

EXODUS 3:14 IN CHRISTIANITY

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Exodus 3:14 in Historical Christianity

While Jewish exegetes did not attribute disproportionate importance to Exodus 3:14 until the Middle Ages, it has commanded the attention of Christian exegetes from the outset. To grasp the significance that Exodus 3:14 has had in Christian thought we might usefully consider the words of Gilson, who stated that with this revelation “*Exodus lays down the principle from which henceforth the whole of Christian philosophy will be suspended*”.¹ The importance attached to this verse is readily understood when one considers the foundation upon which Christian dogma rests, for the validity of the Christian understanding of God depends upon the validity of the assertion that Jesus is the incarnation of the word of God, and that the Divine essence and the word of God are at once identical and distinct. These assertions are within the provinces of ontology and epistemology, although the latter is not commonly recognised. There is no more ontological a verse in the Bible than Exodus 3:14, as the Septuagint and Vulgate make clear, and it is therefore not only understandable that this verse has attracted so much attention from Christian exegetes. It could hardly have been otherwise.

The Church fathers and Medieval Scholastics identified the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as the Divine name that expresses the most fundamental essence of God, which essence they identified as “*subsistent being itself*” (Latin “*ipsum esse subsistens*”).² According to Ott, “*The Patristic writers and the Schoolmen (Scholastics) accept the name of the Divine Essence given in Ex.3:14, and regard Absolute Being as that concept by which we state the essence of God most fundamentally*”. John Damascene stated the opinion that is still held in Roman Catholicism today, which is that the name *ehyeh* (translated “*He who is*” from the Septuagint “*ho on*”) is the “*most appropriate*” of all divine names (De fide orth I.9). Ott also informs us that the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh* are

understood in Roman Catholicism to bear the meaning: “*I Am He Whose Essence is expressed in the words “I am”*”; and he continues: “*God is therefore purely and simply being. His Essence is Being*”.

Among the more important of the early and Medieval Christian contributions to the interpretation of this verse are those of Jerome, Augustine,³ and Aquinas,⁴ all of whom saw in it an allusion to God’s absolute and eternal being. Augustine and Aquinas also explicitly identified the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a divine name, the former employing both Septuagint and Vulgate translations in his exegesis while the latter employed only the Vulgate in his. In consequence of this, both ‘Being’ (after Augustine) and ‘He who is’ (after Aquinas) came to be recognised as divine names in Roman Catholic Orthodoxy, although both relate to the same Hebrew word; *ehyeh*.

Translations of Exodus 3:14 in modern Christian Bibles can be usefully considered along the lines of the three major branches of Christianity: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant. Until the middle of the 20th century all Roman Catholic versions were based upon the Vulgate, but since that time have been based upon combinations of the Hebrew MT, Septuagint and Vulgate. The New American Bible offers a good example of this synthesis with *ehyeh asher ehyeh* being rendered as in the Vulgate with “*I am who am*” while the absolute *ehyeh* is translated directly from the Hebrew MT with “*I am*”. The New Jerusalem Bible by contrast employs a combination of the Septuagint and Hebrew MT in its translation, rendering *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as “*I am He who is*” and the absolute *ehyeh* as “*I am*”. Roman Catholic versions thus retain the connotation of absolute and eternal being, which is in line with the most recent Papal interpretation of the verse. The Eastern Orthodox Churches recognise only the Septuagint as Holy Scripture, and so their understanding of the verse is necessarily in terms of absolute and eternal being. Protestant Bibles show more variety in their translations, but most of them opt for “*I am who I am*” and “*I am*” for 3:14a and 3:14b respectively. This translation of *ehyeh asher ehyeh* invites a variety of interpretations, including those of God being inscrutable, evasive, or even dismissive in His response to Moses.

