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What's in a Name?

Names are a huge part of life; without them, society would be kind of confusing. Parents will spend hours deciding what to call their newborn, yet many children often pick the first thing that pops into their head when naming a pet. However or whatever someone is named, there is no doubt the end result plays a pretty large role in his or her life. In society today, though, names don't typically bear the contextual significance they once did. I personally was named after my grandma on my mom's side (we share our middle name), but I couldn't tell you what it means. This was not the case in biblical times. People were named according to their personality, character, or history, and Jesus himself was no exception.

Of all His names, I AM is one of the most powerful titles of Christ. It first appears in the Bible in Exodus chapter 3 when God is talking to Moses at the burning bush. God instructs Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and when Moses asks God what he shall say to get the Israelites to follow him, God responds with "I AM has sent me to you." Additionally, if the Israelites are to ask what his name is, Moses is to respond with "I am who I am." This title is known as the Divine name of Christ because it "emphasize[s] the mystery of God, the impossibility of defining his nature" (Schild 297). And it does just that.

Many translations of the Bible reorganize "I am who I am" in a way that they think makes the most sense, but regardless of how they do, it all means the same thing, which is that God is who he is. He is not being vague to get on people's nerves, but rather he is "the One who

Is, who exists, who is real” (Schild 301). The confusion often comes from the unorthodox grammatical syntax used and what the “to be” verb “am” insinuates. In any situation, “am” can refer to identity or existence (Schild 296), but the tenacity with which God says it, “I AM” also refers to his genuine and true nature.

Aside from Exodus, “I AM” statements are scattered throughout the Gospel of John. There are seven specific statements that start with “I am” and are followed by a form of imagery that ties back to the Old Testament. These specific metaphors – bread of life; vine; light of the world; good shepherd; gate; resurrection and the life; and the way, the truth, and the life – serve as Old Testament fulfillments, but they also paint the larger picture that Christ himself *is* the messianic fulfillment of the Old Testament (Hutchison 64). The imagery used and the grammatical articles used with them (*the* vine, *the* light, etc.) emphasize that Christ is the one, true covenantal fulfillment. He supersedes all who came before him and serves as the definite Savior (Hutchison 73). Such small words have such powerful meaning, but they don’t end here.

Again in John, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament covenant, but this time he doesn’t use imagery. He explicitly tells the Jews, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). In doing this, Jesus declares his eternal preexistence. Jesus doesn’t say “I *was* around before Abraham was,” but rather uses a present tense verb to explain that he *is* and always has been and always will be. Hebrews says it best when the author wrote, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). “I AM” means that Jesus is eternally present, now and forever.

The journey of “I AM” throughout the Bible wasn’t always a walk in the park, though. When the Jews initially heard Jesus say “before Abraham was, I am,” they took it upon themselves to assume the worst. The Jewish people of that time were aware of Moses’

experience with the burning bush and God's declaration of "I AM," and they credited that name to be so sacred they wouldn't dare use it (LSB 1784). So, when Jesus said "I AM," the Jews took it as blaspheming and were immediately prepared to stone Him to death because it was the only response they knew (Youngblood 151). However, this mindset didn't last long. Later on, when the soldiers went to arrest Jesus, they explained who they were looking for, and Jesus responded with "I am he" (John 18:5). Upon hearing this, the soldiers knew who they were in the midst of and "fell to the ground" (18:6; Youngblood 152).

"I AM" to me resembles great power and authority because God himself is declaring to His people that he is who he is and that's the only way to describe it. We just have to trust in Him because he knows everything and we don't. I think it perfectly describes God because it's a simple concept, yet the more you try to understand it, the more mysterious and confusing it tends to be. It's not meant to be completely understood – just like Trinity. For the very same reasons, though, it's also awe-inspiring. Something so seemingly simple like "I AM" is so powerful that the mere utterance of it in New Testament times was considered blasphemous. I personally love it and think it deserves its title of the Divine name.

Names are important, and Jesus is clearly no exception. His title of I AM is powerful enough to fulfill the Old Testament covenant and describe God in the most fitting way possible. Even though the contextual meaning of names isn't as popular today as it was in Biblical times, what the names have to say is important, and there's no telling what's in each one.