

SPECIAL STUDIES NUMBER FIVE

John 8:58

John 8:58 reads as follows:

"Jesus said unto there, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am."

The American Standard Version reads thus:

"Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was born, I am."

Before we consider John 8:58, it is worthy to call attention to the absolute authority of the Speaker, the Lord Jesus Christ, and how His words, and style, distinguish Him from all other inspired prophets and apostles.

The word translated "verily" is the same word translated in other places by the English "amen". The word means "so be it". Many inspired men said "amen" as did Paul, Romans 9:5, and Peter, I Peter 5:14, and John, I John 5:21, and Jude, Jude 25, etc. But, only One was called "the Amen" (Revelation 3:14). One writer said:

"We may diligently search the chief cities of the nations, examine all the records of the centuries and research the literature of continents the world over, but will never find another bearing this name" (end quote).

This designation; however, is not an adverb, but its use with the definite article, "the Amen", is one of many titles descriptive of our blessed Lord. The term applied to the Lord signifies that He is the fulfillment of all that God has spoken. No one had the authority to say "Amen" with greater significance than the one who was called, "the Amen".

Moreover, Christ not only used the word "verily" but He often used the double "verily, verily" as in our text, John 8:58. See also John 3:5,11; 5:24; 6:47,53; 10:1; 13:16,20,21,38; 14:12; 16:20; 21:18, etc., as cases to point. But, Christ uses the double "verily, verily" at the very beginning of a statement, rather than at the end of a saying, as it was customarily used.

Couple this double "verily, verily", which He used at the beginning

of a statement, with His words, "I say unto you", and you have the style of Deity, the very God who speaks. Notice a few examples:

1. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee" (John 3:5);
2. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee" (John 3:11);
3. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 5:24);
4. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 6:47);
5. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 6:53);
6. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 8:51);
7. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 10:1);
8. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 10:7);
9. "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (John 12:24), etc.

In Ezekiel 2:4, we read, "...Thus saith the Lord." One who received truth from God by revelation, as the inspired prophets and apostles, and was sent by God to present that message to others, preached, "Thus saith the Lord." Christ said, "I say unto you". Peter wrote, "The word of the Lord endureth for ever" (I Peter 1:25). Yet, Christ said, "...My words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). Notice again the authoritative voice of God Himself in Matthew 5 alone:

1. "I say unto you", verse 18;
2. "I say unto you", verse 20;
3. "I say unto you", verse 22;
4. "I say unto thee", verse 26;
5. "I say unto you", verse 28;
6. "I say unto you", verse 32;
7. "I say unto you", verse 34;
8. "I say unto you", verse 39;
9. "I say unto you", verse 44.

The one who so said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you," was very God, and that style of speech was the style of Deity. No wonder we read in conclusion to the sermon on the mount as follows:

"And it came to pass, when Jesus ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (Matthew 7:28,29)

Often we get so lax in our hearing that we allow preachers and teachers the liberty of saying repetitiously, "I say unto you," but such was always the style of Deity. Our Lord so spoke. He was the only One qualified to so speak. He was very God. Hence, He was the Absolute Authority, "the Amen", even "the truth".

This One said:

"...verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am."

In the immediate context, the words of John 8:58 follow the words of Christ in verse 56, and the Jews response in verse 57. Verses 56,57 read as follows:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?"

These unconverted Jews were opposed to Jesus. Christ said to them, "I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me..." (John 8:37). They had boasted, "...we be Abraham's seed...Abraham is our Father..." (John 8:33,39). Christ's words in verses 40,56, "...this did not Abraham...Abraham rejoiced to see my day...", show that Abraham, unlike this "seed of Abraham," was not opposed to Jesus.

The incredulity of the Jews comes out in their reference to the age of Jesus. The words of Christ that "Abraham...saw" my day, implied that if Abraham had seen Jesus, then Jesus had seen Abraham. The Jews took exception to this, saying, "...Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?"

The words "not yet fifty years old" refers to the flesh, His outward appearance. Luke specifically records that Jesus was "about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23) when He began His public ministry, and all scriptural references indicate that His ministry lasted about 3 years. "Fifty" might have been selected because it was thought of as the completion of a man's working life, and his entrance on to old age. I wouldn't be dogmatic about that, but I do know that the Levites, as an example, completed their service at the age of fifty (Numbers 4:3). Whatever the reason, the Jews were certain that so young a man could not have possibly been seen by Abraham. To their vehement objection, Christ emphatically affirmed:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am."

In John's writings, the words "I am" are often employed by Christ in describing various things that He Himself was, things not true of a mere creature. Notice some of His claims, the things which He said, "I am", as follows:

1. "I am the bread of life" (John 6:39);
2. "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12);
3. "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11);
4. "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25);
5. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6);
6. "I am the vine" (John 15:5);
7. "I am the door" (John 10:9);
8. "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Revelation 22:13); etc.

Each claim is peculiar to Deity. Moreover, in John's Gospel, Christ uses the words "I am" without any modifying statements. He not only said "I am" this, or that, but also said, "I am". This is just as much the style of Deity, as was His manner of speech, "Verily, verily, I say unto you", and as was His claims modifying His words, "I am".

In John 8:24, He said, "...if ye believe not that I am (the he is in italics), ye shall die in your sins." The only way to avoid such a fate, one must "believe...that I am," that is, have a scriptural estimate of His person. The "I am" here does not have a predicate, as in many other places previously given. This manner of expression is in the style of Deity. In Exodus 3:13,14 we read:

"And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, what is his name? What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses...I AM hath sent me unto you."

