

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (28 April 2024)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples (John 15:1-8 – NRSV).

Introductory notes

General

The metaphor of the vine is familiar to Jesus’ listeners – see Hosea 10:1, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, 5:10, 6:9, 12:10, Ezekiel 15:1-8, 17:3-10 & 19:10-14. The Synoptic Gospels have a number of references to the metaphor of the vine – see Matthew 21:23–41 & 20:1–16, Mark 12:1–9, Luke 20:9–16, 21:28–32 & 13:6–9. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures the metaphor is typically used as something of a lament.

John 15:1-8 is different. Jesus uses the metaphor here to identify himself and his place in the work of God. Just as Jesus finds his life in and through the Father, so the disciples will find their life in and through Jesus: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Specific

I am: Maybe there are echoes of the Sinai theophany here – “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’. He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you”.’” (Exodus 3:4). Raymond Brown draws on the scholarship of Rudolf Bultmann as he offers a lengthy treatment of this theme. Part of his reflection follows: “The Greek *egō eimi*, ‘I am’, can be simply a phrase of common speech, equivalent to ‘It is I’ or ‘I am the one’. However, it also has had a solemn and sacral use in the OT, the NT, Gnosticism, and pagan Greek religious writings. Bultmann has classified four different uses of the formula: **(a)** *Präsentationsformel*, or an introduction, answering the question, ‘Who are you?’ Thus, ‘I am Socrates’; or in Gen 17:1, ‘I am El Shaddai’. **(b)** *Qualifikationsformel*, or as a description of the subject, answering the question, ‘What are you?’ Thus, ‘I am a philosopher’; or in Ezek 28:2, the king of Tyre says, ‘I am a god’. **(c)** *Identifikationsformel*, where the speaker identifies himself with another person or thing. Bultmann cites a saying of Isis, ‘I am all that has been, that is, and that will be’. The predicate sums up the identity of the subject. **(d)** *Rekognitionsformel*, or a formula that separates the subject from others. It answers the question, ‘Who is the one who ...?’ with the response, ‘It is I’. This is an instance in which the ‘I’ is really a predicate.

“Now keeping in mind this spectrum of usage, extending from the banal to the sacral, let us consider the use of *egō eimi* in John. Grammatically we may distinguish three types of use:

“(1) The absolute use with no predicate. Thus,

8:24: “Unless you come to believe that I AM, you will surely die in your sins.”

8:28: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM.”

8:58: “Before Abraham even came into existence, I AM.”

13:19: “When it does happen, you may believe that I AM.”

“There is a natural tendency to feel that these statements are incomplete; for instance, in 8:25 the Jews respond by asking, ‘Well, then, who are you?’ Since this usage goes far beyond ordinary parlance, all recognize that the absolute *egō eimi* has a special revelatory function in John. According to Daube, T. W. Manson has proposed that the formula really means, ‘The Messiah is here’. The meaning is suggested for Mark 13:6 (Luke 21:8): ‘Many will come in my name, saying I am’—here Matt 24:5 supplies a predicate, ‘I am the Messiah’. However, there is not much in the context of the Johannine passages that would incline us to think that Jesus is speaking of messiahship. A more common explanation, as we shall see below, is to associate the Johannine use with *egō eimi* employed as a divine name in the OT and rabbinic Judaism.

“(2) The use where a predicate may be understood even though it is not expressed. 6:20: The disciples in the boat are frightened because they see someone coming to them on the water. Jesus assures them, ‘*Egō eimi*; do not be afraid’. Here the expression may simply mean, ‘It is I, i.e., someone whom you know, and not a supernatural being or a ghost’. We shall point out, however, that divine theophanies in the OT often have this formula: Do not be afraid; I am the God of your ancestors. in 6:20 John may well be giving us an epiphany scene, and thus playing on both the ordinary and sacral use of *egō eimi*.

“18:5: The soldiers and police who have come to the garden across the Kidron to arrest Jesus announce that they are seeking Jesus, and Jesus answers, ‘*Egō eimi*’. This means, ‘I am he’; but the fact that those who hear it fall to the ground when he answers suggests a form of theophany which leaves men prostrate in fear before God. Once again John seems to be playing on a twofold use of *egō eimi*.

“(3) The use with a predicate nominative. In seven instances Jesus speaks of himself figuratively.

6:35, 51: “I am the bread of life [living bread].”

8:12 (9:5): “I am the light of the world.”

