

'I AM' IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

Literary Function, Background and
Theological Implications

DAVID MARK BALL



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PREFACE

Any attempt to give a history of such a study as this may lay the author open to several dangers. One such danger is that the following study may be interpreted in the light of its pre-history rather than in its final form. Since a basic tenet of the following study is that we should study the final form of the Fourth Gospel rather than its history, it may seem self-defeating to provide a history of the study itself. A second danger is that of authorial intention and its importance (or unimportance) in understanding any text. However, with the question of the 'intentional fallacy' ringing in my ears, I will provide a brief outline of what has led to this study. For those who believe that the meaning resides in the text of the study itself, I make a profound apology.

As an undergraduate, my interest in the 'I am' sayings of the Fourth Gospel was stirred by two events. The first was a lecture course on John's Gospel given in the Sheffield University Biblical Studies Department by Dr Andrew Lincoln. This was the first time I had been exposed to a 'literary' approach to the Gospels. However, rather than neglecting the concerns of history and theology, this course attempted to integrate the approaches of the more traditional theological schools with those of modern Narrative Criticism. The second event was an Evangelistic Mission led by Dr Billy Graham in Sheffield at about the same time. This mission raised the issue of how Jesus' words in John relate to the Jesus of history; an issue that is not restricted to the Evangelical wing of the church, but has repercussions for all those concerned with what is taught in university and what is believed by the majority of church-goers.

Both of these issues led me to want to find out more about the 'I am' sayings. After an undergraduate dissertation on the subject, Dr Lincoln graciously agreed to supervise my postgraduate studies as well. I have therefore subjected not only myself, but my teacher to living closely with these sayings for seven years. This study of the 'I am' sayings will show that the second event which led to this study has still not

adequately been dealt with. However, my concern for biblical studies that is accountable to the average church-goer has only been enhanced by my studies and for this I am especially grateful to Rev Dr Bruce Winter of Tyndale House, Cambridge.

Neither my undergraduate nor postgraduate studies would have got anywhere without the constant support and encouragement of my parents. I have also met many friends along the way, including my wife Angela, who was willing to marry into this project and who has proof-read the final stages of this project. I am grateful also to the examiners of my thesis, Dr Stephen Smalley and Dr Margaret Davies for the helpful comments made on areas for improvement. I am, of course, thankful that Sheffield Academic Press, and particularly Professor Stanley Porter, have accepted this study for publication.

My postgraduate work proceeded without any help from Mrs Thatcher's government. I am especially grateful therefore to Mrs G. Brown and Miss D. Everett as well as Elite Valeting for the finances to help me through (though cleaning Mercedes, BMWs and Toyotas are not the stuff Biblical Studies PhDs are usually made of). Tyndale House, Cambridge supported my second and third year's work. Other unsung heroes include Mr John Weston who gave help with my German; Ron Elsdon, who voluntarily converted my original discs from an Amstrad to a PC and Dr G. David Samuel for allowing me time to complete this work. A final word must go to my brother and the BSA Bantam which shares its renovation with this work. To both of these as well as many others, I owe my sanity.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica
BAGD	W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BETHL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConBNT	Coniectanea biblica, New Testament
ConNT	<i>Coniectanea neotestamentica</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NCB	New Century Bible
Neot	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	<i>Novum Testamentum Supplements</i>
NRT	<i>Nouvelle Revue Théologique</i>

<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>NZTR</i>	<i>New Zealand Theological Review</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SE</i>	<i>Studia Evangelica I, II, III</i> (= TU 73 [1959], 87 [1964], 88 [1964], etc.)
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SNTU</i>	<i>Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia theologica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>TSK</i>	<i>Theologische Studien und Kritiken</i>
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZKT</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

INTRODUCTION

It is now over half a century since the thorough investigation of the Johannine 'I am' sayings by E. Schweizer.¹ Although many important articles on them have appeared since then, scholarship on the Fourth Gospel has changed in so many ways that a full study of these sayings is long overdue. This is all the more important considering the significance of these sayings in the Gospel of John. The phrase is used in various forms, settings and among diverse narrative audiences.²

When Schweizer wrote, the general consensus was that the Gospel of John should be understood against a background of Gnostic and Mandaean literature.³ However, many of the concepts that were thought to derive from a Gnostic milieu have since been found within Judaism. The Jewish nature of the Fourth Gospel has especially been confirmed by the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls and by the rise in the study of Jewish material as a possible background to Johannine thought. This has led to a re-appraisal of the origins of the Gospel as a whole.

A recent trend in Johannine scholarship has been to accept that, although the text of the Gospel may have had a complex history, it should be interpreted in its final form.⁴ This trend has been prompted by

1. E. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi: Die religionsgeschichtliche Herkunft und theologische Bedeutung der johanneischen Bildreden, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Quellenfrage des vierten Evangeliums* (FRLANT, 56; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939).

2. Cf. P.B. Harner, *The 'I am' of the Fourth Gospel* (Facet Books; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 2.