Many religious infidels, like the Jehovah's Witnesses who vehemently deny the Deity of Christ, believe that the Son of God existed before Abraham. Their error is that they also believe that the Son of God came into existence, just as did Abraham. If that is true, then Christ should have said, "Before Abraham was, I was," or "I have been." But, He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was." He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." To become is to pass from nothingness to existence. "I am" denotes a mode of existence which is not due to such a transition. Thus, a mode of being which has a definite beginning is contrasted with one which is eternal. The use of "I am" is an emphatic form of speech, and one that would not customarily be used in ordinary speech. Therefore, to use it was recognizably to adopt the style of Deity.

As this point, permit me to introduce two other facts as follows:

1. Christ uses the words "I am" without the predicate in John 8:24, John 8:58, John 13:19, and John 18:5. This is significant when one remembers that the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in about 300 B.C. Therefore, certain Greek words were used to translate, or correspond to, the Hebrews words. In Deuteronomy 32:39, where the Lordship of Jehovah is clearly reiterated, the Hebrews words "I (am) he" are translated by the exact Greek equivalent "I am" in John 8:58. Again, in Isaiah 43:10, where the Lordship of Jehovah is clearly reiterated, the Hebrew words "I (am) he" are translated by the exact Greek equivalent "I am" in John 8:58. Again, in Isaiah 46:4, where the Lordship of Jehovah is clearly reiterated, the Hebrew words "I (am) he" are translated by the exact Greek equivalent "I am" in John 8:58. Since, therefore, the words "I am" of John 8:58 are used to translate those passages where the Lordship of Jehovah is reiterated, then those words are in the style of Deity, and are a claim to full and equal Deity. This meaning is ostensible in John 13:19 which reads as follows:

"Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am (the he is in italics)."

Christ's prediction was of Judas Iscariot, verse 18, who, although his name was not mentioned in prophecy, would be the one to fulfill the traits of Psalms 41:9, John 13:18. The disciples would live long enough to see it come to pass and, when they did, the fulfillment thereof would serve to identify the One who predicted it as the "I am".

Jehovah is the only one who knows the future, and who has the ability to state it as the present. He said, "...I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:9,10). It is only "God, who...calleth those things which be not as though they were" (Romans 4:19. Hence:

"Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am."

2. The verbs "was" and "am" of John 8:58 are quite different in derivation, and meaning, as scholars testify as follows:

"It is important to observe the distinction between the two verbs. Abraham's life was under the conditions of time, and therefore had a temporal beginning. Hence, Abraham came into being, or was born...Jesus' life was from and to eternity. Hence the formula for absolute, timeless existence, I am..."

(end quote, Word Studies in the New Testament, Volume II, "Gospel of John", page 58.)

A.T. Robertson writes:

"...'before Abraham came into existence or was born.' I am (ego eimi)...genesthai (entrance into existence of Abraham and eimi (timeless being))..." (end quote, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume V, "The Fourth Gospel," page 158,159).

Kenneth Wuest writes:

"The verb John uses, speaks of absolute existence as contrasted to an existence that has had a beginning in time" (end quote, Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, "Jesus of Nazareth - Who is He?", page 23.)

Leon Morris writes:

"...before Abraham was'... the meaning will be 'came into existence',...A mode of being which has a definite beginning is contrasted with one which is eternal" (end quote, The Gospel According to John, page 473).

Henry Alford writes:

"The distinction between was made (or was born) and am is important. The present, I am, expresses essential existence...and was often used...to assert His divine Being" (end quote, New Testament for English Readers, Volume II, "St. John", Page 547.)

The testimony of such scholars could be multiplied indefinitely, but these suffice to show that they distinguish between the two verbs, "was" and "am", and unanimously agree that one means to come into existence, and the other means timeless existence.

What Greek scholars agree to in definition, the word of God clearly teaches. Jesus Christ preceded "all", not some, created things (John 1:3). Thus, He is uncreated. Since He is uncreated, He is eternal. And, since He is eternal, He is God. "I am".

The reaction of the Jews in John 8:59 proves that they understood Christ's words in the style of Deity. Notice:

"Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him..." (John 8:58,59).

The Jews were certainly legalists, and the Mosaic Law reveals five cases in which stoning was legal:

1. Having a familiar spirit (Leviticus 20:27);
2. Cursing, or blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-23);
3. False prophet who led to idolatry (Deuteronomy 13:5-10);
4. A stubborn and rebellious son (Deuteronomy 21:18-21);
5. And, adultery and rape (Deuteronomy 22:21-24; Leviticus 20:10).

Of these five, only the second reason given, that of blasphemy, fits the context. I have read some Jehovah's Witness literature where they take the position that the Jews sought to stone Him because He called them children of the devil in John 8:44. Such, however, was never a legal ground for stoning. Moreover, in Matthew 12:34 He called them a "generation of vipers", and they did not seek to stone Him. The same in Matthew 23:33. But, why? Because, insult was not a ground for legal stoning. They sought to stone Him in John 8:59 for exactly the same reason they sought to stone Him in John 10:31, and no doubt also in John 5:18, and that was because He spoke in the style applicable only to Deity. They understood it that way and, if they erred, it was never corrected. Rather, the Lord proved Himself, to their very senses, to be their Messiah and God, the great "I am" for He "hid himself; and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them; and so passed by" (John 8:59).

So be it. Jesus Christ is Lord.