Turning now to some modern Christian interpretations of the Exodus 3:14. Pope Paul VI’s *Credo of the People of God* states the following in relation to the orthodox Roman Catholic belief in God: “*He is He who is, as He revealed to Moses;*

and He is love, as the apostle John teaches us: so that these two names, being and love, express ineffably the same divine reality of Him”.⁵ His identification of ‘being’ as a divine name is a reference to the exegesis of Augustine, and through him to the translation of Exodus 3:14b in the Septuagint. Pope John Paul II, who commented on these words of his predecessor in his *Catechesis on the Creed*, writes that “Following the doctrinal and theological tradition of many centuries, he (Paul IV) saw in it the revelation of God as “being” – subsisting being, which expresses, in the language of the philosophy of being (ontology or metaphysics used by St. Thomas Aquinas), the essence of God”.⁶ Roman Catholic orthodoxy thus retains the longstanding interpretation of the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as connoting absolute and eternal being and of it being a Divine name.

Brevard Childs offers a substantial and useful commentary on the call of Moses in the course of which he settles on an interpretation that appears to be a somewhat elaborated synthesis of the positions of others before him.⁷ He suggests that the *ehyeh* of 3:14b and *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a are statements of God’s unspecified intentions for Moses and Israel respectively, and thus settles on a generally temporal interpretation of the verse. More specifically he suggests that the *ehyeh* of 3:14 is a word play on the divine name YHWH and that *ehyeh asher ehyeh* of 3:14a is “paradoxically both an answer and a refusal to answer” on God’s part and that God is here announcing “that His intentions will be revealed in His future acts, which He now refuses to explain”. Inventive though his interpretation may be, there is little in it that could have been especially meaningful or even encouraging to the enslaved Israelites in Egypt, and, like so many other interpretations before and since, it neither measures up to nor even fits the occasion and so is very unlikely to be correct. More interesting is Noth, who identifies the *ehyeh* of 3:14b as a divine name, and even suggests that it “unmistakably hints at the name Yahweh in so far as an Israelite ear could immediately understand the transition from *ehyeh* to Yahweh merely as a transition from the first to the third person, so that the name Yahweh would be understood to mean ‘He is’”.⁸ Noth’s interpretation thus approximates those of Recanati, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra, as outlined in *Exodus 3:14 in Medieval Jewish Thought*.

Exodus 3:14 in the Gospels

However, and despite all of the attention that has been given to Exodus 3:14 by Christian exegetes in all ages, what have been very seldom considered in relation to this verse are the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John, and most especially Jn.8:58. In this verse Jesus speaks the words *ego eimi*,⁹ which in contrast to the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b can only be translated into English as “*I am*”.¹⁰ This is one of the numerous absolute ‘I am’ sayings in John,¹¹ absolute in the sense that they occur without either an implied or actual predicate. There is universal agreement amongst Christian interpreters that the words “*I am*” in Jn.8:58 are a statement of both the eternal existence of Jesus and of his divinity. The allusion to divinity clearly resonates with the revelation of Exodus 3:14 while the claim to eternal existence likewise connotes the meaning attributed to the *ehyeh* of 3:14b by Jerome, Augustine, Aquinas and the authors of the Septuagint, and so the possibility of a link between the two verses is at least plausible. There is, moreover, a widespread recognition amongst Christian scholars that most if not all of the absolute ‘I am’ sayings of John do indeed refer to the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, and so one would imagine that the reality of this link could be confidently affirmed.¹²

That, however, is not the case, because opinion is firmly divided on this issue, with some Christian scholars decisively and even somewhat dismissively rejecting the “I am” of Jn.8:58 as a reference to the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, while yet others elect to remain silent on the subject.¹³ At first glance this rejection or silence would seem quite surprising, constituting as it does a rejection of an obvious association between the person and ministry of Jesus and the person and mission of Moses, the outstanding figure in Judaism before, during and ever since the time of Jesus. It seems more noteworthy still when one considers the prominent Mosaic typology in John, which one noted Johannine scholar considers to be beyond dispute¹⁴ and which is documented in detail by Glasson.¹⁵ It is, moreover, the rejection of an obvious link between the words attributed to Jesus during his ministry and the words attributed to God on the occasion of one of the most important events in the Bible; the call of Moses, which event has occupied the attention of Christian exegetes in all ages. Brevard Childs has even noted with surprise what a minor role the call of Moses plays in New Testament usage, “*particularly since the call of God to both apostle and others is a basic theme of the New Testament*”.¹⁶ This would indeed be surprising if it