3. This was the consensus of the 'history of religions' school as advocated by R. Bultmann, who held that Mandaean Gnosticism antedates Christianity and is determinative in the shaping of Johannine Christology ('Die Bedeutung der neuer-schlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums', *ZNTW* 24 [1925], pp. 100-46, esp. pp. 115-17). Although Schweizer (*Ego Eimi*, p. 108) did not accept that the extant Mandaean texts influenced John, he saw many parallels in Mandaeism and concluded that John and Mandaeism drew from a common source.

4. The development of this trend is outlined in the works of S.D. Moore (*Literary*

the rise in various forms of literary criticism,¹ which assume that the extant text is ordered to convey a message and which attempts to discover how that message is conveyed as well as what the message is.²

In the light of such major changes in Johannine scholarship, a new study of the 'I am' sayings is needed. However, such a study should not ignore the importance of several of Schweizer's findings about John's use of ἐγώ εἰμι. Schweizer made a nearly exhaustive survey of different uses of 'I am' in various cultures (including examples from India, Iran and Egypt as well as modern usage),³ and drew the highly significant conclusion that formal parallels to a phrase do not necessarily denote interdependence.⁴ It is therefore not necessary to discuss all the possible occurrences of 'I am' unless some sort of dependence can be established or is at least plausible. This will be particularly important in view of the following survey of possible parallels to 'I am' (Chapter 1). Secondly, Schweizer discovered that the Fourth Gospel displayed an essential unity from which it is difficult to extract particular sources for the 'I am' sayings. In other words the sayings form an integral part of the Fourth Gospel and as such cannot readily be removed from it.⁵ This will be confirmed by the literary studies in Chapter 3.

Finally, Schweizer maintained that the 'I am' sayings with an image should not be regarded as allegory or parable but as 'real speech'.⁶ This

Criticism and the Gospels [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], pp. xv-xix) and M.W.G. Stibbe (*John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* [SNTSMS, 73; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], pp. 5-12).

1. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. xvi, lists 'a bewildering variety of names', by which the new literary approach may be categorized.

2. Moore points out that much biblical literary criticism has been based on the theories of new criticism. He observes that, 'a fundamental New Critical tenet was the inseparability of form and content. Form was not to be thought of as instrumental, the vehicle for ideational or propositional content or cultural or historical reality, separable from the literary text and independent of it. Rather, the meaning of the text was indissolubly bonded with its form' (*Literary Criticism*, p. 9).

3. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 12-14 (also pp. 14-21).

4. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 21.

5. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 82-112. He concludes (p. 108): 'The style is generally unified. . . a) The Gospel is very probably not a completely free creation, but is written on the basis presumably of a written tradition. b) But this tradition is very strongly imbued with the evangelist's own style and is assimilated into the whole so that it is hardly possible to separate it any more.' All translations of German and French texts are my own, except where the work is cited from a published English translation.

6. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 112-24.

means that the 'I am' sayings do not simply compare Jesus with various images but actually unite Jesus with the term.¹ Jesus is not just like a vine (parable—cf. Mt. 13.24, 31, 33), he is the vine. Likewise he is not simply *a* vine (allegory), he is *the* vine.

It is not Jesus who is the shepherd in the unreal, metaphorical sense—he is the only real and right one—, it is not Jesus who is the bread in the unreal, metaphorical sense—he is the only true and right one—, but all that we humans ('in reality') call shepherd and bread is only this in respect to him in an 'unreal, metaphorical' sense.²

1. *The Reasons for the Present Study*

From previous critical studies of the use of ἐγώ εἰμι in John's Gospel, two main categories of form have emerged:

- a. The use of ἐγώ εἰμι accompanied by an image. This is the simplest category to define. Starting with the claim to be the bread of life (6.35, 41,48,51.), Jesus takes various images upon himself by means of the words ἐγώ εἰμι ending with the claim to be the true vine (15.1, 5). In all, there are seven distinct images accompanied by the words ἐγώ εἰμι in six different passages.
- b. The use of ἐγώ εἰμι without an image. Brown further divides these sayings without an image into '(1) The absolute use with no predicate.'³ '(2) The use where a predicate may be understood even though it is not expressed.'⁴ A satisfactory definition of which among this second category of 'I am' sayings should be regarded as absolute (i.e. which 'I am' sayings stand alone with no further explanation of who or what Jesus is claiming to be) is hard to obtain (see Chapter 5).

Such a distinction in the use of ἐγώ εἰμι in the Fourth Gospel has led scholarship to look for formal parallels to both types of saying. A glance at the possible parallels (outlined in Chapter 1 below) shows that, while the closest formal parallels to the use without an image are in the Old

1. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 122.

2. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 124.

3. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB, 29; New York: Doubleday, 1970), I, p. 533.

4. Brown, *John*, I, p. 533.

Testament and Judaism, the closest formal parallels to the sayings with an image lie in Mandaeism. This has tended to result in scholars studying the different forms separately.¹ It must, however, be asked from the outset whether the use of ἐγώ εἰμι in the text of John allows such a sharp distinction between the forms of 'I am' which even permits an entirely different background to the two types of saying.

