "I have been" and two others correspond to "I was." There are also English translations of the Old Georgian and the Old Ethiopic versions, both from the sixth century, and both of them correspond to the English rendering, "I was." The Ethiopic and the Syriac versions are compatible with the NWT rendering because the perfect of these ancient languages do not have the same restrictions as the English preterite. The Syriac Peshitta, both its Eastern and Western versions, has rendering *'ena itai* ("I am/was/will be") which is completely time indifferent.

[38] K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 42.

[39] Bowman, *Jehovah's Witnesses*, p. 91.

IS PSALM 90:2 PARALLEL TO JOHN 8:58?

Below we consider NWT's translation of the Hebrew text of this verse, followed by Brenton's translation of the Septuagint text:

LXX Translation of Psalm 90:2

Before the mountains themselves were born, Or you proceeded to bring forth as with labor pains the earth and the productive land. Even from time indefinite to time indefinite you are God.

NWT's Translation of the Hebrew of Psalm 90:2

Before the mountains existed, and *before* the earth and the world were formed, even from age to age, Thou art.

The principal difference is that the Hebrew text has "God" as predicate nominative in the last clause, while the Septuagint simply says *su ei* ("you are") without any predicate nominative. "The parallels between this text and John 8:58 are remarkable" writes Bowman, and in this he is correct. "You are" (*su ei*) in the Psalm is indeed parallel to "I am" (*egō eimi*)[40] in John 8:58, and "were born" (*ginomai*) is parallel to "was born" (*ginomai*). The use of slightly different prepositions does not alter this otherwise harmonious picture. The Hebrew noun *ʿōlām* and the Greek *aiōn* have the meaning of "time indefinite," but sometimes they can be used to convey eternality. Psalm 90:2 evidently says that God is eternal.

In spite of the aforementioned similarities between these two scriptures, much of what Bowman says about them is hard to accept, and easy to dispute. He argues, "To be consistent,

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[40] I use "I am" here as a simple representation of these present verbs, without taking the context into consideration. This is not the only way they can be translated. That *egō eimi* is said to be equal to "I am" cannot be used as an argument for such a rendering in John 8:58, for there are other factors to consider. Some of these factors have been considered already, and others will be discussed later in this section.

then, they [Jehovah's Witnesses] have to admit that John 8:58 just as clearly affirms the eternality of Jesus."[41] Bowman's premise evidently is the same as the one used for John 1:1, namely, that time was created with the universe. Only if this is true is his conclusion justified, but, as was earlier shown, this is a philosophical thought which cannot be substantiated. The Psalmist compares the short life of men with that of God, who is eternal. In verse 1 he places God within the timeframe of the generations of mankind. In verse 2 he expands on this thought, pointing out that God existed before the universe was created, and then comes his climax: God is from everlasting to everlasting! There is neither a linguistic nor a semantic reason to claim that the clause "before the mountains were brought forth" necessarily implies God's eternal existence, since even the angels existed before the creation of the universe (Job 38:7).

If we compare Psalm 90:2 with John 8:58 we do in fact find a difference in the temporal descriptions given. Speaking syntactically of the Psalm, the time adverbial "from everlasting [age] to everlasting [age]" gives the anchor points for the words *su ei*, a fact which, semantically speaking, indicates that the time covered by *su ei* is from everlasting to everlasting (cf. 1 Chron 29:10). This means that past, present and future are gathered together by this expression, or that it is independent of any time measure. Speaking syntactically of John's words, we may say that the time adverbial "before Abraham" is the past anchor point of *egō eimi* while Jesus' speech time represents the other point; speaking semantically, this indicates that the time covered by *egō eimi* runs from some unspecified point before Abraham was born, up to the time when Jesus' words were spoken. This means that past and present are gathered together by the expression, but not the future. So compared with Psalm 90:2 this is a completely different situation.

Because Greek present is not a tense but an aspect, which can give different meanings when used with verbs with different *Aktionsart* in clauses with different kinds of subjects and objects, it can be used in both in Psalm 90:2 and in John 8:58. Those understanding Greek in the first century CE would

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[41] Bowman, *Jehovah's Witnesses*, p. 118.

214

have no problem understanding the meaning of both of these passages. If we are going to translate these texts into English, since English does not have aspects but only tenses, the verbs of both passages must be translated differently.

Using present tense in the Psalm creates no problems. The words "from everlasting [age] to everlasting [age] you are" gather the present, past and future into a single expression. But when we have a clause with the preposition "before," referring to a particular time in the past, to use the present tense would be ungrammatical in English. An act or a state anchored to a particular time in the remote past cannot be expressed by English present. So while there are indeed parallels between John 8:58 and Psalm 90:2, there are also considerable differences.

IS EXODUS 3:14 PARALLEL TO JOHN 8:58?

In discussing Exodus 3:14, we may also learn an important lesson from Psalm 90:2, something which evidently has not occurred to Bowman. There are two words in the Hebrew text of the Psalm and two in the Greek. However, the two Greek words are not a translation of the two Hebrew words, but of one of the Hebrew words and of another which is implied. The Hebrew word which is not translated by the Septuagint is the predicative nominative "God." The Hebrew text literally says "You (are) God" while the Septuagint has the rendring "You are." Bowman is aware of this, but there is another important point which he does not stress.