were actually the case. I would suggest that the very fact that allusions to the call of Moses do not feature in a very obvious way in the New Testament should alert us to the possibility that they have simply not been recognised as such. The most likely, and surely the most obvious, candidates for such unrecognised allusions are the absolute ‘I am’ sayings of all four Gospels, most especially those of the Gospel of John, and most distinctively that of Jn.8:58. So why, then, might there be a reluctance to recognise and accept this obvious and seemingly attractive link?

The reluctance, where it exists, is presumably on account of the theological difficulties that such a link might appear to present. Among the most fundamental points of Christian dogma is that God (the Father) and Jesus (the word of God incarnate) are one in their essence but distinct in their persons.¹⁷ Christian dogma is therefore incompatible with the total identification of God (the Father) and Jesus, because a total identification of the two would imply that there is really only one ‘person’ in God, and that one could obviously not be Jesus. So if the words of Divine Self-identification in Exodus 3:14b are placed on the lips of Jesus in Jn.8:58 as applying to himself, that could appear to suggest that Jesus was assuming the identity of God (the Father), and that could in turn suggest that the Gospel of John is at odds with Christian dogma. When one considers that the Gospel of John is also substantially the source of Christian dogma, then it is easy to understand why some Christian interpreters might be slow to acknowledge the possibility of a specific and intentional link between these two verses.

However, it is relevant to this paper to determine whether there is such a link, because if there is, then we have in this verse the earliest surviving unequivocal witness to the translation of the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b into Greek as *ego eimi*, and so into English as “*I am*”. For that reason I will consider the matter carefully and in so doing will necessarily look for evidence both that John understood the absolute “*I am*” of Jn.8:58 to be a reference to and translation of the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, and that he understood “I AM” to be a divine name.

Before commencing with this investigation it is useful to make a few introductory remarks on the subject of candidate source-texts for the ‘I am’ sayings of John, about which so much has been written. I must first emphasise that my aim in what follows is not to exclude from consideration any of the possible source-texts,

because that is too large and complex a task for this paper, and it is anyway unnecessary. It is unnecessary because, to begin with, there is little doubt that John is alluding to more than one source-text in the twenty-six “*I am*” sayings that he attributes to Jesus in his Gospel. Schnackenburg, for example, regards the ‘I am’ saying of Jn.8:24 as a reference to the *ani hu* sayings of Second Isaiah¹⁸ and that of Jn.8:58 as a reference to the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, with which opinion I concur.¹⁹ Moreover, John is quite possibly alluding to more than one source-text in some of the ‘I am’ sayings, and he certainly does sometimes use the absolute *ego eimi* with deliberately ambiguous intent, as I will point out below.

The most appropriate and propitious approach to any investigation of these sayings is not to establish which single source-text is the correct one, or even which one can with certainty be excluded. It is rather to determine which source-text can with confidence be said to be fitting in any particular instance. With this in mind my only aim in what follows is to demonstrate that the evidence in John most patently and strongly suggests Exodus 3:14b as the source-text that John had in mind when he wrote the words *ego eimi* in Jn.8:58.

The most useful place to begin this investigation is with the recognition that the author of the Gospel of John was very familiar with the Torah. Every Christian scholar would agree with this, as no doubt would any Jewish scholar familiar with the text. John would therefore have been very familiar with the account of the revelation at the burning bush and with the words spoken by God in Exodus 3:14. As a deeply religious and highly educated Jew he would certainly also have known the possible meanings of the Hebrew words of this verse, and, being fluent in Greek, would have known that one of the only two literal translations into Greek of the word *ehyeh* as it occurs in this verse is *ego eimi*. He would therefore have known that the words he was placing on the lips of Jesus in Jn.8:58 could be understood to have the same meaning as the word *ehyeh* spoken by God in Exodus 3:14b. The question we must first consider is whether or not that is how he intended them to be understood.