Although Schweizer warns against the danger of thinking that a parallel form of saying necessarily implies dependence,² his study assumes that the background to the 'I am' sayings consists of formal parallels. He is representative of many scholars in thinking that it is primarily the form of John's ἐγώ εἰμι sayings which provides the key to the correct background by which the phrase may be understood. Such an assumption leads to the danger that otherwise close parallels are excluded because they do not concur with the Johannine form. It is the contention of this investigation that conceptual parallels may prove to be as important as, and in some cases more important than, formal parallels for determining the correct background by which the ἐγώ εἰμι sayings of John's Gospel may be understood. For this reason it is important to study the way ἐγώ εἰμι is used in the Gospel itself before looking for material which is in agreement with such a use of 'I am'.

The belief that ἐγώ εἰμι in John is a formula leads to a further danger that where ἐγώ εἰμι in John does not fit the formula that has been assumed, it may be excluded from discussion.³ This investigation will thus study every occurrence of ἐγώ εἰμι on the lips of Jesus before determining whether 'I am' is a fixed formula.

As the survey in Chapter 1 will show, scholarship has tended to concentrate on the background to the sayings in John.⁴ As a result, there

1. Thus Schweizer (*Ego Eimi*) Bultmann (*Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*) and S. Schulz (*Komposition und Herkunft der Johanneischen Reden* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960]) concentrate on the 'I am' sayings with images. The following, however, concentrate on those 'I am' sayings without images: C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 93-96; Harner, 'I am'; J. Richter, 'Ani Hu und Ego Eimi' (unpublished dissertation, University of Erlangen, 1956); and E. Stauffer, 'The Background to the Revelation', in *idem, Jesus and his Story* (trans. D.M. Barton; London: SCM Press, 1960).

2. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 37, 38. Cited below in Chapter 1, 'Possible Parallels: Gnosticism and Mandaeism'.

3. See below in Chapter 5, 'Delimiting the Sources: Implications of Form'.

4. By concentrating on the role of the 'I am' sayings in the Gospel of John, the

is a danger of imposing on the text ideas which were never implied. The emergence of literary criticism has both challenged the excessive preoccupation of scholarship with the background to Johannine thought and at the same time provided new tools to look at how the Gospel functions as a whole. Owing to the above considerations, the 'I am' sayings of the Fourth Gospel are ripe for re-investigation. It is important to study the context of ἐγώ εἰμι in the Gospel itself. The text of the Gospel will then be used to judge the possible background material in accordance with how the words are used in the Gospel.¹

2. *Intention and Plan of Action*

The following study of the 'I am' sayings in the Fourth Gospel will be divided into four parts. The first (Chapter 1), entitled 'Suggested Background to "I am"' is a brief, but not exhaustive survey of the various parallels that have been suggested as possible background to the ἐγώ εἰμι sayings of the Fourth Gospel. This part is not intended as a critical history of the study of 'I am', but instead is an overview of the diverse backgrounds that may be pertinent to such a study.² The second part (Chapters 2–4), entitled 'The World of the Text', will entail a literary study of each pericope in which the words ἐγώ εἰμι occur. This part will concentrate on how 'I am' works in the Gospel itself³ and will form a major part of the investigation. The third part (Chapters 5–8), entitled 'The World behind the Text', will draw on conclusions from the second part in order to investigate the background from which the 'I am' sayings derive. In other words, it will be argued that the literary function of ἐγώ εἰμι itself points to the likely sources upon which the writer

work of B. Hinrichs has gone some way to redressing this imbalance (*'Ich Bin': Die Konsistenz des Johannes-Evangeliums in der Konzentration auf das Wort Jesus* [Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 133; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988]).

1. Cf. W.C. Van Unnik, 'The Purpose of St John's Gospel', *SE* 1, p. 386: 'the final word of John himself' should 'offer the pattern for the reproduction of John's theology'.

2. For a brief critical history of the study of ἐγώ εἰμι, see R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (trans C. Hastings *et al.*; London: Burns and Oates 1980), II, pp. 81-83.

3. By 'how it works' I intend (following R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* [Foundations and Facets: New Testament; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], p. 5) questions regarding how the narrative components of the Gospel interact with ἐγώ εἰμι and involve and affect the reader.

drew when using the phrase. The concluding part (Chapter 9), entitled 'The World beyond the Text', will then draw together implications of the investigation for the study of 'I am' and also raise possible implications of such a study for other spheres of Johannine scholarship.

This plan of action may at first seem somewhat clumsy as it involves two (and sometimes three) separate studies of the pericopes which contain ἐγώ εἰμι. However, while a more popular presentation may wish to combine the implications from a literary study with the study of background material in one smooth presentation, the following structure has two distinct advantages. The first is that this structure clearly shows the process of the investigation. In other words, it follows the structure of the investigation as it was carried out and therefore it is possible to trace how each layer of study led to another. Secondly, and more importantly, the following structure begins with the text of the Gospel. The way that 'I am' functions in the Gospel itself is then used to delimit the possible background material. This means that the function of ἐγώ εἰμι in John can be used to sift the enormous amount of possible parallels. This will show that the text itself points to a certain background by which the 'I am' sayings should be understood and will thus suggest that it is not necessary to look to every possible formal parallel before being able to determine what is meant by the use of such a phrase.