One of the premises on which he builds when he parallels Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58 is that $hay\bar{a}$ ("to be/exist") in Hebrew is equivalent to $eimi$ ("to be") in Greek, and herein lies a problem, for this is not necessarily true. The linking verb (copula) "to be" is usually implied in Hebrew, not written. Therefore, the Greek $eimi$ does not have a written equivalent in Hebrew, and it does not correspond to $hay\bar{a}$.

A few statistics might help illustrate this point. Apart from consecutive perfect and imperfect, the meaning of which may be open for discussion, there are a total of 493 occurrences of $hay\bar{a}$ in the Hebrew OT, compared with 6469 occurrences of $eimi$ in the Septuagint and 2462 occurrences of $eimi$ in the NT.

The reason why *eimi* is used 13 times more frequently than *hayā* is because *eimi* serves as copula while *hayā* does not. Therefore, when *hayā* is used there is often a stress on *existence*, which is normally lacking in the Greek *eimi*. Bowman has not considered this, but it has a bearing on his attempt to parallel John 8:58 and Exodus 3:14.

The crucial words of Exodus 3:14 are *'ehyē 'ashēr 'ehyē* ("I will be what I will be"), or, as NWT reads, "I shall prove to be what I shall prove to be." In the following verse the personal name of God is expressed by the four consonants YHWH, and Bowman, Countess and others claim that Jesus applied this name to himself.

There is a similarity between *'ehyē* and YHWH in that two of the consonants (H and H) are identical, and the third (W) is probably identical.[42] So, what is the meaning of YHWH? It is near impossible to determine with certainty the etymology of such an ancient word; we simply do not know! One suggestion is that the name represents the causative form of *hayā*, meaning, "he causes to be." This may very well be the case. Against this, however, it may be argued that a causative form (hiphil) of *hayā* is unprecedented, and that a third person singular is strange indeed for the personal name of God. We would have expected *"I* cause to be" rather than *"he* causes to be," just as we see in the *'ehyē* (*"I* will be") of the following verse. Because the *'ehyē*-clause *describes* God and YHWH *names* God, it is not unreasonable to think that there is some connection between them, but what that connection is may be difficult to determine, with certainty.

The Septuagint translation of *'ehyē 'ashēr 'ehyē* is *egō eimi ho ōn*. The words *ho ōn* are the present participle of *eimi* together with the article, so the clause may be translated, as

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[42] The verb *hayā* has a *yod* as the second consonant, while YHWH has a *waw* in the second position. In Aramaic a *waw* is used in the equivalent verb, and such a verb with *waw* also occurs five times in the Hebrew text (Gen 27:29; Is 16:4; Eccl 2:22; 11:3 and Neh 6:6). The wife of Adam, in Genesis 3:20, is called *ḥawā* ("the living one," with *het*, not *he*, as the first consonant) though we might have expected *hayā*. The names in Genesis 5 and 10 reveal that the Hebrew behind them was slightly different from the Hebrew of the Masoretic text.

Brenton does, "I am The Being." It is important to note that the second occurrence of *'ehyē* is translated by *ho ōn*, which is the predicate nominative of the clause. When the Septuagint in the next verse refers to the person of the previous verse, it uses the predicate nominative *ho ōn*, which now serves as the subject, "The Being [*ho ōn*] has sent me."

If Jesus, by help of the Septuagint translation, had claimed identity with YHWH, he could either have said, "I am YHWH" or "I am God" (as shown in Chapter 5, the Septuagint contained God's name in Jesus' day), or he could have said "I am The Being [*ho ōn*]." The word *eimi* in Exodus 3:14 is merely a linking verb, and cannot be claimed to represent a point of reference, even an important one. So here there is no link to John 8:58.

Scholars in the field of translating literature know that because languages are different there are times when certain nuance found in one word in the source language cannot be reproduced in the equivalent word in the receptor language. If this is the case, a careful translator of an idiomatic translation should try to create the same effect somewhere else in the clause, or even in the next clause. This is probably what the Septuagint translator tried to do in Exodus 3:14. As already noted, *hayā* is not a linking verb, even though it, in a few instances, is used like one, but it indicates existence or emphasis. There is no equivalent verb in Greek, so the translator lets all the emphasis materialize in the expression *ho ōn*; in a way this expression accounts for both occurrences of *'ehyē* in the Hebrew text, while *eimi* in the same clause is just a linking verb (copula). The *eimi* of John 8:58, on the other hand, is probably a translation of a nominal clause with an implied copula (the lone *'anî*) or a nominal clause with an expressed copula (*'anî hû*, "I am"). In either a nominal clause a predicate nominative is lacking (though one could be implied from the context), and therefore *existence* on the part of the subject is expressed. But this existence is expressed syntactically while the existence signaled by *hayā* is expressed lexically. If this reasoning is correct, the difference between *egō eimi* used in John 8:58 and in Exodus 3:14 becomes even more profound.

elements. But its weakness is that it is ungrammatical. Thus, it may be that in this case even a strictly literal translation should concede to add the one word ("since") that, in English, would allow for a grammatical and intelligible translation, such as the one offered by McKay.