If we first suppose that it is not how he intended them to be understood, and that the apparent link between these verses is therefore not intentional, then there are only two possible ways to understand John’s use of the absolute *ego eimi* in Jn.8:58. Either he was aware of the possibility that his readers might - and as it has turned out

certainly would - make the link between the enigmatic declaration of God in Exodus 3:14b and the equally enigmatic and apparently-identical declaration of Jesus in Jn.8:58, but despite being so aware didn't think it was necessary to make it clear that this was not the link he intended, or else it didn't occur to him that his readers would make this link, in which case he made a serious error of judgement in writing his Gospel. The latter possibility can surely be uncontroversially rejected, given John's familiarity with the Torah and the care with which his Gospel is written. We need therefore only consider the former possibility, i.e. that John was aware of the likely association being made between these two verses, that he did not intend it to be made, but that he allowed the possibility to stand just the same. Given the theological significance that such a link could be seen to entail, and the prominence of the call of Moses at the burning bush within Jewish religious and national consciousness, it is extremely improbable that John would have been indifferent to this link being incorrectly made, and that he would have been so knowingly ambiguous in making the link that he did intend as to make such an obvious, theologically significant, and unintended link inevitable, and so this possibility can also be confidently rejected. It is therefore the case that the apparent link between Jn.8:58 and Exodus 3:14 cannot be reasonably accounted for either as an accident or even as merely unintended.

We must therefore consider the only remaining possible explanation, which is that John placed the words *ego eimi* on the lips of Jesus in Jn.8:58 in the full knowledge and expectation that they would be associated with the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, and that the total identification of Jesus and God is what he at least meant to suggest in these words, whatever his precise thinking on the so-called 'divine relations' might have been. If this is the case, then we would expect to find some other evidence in John that also suggests such a total identification, which evidence is actually not difficult to find.

There are in the Gospel of John several statements to the effect that God and Jesus are one and the same. Take for example the opening words of the Gospel: Jn.1:1 "*In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God*". This statement does not suggest any distinction between God and His word, and does, on the contrary, strongly suggest a condition of total identity between the two. Also highly suggestive are the words attributed to Jesus in Jn.10:30: "*I and the Father are one*". This is a very clear statement of the unity of the being of God and the being of

Jesus, and whilst this concept was subsequently taken into consideration in the trinity-in-unity formula of Christian dogma, there is no clear reason for us to suppose that the Jewish John thought of unity as anything other than total identity, and even less reason to suppose that the religious community for whom he was writing would have made any such distinction. Then in Jn.14:9 Jesus says, “*He who has seen me has seen the Father*”, which strongly suggests a condition of identity between the two. More telling again is Jn.16:15 where Jesus says, “*all things the Father has are mine*”, and Jn.17:10 where he says, “*all things that are mine are Yours, and Yours are mine*”, both of which are tantamount to stating that Jesus is identical to God, and even that he is God. And finally the confession of Thomas in Jn.20:28, where Thomas addresses the resurrected Jesus as, “*My Lord and My God*”. In the Gospel of John the title Lord is the Greek *kurios*, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *adonai*, which in turn is the *qere perpetuum* for the divine name YHWH (i.e. the word spoken wherever YHWH is written in the Hebrew Bible). *Kurios* is also the way YHWH is translated into Greek in the Septuagint. The words spoken by Thomas in Jn.20:28 are therefore equivalent to him addressing Jesus as both God and YHWH, and this again strongly suggests that John was totally identifying Jesus with God.

Considering just these few verses, the very least that can be said is that it would not have been entirely out of character for John to have put the Self-identification of God as written in Exodus 3:14b on the lips of Jesus in Jn.8:58. On the contrary, it would have been entirely in character for him to have done precisely this, and it would therefore have been entirely reasonable for his readers to assume that he had done so, and so for them to have made this obvious and highly meaningful link just as so many others have since done over the course of almost two millennia.