Since the term 'literary study' may be defined in several different ways, it is important to clarify the method which was adopted in examining each pericope. In what follows the concept of a 'literary study' of the Fourth Gospel is indebted to the work of Culpepper,¹ which seeks to bring tools from the field of narrative criticism to bear upon the final text of John's Gospel.² According to the model which Culpepper and, consequently, the following studies adopt, 'dissection and stratification have no place...and may distort and confuse one's view of the text. Every element of the Gospel contributes to the production of its meaning, and the experience of reading the text is more important than the process of its composition.'³ However, it is not the intention of the following studies to contend that such 'dissection and stratification have no place in the study of the gospel', nor to contend that the 'process of

1. Culpepper, *Anatomy*.

2. Following Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 5: "'Text" here means simply the words or signifiers of the story as recorded in the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland, Novum Testamentum Graece' (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).

3. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 5.

its composition' is not important. In fact it may be that in certain circumstances a 'literary study' of the text sheds new light on the process of composition, either by confirming or calling into question previously held views. For this reason Culpepper is correct to call for a dialogue between 'historical-critical scholarship' and 'the approach of literary criticism'.¹ Later he further acknowledges that

Once the effort has been made to understand the narrative character of the gospels, some rapprochement with the traditional, historical issues will be necessary. Questions about how the story is told inevitably raise interest in why it is told and why it is told as it is.²

It is therefore the intention of this investigation that such a dialogue will begin to take place in the study of background material.

While it is important to note that the Gospel of John takes the form of a Gospel and not of a novel, it is believed that, if used carefully, the tools developed from the study of modern literature may also throw new light on the study of ancient literature which conforms only to certain aspects of the modern genre.³ It is hoped that the literary studies will show the particular worth of using such modern tools not only for an understanding of the text itself but also for their implications for an understanding of the background from which the text was written. These literary studies will therefore prove to be a 'way in' for the background studies which follow them.

In defence of applying the tools of modern narrative criticism to the text of John's Gospel, it should be stated that, while such tools have been refined and redefined in the study of various genres (such as the folk tale and the novel),⁴ many of the definitions go back to the ancient

1. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 5.

2. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 11.

3. Stibbe points out the importance of recognizing that the Gospel genre is quite different from that of the novel and that 'Culpepper takes it too much for granted that a gospel can be studied as if it were a novel' (*John as Storyteller*, p. 10) so that 'Culpepper's method is fundamentally anachronistic' (p. 11). The following study has attempted to use narrative criticism only in as much as it sheds light on the Gospel genre. It has not been possible to integrate all the implications of Stibbe's observations of the flaws in Culpepper's method into the present study.

4. See the seminal works of V. Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale* (trans. L. Scott; Austin: University of Texas, 2nd edn, 1968 [1928]) and E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962); cf. also S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (London: Ithaca, 1978).

study of Greek literature and much is owed in particular to Aristotle's work on poetics.¹ Thus Aristotle deals there with the concepts of plot (6.19–8.4), characterization (15.1–8) and (elsewhere) with irony.² Other such tools are derived from the study of ancient as well as modern literature.³ Thus Moore is correct to observe that:

Over the past three decades, the theory of narrative has displaced the theory of the novel on the international scene as a central preoccupation of literary theory... Over roughly the same period, narrative theory has become an interdisciplinary project, making important inroads in fields as diverse as anthropology, historiography, psychology, and, of course, theology and biblical studies. The literary study of the Gospels and Acts, in consequence, need by no means be chained to the novel.⁴

Moreover, some of the tools of more traditional historical-critical scholarship (such as form or redaction criticism) are as alien to the ancient world as are concepts derived from poetics (such as point of view or narrative time).⁵ It is a question of how these tools are applied to the text of the Gospel and whether they are adapted in the light of the Gospel genre which determines how appropriate and helpful they may be in the understanding of the text.⁶

1. Aristotle, *The Poetics: 'Longinus' on the Sublime: Demetrius on Style* (LCL; Aristotle 23; trans. W.H. Fyfe; London: Heinemann, 1927). Aristotle is cited by Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 80 and 101 on plot and characterization respectively.

2. For 'Plot' and 'Characterization' see Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. 26–34 and p. 55 respectively. For 'Irony' see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (LCL; Aristotle 19; trans H. Rackham; London: Heinemann, 1926), IV, pp. 14, 16. P.D. Duke summarizes the origin and development of irony, showing that both the concept of irony and its study is firmly rooted in the ancient world, even though it has been more precisely defined by 'New Criticism' (*Irony in the Fourth Gospel* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985], pp. 8–13).

3. Thus modern scholars such as Scholes and Kellogg studied Homer as well as other Hellenic and Hebraic literature in their attempt to define different types of characterization (R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* [London: Oxford University Press, 1966]. For Homeric characterization see pp. 161–64; for biblical characterization see pp. 165–67).

4. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. xviii.

5. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, pp. xiii, xiv, makes the same point.