10:7, 9: “I am the [sheep]gate.”

10:11, 14: “I am the model shepherd.”

11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life.”

14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

15:1, 5: “I am the [real] vine.”

“(On the borderline of this group of ‘I am’ statements would be two others: 8:18, ‘I am one who gives testimony on my behalf’; and 8:23, ‘I am of what is above’.) In discussing these ‘I

am' statements in the light of the four possible formulas given above, Bultmann thinks that, as they now stand in the Gospel, five of the seven belong to his group (*d*). This means that Jesus is saying, 'I am the bread, the shepherd, etc., and this predicate is not true of some other person or thing'. Zimmermann, agrees that the use is exclusive; the accent is on the 'I' and the predicate is only a development—thus, this type of 'I am' sentence is related to the absolute use in (1). Those who think that the 'I am' sentence with a predicate came from proto-Mandean sources hold that in the Gospel Jesus is contrasting his claim to be the bread, the shepherd, etc., with that of the claimants put forward by the proto-Mandaeans.

"A more obvious contrast is suggested by the Gospel context. 'I am the bread' is found in a context where the crowd suggests that manna given by Moses was the bread from heaven (6:31). The statement at the feast of Tabernacles, 'I am the light', was probably by way of contrast with the festal lights burning brightly in the court of the women at the Temple. The double claim, 'I am the gate' and 'I am the shepherd', was probably by way of contrast with the Pharisees mentioned at the end of ch. 9.

"Bultmann thinks that two of the 'I am' statements, 11:25 and 14:6, belong to group (*c*) of the 'I am' formulas where the predicate identifies the subject. Thus, these statements are not primarily a contrast with another's claim to be the resurrection, the life, the way, and the truth. In our opinion, not only is this correct, but it is also probable that the five statements that Bultmann attributes to (*d*) have features that belong to (*c*) as well. The stress in all of these 'I am' statements is not exclusively on the 'I', for Jesus also wishes to give emphasis to the predicate which tells something of his role. The predicate is not an essential definition or description of Jesus in himself; it is more a description of what he is in relation to man. In his mission Jesus is the source of eternal life for men ('vine', 'life', 'resurrection'); he is the means through whom men find life ('way', 'gate'); he leads men to life ('shepherd'); he reveals to men the truth ('truth') which nourishes their life ('bread'). Thus, these predicates are not static titles of autodoxology but a revelation of the divine commitment involved in the Father's sending of the Son. Jesus is these things to men because he and the Father are one (10:30) and he possesses the life-giving power of the Father (5:21). Jesus' statement, 'I am the truth, the light, ...' must be related to similar statements about the Father's relation to men: 'God is Spirit' (4:24); 'God is light' (1 John 1:5); 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16).

"There are other indications that the predicate cannot be neglected in these statements. The discourses associated with the 'I am' statements explain the predicate; this is clear in the explanations of the bread, the gate, the shepherd, and the vine. Moreover, there is much to be said for the parallelism that some scholars would establish between this class of 'I am' statements and the Synoptic parables that begin with 'The kingdom of heaven [God] is like ...'

"Finally, it should be noted that there are 'I am' statements with a nominal predicate in Revelation as well as in John. But, while in John the predicates are adaptations of OT symbolism (bread, light, shepherd, and vine are all used symbolically in describing the relations of God to Israel), the predicates in Revelation are frequently taken directly from OT passages. Note the following examples: Rev 1:8: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega'; 1:17: 'I am

the first and the last, and the living one' (cf. Isa 41:4, 44:6, 48:12); 2:23: 'I am the one who searches mind and heart' (cf. Jer 11:20)." (Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel according to John (I–XII): Introduction, translation, and notes* (Vol. 29), New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008, 533-535.)

abide: The Greek verb *menō* is used repeatedly through John's Gospel. It can be translated as "abide", "remain", "stay", "make one's home". John uses it initially in 1:32 when John the Baptist recognizes Jesus and declares to the people: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it *remained* (*emeinen*) on him". It is used again in 1:33. Gradually, the word starts to take on more and more significance. We glimpse this when two of John's disciples walk after Jesus: "'Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying (*meneis*)?' He said to them, 'Come and see'. They came and saw where he was staying (*meinei*), and they remained (*emeinan*) with him that day" (1:38-39). This threefold use of the word is suggestive of what is to come in today's Gospel, where the word appears eight times and is translated "abide", indicating a depth of meaning beyond what is implied in words such as "stay" and "remain".