The theme of self-identification brings us next to a consideration of the context in which Jesus speaks these words, because the “*I am*” of Jn.8:58 is the climax of a lengthy passage in which the identity of Jesus is repeatedly addressed and in which he speaks the absolute *ego eimi* on no less than three occasions – Jn.8:24, 8:28, and 8:58. In Jn.8:25 ‘the Jews’ ask Jesus “*who are you?*”, and in 8:53 “*whom do you make yourself out to be?*”. In Jn.8:58 comes his definitive response, with Jesus referring to himself in the same words as the Greek translation of the absolute-and-eternal meaning of the divine name of Exodus 3:14b, the divine name that Moses before him had been commanded to say to the doubting Israelites in Egypt. These

parallels are surely no accident, and surely do, on the contrary, indicate the making of a deliberate link between these two verses.

The above evidence strongly and patently suggests that the absolute “*I am*” of Jn.8:58 is a reference to and translation of the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b, and because we have already established that this link cannot be reasonably accounted for as either an accident or even as unintended, this evidence is sufficient to confirm that the link between these two verses must be real and intended. Having established this, we come now to the second point of this enquiry, which is the question of whether or not John understood the “*I am*” of Jn.8:58 to be a divine name. To confirm that he did so we need begin our search no further than Jn.8:59.

In Jn.8:59 ‘the Jews’ whom Jesus was addressing in 8:58 attempt to stone him immediately after he speaks the words *ego eimi*. The Mishnah rules that the sentence of death by stoning for the crime of blasphemy should be applied only in cases where the offender has fully pronounced the divine name YHWH (Sanh. 7:5),²⁰ but Jesus is nowhere recorded as having spoken this name, let alone in Jn.8:58. However, these verses do not make absolutely clear that it was for speaking the words *ego eimi* that he was to be stoned. Elsewhere in John there is a description of an attempt to stone Jesus when he has not committed a crime technically deserving of this punishment (e.g. Jn.10:33), so we must look elsewhere for evidence that the *ego eimi* of Jn.8:58 is to be understood as a divine name.

There are two further passages in John that help us clarify the meaning and the significance these words had for its author, and in so doing help us to understand the version of events described in Jn.8:58-59.

First to Jn.18:5-6 and to the *ego eimi* sayings that feature therein. These declarations are thought by many commentators to have an implied predicate, and that the *ego eimi* of these verses should therefore be translated ‘I am *he*’.²¹ That, however, would make the behavior of those who have come to arrest Jesus very puzzling, because they fall to the ground upon hearing him speak these words, a direct association that is carefully and clearly emphasised in Jn.18:6. Falling to the ground in this verse describes the act of prostration. We can be certain of this because Jn.18:5 is a close parallel to Mt.26:39 and Mark.14:35, in both of which verses the act of

prostration is described, although in those verses it is Jesus who is recorded as having thrown himself on his face (Mathew) or to the earth (Mark) in prayer.²²

Prostration is the typical biblical response to theophanies (e.g. Lev.9:24; Jos.5:14; Judg.13:20; Ezek.1:28), but that is clearly not the intended association with this behavior in Jn.18:5-6, because the arresting party had already seen Jesus and heard him speak without responding in this way. They prostrate themselves only when he speaks the words *ego eimi*. More relevant to this enquiry is that prostration is recorded as the response of worshippers to hearing the name YHWH pronounced by the High Priest in the Temple during the daily Tamid service (Sir.50:21; Eccles. Rabbah 3:11), and so its implications would have been very widely understood.