6. In the wake of literary studies of the Gospels, the question of genre has taken on renewed significance. For a recent study of the Fourth Gospel's genre, see M. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 66–109. Having shown the importance of the question of genre for the study of the Gospel, Davies is still happy to use modern concepts such as 'the

After studying the literary function of ἐγώ εἰμι in the Gospel of John, the next question to ask is what the background to the Johannine use of 'I am' may be. Drawing on its literary function and context, the possible background can be further defined. Three points suggest that it is appropriate to pursue the thesis that all the 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel derive their meaning from the Old Testament and Judaism:

1. Old Testament and Jewish concepts are explicitly alluded to in the context of ἐγώ εἰμι;
2. scholarship has become more and more conscious of the Jewish nature of John;
3. literary study shows the two types of ἐγώ εἰμι to be inter-related in such a way as to suggest a similar conceptual background.

Constant reference to the context and function of ἐγώ εἰμι in John will attempt to ensure that the findings on the background to the phrase are set in their right context, not as an imposition on the text but as parallels which may shed light on the term as used in John. The question of what is meant by 'I am' on the lips of Jesus (i.e. its theological implications) in John can then be addressed in conclusion.¹

implied reader' and 'the implied author' and also to make use of what is best from reader-response theories.

1. To look at the background of the text is not in itself a departure from the concerns of narrative criticism, for a knowledge of first-century culture and history is essential to understand the Johannine story. Where this study departs from pure narrative criticism is in the belief that 'the meaning resides in the text's theological (or ideational) content. This content is separable in principle from the narrative form; narrative is the vehicle of theology. Narrative criticism in contrast, is a formalist criticism; the meaning of the biblical text is located in the details of its structure. What the text says cannot legitimately be extrapolated from how it is said' (Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. 10). Although the following study accepts that the meaning of the text is located in the details of its structure, it views the text as the vehicle of theology so that, at least in principle, it is possible to speak of meaning conveyed by the text but which is distinct from it. In this respect the following study thus comes somewhere on the line between what Moore regards as 'compositional' and pure 'narrative' criticism. The latter has the declared intention of bracketing the author's intention with a list of extrinsic approaches inappropriate to a literary study of the text. Instead it looks at the closed universe of the story world (cf. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 8, 12). While the following study accepts that author's intention is not the primary locus of meaning, it also acknowledges that 'the text produces specifiable effects on the reader, which implicitly originate in an author's intentions' (Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. 12).

3. *The Limitations of this Investigation*

The following investigation is not an attempt to study all the possible parallels to 'I am'. Such a study has already been carried out by Schweizer.¹ It is the thesis of this investigation that such a study is unnecessary since John itself points to a particular background by which the 'I am' sayings should be understood. It will be seen that the background for the Johannine 'I am' sayings is primarily in the Old Testament. However, this investigation does not attempt to study all the occurrences of 'I am' in the Hebrew or Greek Old Testament, but only those passages that may be alluded to in John's use of the phrase.² It will be argued that the formulation of the 'I am' sayings in John alludes to particular passages and themes from the Old Testament and Judaism.

This study has deliberately been restricted to the occurrences of ἐγώ εἰμι on the lips of Jesus in John. Therefore certain possible 'I am' sayings are not included in this study either because they do not fit this precise form of words or because they occur on the lips of others. The following sayings on the lips of Jesus which may be related to ἐγώ εἰμι, have been disregarded for the purpose of this study because they do not fit the precise formulation and raise issues that would need to be addressed as part of a separate study: (1) ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί, 8.23; (2) ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμι ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου (τούτου), 8.23; 17.16; (3) ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ, 7.34; 12.26; 14.3; 17.24.³ In addition, possible uses of the phrase on the lips of others have not been studied (the man born blind, 9.5; John the Baptist, 1.20; 3.28).⁴ It is not a problem for the following investigation that John

1. Of the studies since Schweizer, as we have seen, only those of MacRae and Schulz have brought forward any new material. Schulz finds parallels in further Mandaean texts (*Komposition*, pp. 96, 97) as well as in material from Qumran (*Komposition*, p. 118). The material from Qumran does not contain 'I am' sayings. MacRae, *The Ego-Proclamation* (see above), suggests Gnostic material from Nag Hammadi as further parallels to the ἐγώ εἰμι of John.

2. Cf. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 21-27; A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), pp. 139-40; and J. Richter, 'Ani Hu', pp. 19-46, for use of 'I am' in the LXX and Hebrew Old Testament; also W. Zimmerli, *I am Yahweh* (trans. D.W. Scott, ed. W. Brueggemann; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) for the use of 'I am Yahweh' in the Hebrew Old Testament.

3. Brown, *John*, I, pp. 314, 347, hints at a link between these sayings and ἐγὼ εἰμι.

4. Cf. E.D. Freed, 'Ego Eimi in John 1.20 and 4.25', *CBQ* 41 (2,79), pp. 288-91; P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the*

is able to use a 'profane' ἐγώ εἰμι on the lips of the man born blind, since neither the context of that saying nor its formulation point to the background which makes the use of the phrase on Jesus' lips so profound.