However, what is even more relevant to our enquiry is that prostration is also recorded in the Mishnah as the response of worshippers to hearing the name YHWH fully pronounced by the High Priest in the Temple on the most important day in the Jewish religious calendar; the Day of Atonement (Yoma 6:2).²³ The name YHWH was pronounced three times during the day's ritual, called the Avodah, but it is only on the occasion of the High Priest beseeching God to forgive the sins of the whole House of Israel – and of his symbolically laying their sins on the scapegoat before dispatching it to its death in the wilderness - that the congregation are explicitly recorded as having responded by falling on their faces. That is to say, the priests and the people of Israel fell on their faces in the presence of the High Priest immediately after he spoke the name YHWH, and immediately before the scapegoat – whose death would cleanse them of their sins - was led away to its fate. There are obvious parallels between this account and the account of Jesus' arrest in the opening verses of Jn.18, and these parallels become even more apparent when one considers the long-recognised 'high-priestly' character of the prayer of Jesus in Jn.17, the prayer that ends immediately before the account of his being arrested and taken away to his eventual death begins.

Because both the Tamid and the Avodah rituals were observed in the Jerusalem Temple - which was destroyed in 70 CE - we can be confident that they were current and widely known during the lifetime of Jesus. Even if these were rituals with which John was not personally familiar, he would certainly have been

aware of them, and so he would certainly have been aware of the significance of his own reference to ‘falling to the ground’ in Jn.18:6.

This leaves no reasonable doubt that these words are to be understood as a form of divine identification and, because they stand alone and relate to no other theophanic phenomenon or statement of divine presence, they must in this context be understood to be an actual Divine name. That Jesus repeats the words *ego eimi* in Jn.18:8 in such a way as to bring the arresting party to their senses and to tell them that he has already identified himself as the man they seek only further underscores the singularity of the response described in 18:6, and is also a good example of John’s occasional use of the absolute *ego eimi* in an ambiguous way.

This being the case, John is telling us that Jesus did indeed speak a divine name in Jn.8:58, but not the name to which the Mishnaic ruling specifically applies. However, the implication of Jn.8:59 and 18:6 is that the divine name he did speak - *ego eimi* - was not merely thought of as a general designation for God, but rather that it had at least equal standing with the name YHWH, because according to John it elicited the same response from those who heard it spoken as would have been expected from the name YHWH. On this point, therefore, John seems to be in broad agreement with Ibn Ezra, Recanati, and Buber, as we shall see again below.

Despite the technical and likely historic inaccuracy of the events described in Jn.8:58-59, the reaction of ‘the Jews’ in 8:59 and of the arresting party in 18:6 would suggest that *ego eimi* / ‘I am’ was well known as a divine name in 1st century CE Palestine. That, however, is very unlikely to be case. To begin with, if the *ego eimi* of Jn.8:58 is a reference to Exodus 3:14, then the Gospel of John is the earliest surviving unequivocal witness to this translation of the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b²⁴ and no other contemporaneous Jewish source bears witness to it.²⁵

Moreover, the words attributed to Jesus in Jn.17:26 present us with compelling evidence that this divine name was not widely known during his lifetime, because in this verse Jesus states that he has “made known” (Gk. *gnorizo*²⁶) the name of God to those whom God had sent to him, meaning that he had made it known to his disciples. The name he was making known cannot have been YHWH because that name would already have been well known to his disciples and there is also no record in John or in any other Gospel that he spoke this name at all. Indeed, the complete absence of the

name YHWH in John stands in marked contrast to the twenty-six “*I am*” sayings attributed to Jesus in this Gospel, which imbalance, it will be recalled, is the reverse of that encountered in the Hebrew Bible in relation to *ehyeh* and YHWH. Nor even can we accept that Jesus might be referring to the *qere perpetuum* for YHWH (*kurios* / Lord) in Jn.17:26 because this too would have been well known to his disciples. Nor is the divine appellation he does frequently use (Father) recognised as a name either in Judaism or in Christianity. Moreover, nobody would disagree that if John had wanted his readers to know that Jesus was making known a particular divine name, as is stated in Jn.17:26, then he would have noticeably attributed the use of that name to Jesus in his Gospel, and so he presumably did.