Part I

SUGGESTED BACKGROUND TO 'I AM':
A SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Chapter 1

POSSIBLE PARALLELS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The enigmatic character of the 'I am' sayings in the Fourth Gospel has caused scholars to search in every direction to understand better the implications of ἐγὼ εἰμι for the 'original' audience.¹ As a starting point, a survey of the diverse opinion may show the need to delimit such background material on the basis of how 'I am' functions within the text of John itself.

1. *The Greek World*

Hellenism in General

G.P. Wetter began by looking at the occurrences of ἐγὼ εἰμι in John's Gospel.² He then studied the incidence of 'I am' in the Synoptics before looking at its use in Judaism and the LXX.³ Finally he investigated texts outside the sphere of the Israelite religion in the ancient world at large. He claims to have found an occurrence of the absolute 'I am' in an Egyptian text, which he cites in translation:

I am the God Atum, who alone was...I reach this Land of the Transfigured Ones and enter in through the magnificent gateway. You who stand outside, stretch out your hands to me; I am he, I have become one of you. I am together with my Father Atum daily.⁴

Apart from this isolated occurrence of an absolute 'I am' in Egypt,

1. Dodd, *Interpretation*, p. 6, points out the danger but necessity of searching for background material in John.

2. G.P. Wetter, "Ich bin es", Eine Johanneische Formel', *TSK* 88 (1915), pp. 224-38.

3. Wetter, 'Ich bin es', p. 233.

4. The translation Wetter quotes ('Ich bin es', p. 233) is by A. Erman, *Aegypten und Aegyptisches Leben im Altertum* [zweiter Band] (Tübingen: H. Laupp'schen, 1885), pp. 459-60.

Wetter also sees examples of an absolute ἐγώ εἰμι in the Magical Papyri:

Leiden Papyrus. W. VII 33:

καὶ μηδεὶς με καταβιάσασαίτο, ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι· λέγε τὸ ὄνομα...

Leiden Papyrus. Z. 39:

οὐ μή μου λυμάνης σάρκα· ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι· λέγε τὸ ὄνομα...¹

For Wetter, these texts present evidence for a non-Jewish background to the ἐγώ εἰμι in John. Yet Zimmermann rightly argues that the magical texts cannot be accepted as an absolute ἐγώ εἰμι.² While they certainly contain the phrase ἐγώ εἰμι, this is followed immediately by the phrase λέγε τὸ ὄνομα. From this it is apparent that the magician was expected to supply the name of the power whom he was invoking. Although Wetter acknowledges that in the LXX the formula ἐγώ εἰμι clearly signified an attribute of Yahweh and also possessed the same solemn tone as in the text of John, he concludes that:

In my opinion, the author of John's Gospel did not take it from the Old Testament... but from his environment, from the religious life bustling all around him, whether it had more of a Judaeo-hellenistic or more of a generally Hellenistic-syncretic character.³

Deissmann quotes three texts containing ἐγώ εἰμι⁴ and sets them alongside Jn 10.7-14. The two Isis inscriptions, the first, an inscription from Nysa quoted by Diodorus Siculus, and the second, an inscription at Ios, are very similar:

Ἐγὼ Ἰσίς εἰμι ἡ Βασίλισσα πάσης χώρας... Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ τοῦ νεωπάτου Κρόνου Θεοῦ θυγάτηρ πρέσβυτάτη. Ἐγώ εἰμι γυνὴ καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὀσίριδος βασιλέως. Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ πρώτη καρπὸν

1. Wetter, 'Ich bin es', p. 233, quotes from the *Leiden Papyrus* W. VII.33 and Z.39.

2. H. Zimmermann, 'Das Absolute "Ego Eimi" als die neutestamentliche Offenbarungsformel', *BZ 4* (1960), pp. 54-69, 266-76. See especially pp. 55, 56.

3. Wetter, 'Ich bin es', p. 234.

4. Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 133-40. Deissmann usefully lays out the texts in Greek: none of these contain an absolute ἐγώ εἰμι.

p. 138 Diodorus Siculus [6 × ἐγώ εἰμι]

pp. 139-40 The Inscription at Ios [5 × ἐγώ εἰμι; 22 × ἐγώ]

p. 142 London Magical Papyrus No.46 [7 × ἐγώ εἰμι]

ἀνθρώποις εὐροῦσα. **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** μήτηρ. Ὄρον του βασιλέως **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** ἢ ἐν τῷ ἄστρῳ ἐν τῷ κυνὶ ἐπιτέλλουσα.¹

Εἷσις **ἐγὼ εἰμι** ἢ τ[ύρανν]ος πάσης χώρας... **Ἐγὼ** νόμους ἀνθρώποις ἐθέμην... **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** Κρόνου θυγάτηρ πρέσβυτάτη. **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** γυνὴ καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὁσείρεος βασιλέως. **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** θεοῦ Κυνοῦς ἄστρῳ ἐπιτέλλουσα. **Ἐγὼ εἰμι** ἢ παρὰ γυναιξὶ θεοῦ καλουμένη...²