This implies that Jesus was making known a divine name other than YHWH or Lord, and the only conceivable reason he would have needed to do that is because it was not already known, or at least not widely so. It also implies that the divine name in question must feature noticeably in the Gospel of John.

Under the heading ‘Modern Jewish Philosophy’ in the main paper published in www.exodus-314.com we have already noted that if *ehyeh* is a Divine name then it was almost certainly unknown to mainstream Jewry in the interval between the writing of Exodus 3:14 and the beginning of Christianity. According to the analysis presented in this review, the absolute “*I am*” sayings of Jn.8:58 and 18:5 are to be understood as a divine name, and outside of the Gospels there is no record of this name being known at all in 1st century CE Palestine or indeed at any earlier time. On the other hand, there is no record in John that Jesus spoke any other divine name during his ministry, let alone one that he was trying to make known to his fellow Jews.

It is therefore both reasonable, and indeed necessary, to conclude that ‘I AM’ is the Divine name to which Jesus is referring in Jn.17:26. Conversely, the reference in Jn.17:26 to a divine name that needed to be made known is yet further evidence that the absolute “*I am*” of Jn.18:5-6 and 8:58 is to be understood as a divine name.

And finally, it should be noted that in Jn.17:26, Jesus is depicted as having regarded this name - and his success in making it known - as being such an important feature of his ministry that he would make emphatic mention of it in his final address to God, even in the moments immediately preceding his arrest. We can therefore

safely assume that the author of John likewise regarded this name as uniquely important, as suggested above, and that he too would have wanted to make it known. This, however, does not imply that he had the same understanding of its meaning and significance as did Jesus.

Taking account of all of the above evidence from the Gospel of John, the implications are inescapable. The words 'I am' were understood by John to be a divine name. This name was understood to be a reference to and translation of the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b. It was regarded by John as uniquely important and according to his account by Jesus too. And it was understood to be a divine name by at least some sector of 1st century CE Jewry.

In Summary

To summarise the evidence from all of the above Christian sources:

1. The Vulgate of Jerome and the writings of Augustine and Aquinas bear witnesses to a widespread Christian understanding of the words of Exodus 3:14 as connoting absolute and eternal being (or existence).
2. Both Aquinas and Augustine state that the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b is a Divine name.
3. Certain of the absolute "I am" sayings of John (most notably those in John 8:58 and 18:5-6) are a reference to and translation of the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b and were understood by John and his religious community to be a Divine name. This represents the earliest recorded translation of the absolute *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b as "I am".
4. There is a continuing recognition within modern Christian exegesis that the *ehyeh* of 3:14b connotes absolute and eternal being (or existence), and that it is a Divine name, and that it translates as "I am".

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References and Endnotes

¹ Gilson E., *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p.51.

² For an authoritative summary of the Roman Catholic interpretation of Ex.3:14 from Patristic times to the present day, see: Ott L., *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Lynch P., (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974), p.25-27.

³ McKenna S. (trans.), *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, in: Peebles M. et al. (eds), *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), p.177. For online translation, see: Hadden A., *On The Trinity*; Book 5, Ch.2, available online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130105.htm>

⁴ Gilbey T. et al (eds.), *St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica, Latin Text and English Translation, Vol 3*, (London: Blackfriars, 1964), pp.91-93; For online translation, see: *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Q.13, Article 11. Available online at: <http://www.catholicprimer.org/summa/FP/FP013.html#FPQ13A11THEP1>

⁵ “*The Profession of Faith of Paul VI (1968)*”, in: Dupuis J. (ed.), *Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, (NY: Alba House, 1996), p.24. Full text also available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19680630_credoen.html

⁶ John Paul II, *A Catechesis on the Creed: God, Father and Creator*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), p.118.

⁷ Childs B., *Exodus*, Old Testament Library, (London: SCM Press, 1974), p.75ff.

⁸ Noth M., *Exodus*, Old Testament Library, trans. Bowden J., (London: SCM Press, 1962), p.43.

⁹ Marshall A., *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, The Nestle Greek Text with a Literal English Translation*, (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1958), p.401.

For online interlinear Greek-English New Testament, visit:

http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

¹⁰ All English language New Testament quotations are taken from: *New American Standard Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999). Available online at: <http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/?action=getVersionInfo&vid=49>

¹¹ The following is a complete list of verses in The Gospel of John where the absolute *ego eimi* / 'I am' occurs: 4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 8:28; 8:58; 13:19; 18:5, 6. Source: Keck L. (ed.), *The New Interpreters Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Luke, John Vol. 9*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994-2002), p.602.

¹² See e.g. (1) Freedman D. (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Vol.3*, (NY: Doubleday, 1992), p.924 (2) Brown R., *The Gospel According to John (i-xii), Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible, (NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp.367 and 533ff (3) Meeks W. (ed.), *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books*, (NY: Harper Collins, 1993), p.2029, n.8:24 (4) Schnackenburg R., *The Gospel According to John: Vol. 2*, (London: Burn and Oates, 1980), p.84 (5) Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible*, p.634, n.8:24 (note the typological error in commentary on Jn.8:24; 'Exod.13:14')

should read 'Exod.3:14'. The words 'I am' do not occur in Exod.13:14 in any version or language).

¹³ See e.g. Harner P., *The "I Am" of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp.15-17, 60.

¹⁴ Ashton J., *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.194.

¹⁵ Glasson T F, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel (Studies in Biblical Theology)*, (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹⁶ Childs, *Exodus*, p.83.

¹⁷ Ott L., *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p.69. See also essay on *The Dogma of the Holy Trinity* at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15047a.htm>

¹⁸ The Hebrew *ani hu* and *anoki hu* are rendered into Greek in the Septuagint Version of Second Isaiah as *ego eimi*. The verses in Second Isaiah where these sayings occur include: 41:4; 43:10-11; 43:25; 45:18; 46:4; 51:12; 52:6. For full analysis of these verses, see: Harner, *The "I am" of the Fourth Gospel*, p.6ff. For English translation of Septuagint Second Isaiah, see: *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, with an English Translation*, London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1879, p.874ff.

For a very recent English Translation, see: Silva M., *New English Translation of the Septuagint, Electronic Edition*, available online at:

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/> → *Prophecies* → *Esaias*.

¹⁹ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to John*, p.84.

²⁰ Neusner J., *The Mishnah: A New Translation and Commentary*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p.597.

²¹ This is the translation found in even the most scholarly of translations of John, such as the NRSV and NASB, although the former adds the accurate translation in a footnote, and the latter italicises the ‘*he*’ to indicate that this word does not feature in the text.

²² See: http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

²³ Neusner, p.275.

See also: <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/rlesses/Mishnah%20Yoma.html>

²⁴ The absolute “*ego eimi*” is also attributed to Jesus on five (or perhaps six) occasions in the Synoptic Gospels, all of which predate John. However, its use as a divine self-identification is less clear than in John, and so I regard John as the earliest surviving unequivocal witness to this translation of the *ehyeh* of Exodus 3:14b. The occurrences in the Synoptics are as follows: Mark 6:50 par. Matthew 14:27; Mark 13:6 par. Luke 21:8; Mark 14:62 (and perhaps Luke 22:70), for all of which see: Marshall A., *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*. Also available online at: http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/Greek_Index.htm

²⁵ There is some evidence that ‘I am’ as a translation of the Hebrew ‘*ani hu*’ was understood to be a divine name both in the Septuagint and in Rabbinic Judaism, for which see: Dodd C., *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.94.

²⁶ Contrast Jn.17:6, 21:1, 1:31, where the Greek *phaneroo* is employed. The meaning intended by the ambiguous *phaneroo* is clear, but translations still differ on this point. It clearly implies the physical embodiment or appearance of the word of God in the figure of Jesus. It presumably does not convey the same meaning as that intended by the unambiguous *gnorizo* of 17:26 - as e.g. suggested by the NAB and NRSV – or the same word would have been used for both.