Deissmann remarks more on the similarity between these texts and the LXX than concerning their possible influence on John:³

I was anxious to show how close the resemblance can be between the Hellenised Old Testament and Hellenised Egyptian religion. The actual relationship of ideas being so close, how easy it must have been for Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity to adopt the remarkable and simple style of expression in the first person singular.⁴

The implications of Deissmann's observations are twofold. First, he allows for the possibility that Judaism itself may have been influenced by the Hellenistic 'I'-style in much the same way that he thinks the religions of Egypt were. This would mean that it would be dangerous to draw a strict line between Jewish and Hellenistic influences on John.⁵ Influences in John that appear at first to be of Hellenistic character, may in fact have been filtered through Judaism and may not have been borrowed directly from the religions of Hellenism. Secondly, by placing the Isis sayings alongside John 10, he implies a conceptual correspondence

1. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 138, taken from Diodorus Siculus, *History* 1.27 (trans. H. Voegel; Leipzig, 1888). Also in *Diodorus of Sicily* (LCL; trans. C.H. Oldfather; London: William Heinemann, 1933), I, pp. 86-88.

2. The Ios inscription is presented in full by Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 139-40. The validity of Diodorus Siculus (27 BCE) for this discussion is confirmed by the text at Ios, although the latter is not dated earlier than the second or third century CE; cf. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 135.

3. Deissmann, *Light*, pp. 139-40, points to more than 20 LXX references in which he sees stylistic parallels with the inscription at Ios.

4. Deissmann, *Light*, p. 141.

5. Cf. M. Hengel, *The 'Hellenisation' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989). Hengel suggests that the distinction between 'Palestinian Judaism' and 'Hellenistic Judaism' should not be overemphasized. See esp. chapter 6, pp. 52-56: 'The Consequences: Palestinian Judaism as Hellenistic Judaism'. Hengel thinks that even in Palestine, 'people probably read the Septuagint and other edifying "Jewish-Greek" literature, but very rarely the Greek classic writers and philosophers in the original' (p. 56).

between the religions of Hellenism and the language of John. Deissmann's final text, a magical text from the fourth century CE, simply shows the continuation of this 'I'-style beyond the time of the New Testament.

Harner, who is seeking parallels to the absolute use of ἐγώ εἰμι, points out that 'no clear, unambiguous use of the phrase "I am" in an absolute sense' is found in any of the texts examined since Deissmann and Wetter.¹ Harner does acknowledge the use of 'I am' with a predicate in *The Hermetica*.² Barrett too suggests the Hermetic Corpus, where Poimandres reveals himself to Hermes through an 'I am' formula:

Corpus Hermeticum:

1,2: Ἐγὼ μὲν. φησίν, εἰμι ὁ Ποιμάνδρης, ὁ τῆς ἀθηνείας νοῦς...

1,6: Τὸ φῶς, ἐκεῖνο, ἔφη, ἐγὼ Νοῦς σὸς θεός...³

Barrett also thinks that the 'I'-form may indirectly stem from magical formulae dependent on the Isis aretology cited by Deissmann.⁴

Gnosticism and Mandaeism

Besides those who admit influence of a general Hellenistic character, are those who have seen Gnostic or Mandaean stylistic features in John's language (of which 'I am' is especially characteristic). With the support of a scholar such as Bultmann, it is not surprising that possible Mandaean influence on John became widely accepted.

In a study which looked at the possible influence of Mandaean texts on the Fourth Gospel as a whole, Bultmann remarked that the revelatory style of speech is typical in Mandaeism.⁵ Bultmann cites what he regards as examples of real revelatory speech in which 'I am' occurs several times:

1. Harner, 'I am', pp. 27,28.

2. Harner, 'I am', p. 28.

3. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 1978), p. 292. The two Hermetic references are translated in full in C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (London: SPCK, 1957), pp. 82, 83. The texts are laid out in Greek in A.D. Nock and A. Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum. Tome 1. Traités I-XII* (Collection des Universités de France; Paris: 1945), pp. 7, 8.

4. Barrett, *John*, p. 292.

5. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, p. 115.

The Envoy of Light am I, whom the Great One has sent into this world
(*Right Ginza* II, p. 64, 17-18).¹

The Envoy of Light am I; each one, who smells his fragrance, receives
life... (*Right Ginza* II, p.64, 23-24).²

The true Envoy am I, in whom there is no deceit,
The True One, in whom there is no deceit, there is no fault or lack in him
(*Right Ginza* II, p. 65, 1-3).³

The Envoy of Life am I... (*Right Ginza* II, p. 65, 15).⁴

Bultmann claims these sayings result in the fact that 'the johannine images of Shepherd, Vine etc. belong in a fixed context of tradition'.⁵ The belief that the words 'I am', as well as the concepts that go with them, are indebted to Gnosticism and Mandaeism is also characteristic of Bultmann's commentary.⁶ In his comments on ch. 4, for instance, he states that 'this mode of speech about "living water", "bread of life", "true light", "true vine" comes from the sphere of Gnostic dualism'.⁷

Schweizer took up the Mandaean question in terms of the 'I am' sayings and their attached predicates. For Schweizer, the 'I am' sayings of John differ structurally from all the literature that he cites in his first chapter.⁸ The few sayings in the Old Testament, which are predicated

1. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, quoting from M. Lidzbarski, *Ginza, der Schatz oder das große Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925), p. 58.

2. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, pp. 110-11. In Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, p. 58.

3. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, p. 113. In Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, p. 59.

4. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, p. 110. In Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, p. 59.

5. Bultmann, *Mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen*, p. 116.

6. See the long note on ἐγώ εἰμι in R. Bultmann's commentary, pp. 225-26, where he draws many parallels with Mandaeism (*The Gospel of John* [trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971]). The parallels he draws from varied backgrounds (including the Old Testament) suggest that he does not regard the Mandaean sayings as the exclusive influence on John's ἐγώ εἰμι.

7. Bultmann, *John*, p. 182.

8. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 33. He sets out what he sees as an important formal difference between the religious-historical and Old Testament 'I am' sayings and those in John, which have a fourfold structure: (1) ἐγώ; (2) εἰμι; (3) the 'image-word'; and (4) an adjective with the article repeated, or a genitive expressing uniqueness.

with an image, argue against finding there the background for ἐγώ εἰμι in John:

It is striking...that even in the OT quite a selection of images would have been available, which as ever recurring terms describe the being and activity of God: 'Shepherd', 'Rock', 'Fortress', 'Shield', 'Lion' etc., but that of these predicates only the first occurs in John, while all the other johannine concepts are either completely foreign to the OT or else [when they do occur in the OT] imply something quite different.¹

It may be true that John does not take up these predicates of the Old Testament in his 'I am' sayings, but, whether the Old Testament can be so swiftly dismissed as background to the imagery connected with the sayings, is to be seriously doubted. That Johannine terminology is really foreign to the Old Testament or even meant in a completely different way, is a matter to be discussed below. To argue that the absence of certain Old Testament predicates necessarily rules the Old Testament out as background to the sayings in John, is unconvincing. On the same premise it could be argued that the absence of the following Mandaean predicates rules Mandaism out as a source of background material:

A house am I, which has been abandoned by its master and whose builder has deserted it (*Book of John* 65.12).²

A Fisherman am I, a fisherman, chosen from among the fishermen. A fisherman am I, chosen from among the fishermen, the chief of all the fisherfolk (*Book of John* 143.1).³

For Schweizer, as for Bultmann, it is in the remarkably similar nature of the Mandaean literature that the key to the Johannine 'I am' sayings is to be found. He particularly concentrates on the similarity in imagery between Mandaism and John:

A shepherd am I, who loves his sheep and cares for his sheep and lambs. Around my neck (I carry) the sheep, and the sheep do not stray from the village (*Book of John* 44.27-30).⁴

A vine are we, a vine of life,
A tree, in whom there is no deceit.

1. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, pp. 37, 38.
2. M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (Giessen: Töppelmann, 1915), p. 69.
3. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch*, p. 144.
4. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 64. In Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch*, p. 44.

The Tree of Praise,
from whose fragrance each receives life (*Ginza* 65.39-40).¹

The major problem with much of the Mandaean literature is that it is difficult to date accurately. Indeed, there is an obvious Christian influence on much of it. For example, earlier in *Ginza* (55.149), just after a statement about Sunday observance, come the words 'I am the true God, whom my Father has sent hither. I am the first, I am the last Envoy; I am the Father, I am the Son, I am the Holy Spirit...'² Since Schweizer acknowledges that the extant Mandaean texts are from Babylonia of the eighth century,³ he has to argue for an early date and a Western origin for the essentials of Mandaeism in order to be able to assert that it is linked to the thought of John.⁴ As a result he concludes that

It is very probable that the Evangelist is either tied to a Christian sayings-source, whose author was or had been very close to the Mandaean religious community and their texts, or even more likely (since we could not extract such a sayings-source) that he himself is this author and either he freely models his speeches according to the usual Mandaean texts, or he permeates existing material very strongly with his own style.⁵

In claiming to be the light of the world, the bread of life etc. Jesus is, according to Schweizer, standing over and above those redeemers of Mandaeism.

Against Schweizer, Yamauchi does not believe there is sufficient evidence to support 'the development of Mandaeanism prior to the second century AD'.⁶ He correctly recognizes that parallels between John and Mandaeism 'can be significant in providing us insight into John's *Vorlage* only if Mandaeanism was a pre-Christian movement'.⁷ Firm evidence for the existence of Mandaeism in the third century CE

1. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 67. In Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, pp. 59, 60.

2. Lidzbarski, *Ginza*, p. 50.

3. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 46.

4. Cf. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 62.

5. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, p. 108.

6. E.W. Yamauchi, 'Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the Trimorphic Proténnoia', in R. Van Den Broeck and M.J. Vermaseren, *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions: Festschrift Gilles Quispel* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), p. 473. Cf. also E.W. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 68-89.

7. Yamauchi, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 473.

was found in a supposed link with Mani. The similar language of Manichaeism and Mandaeism had led to the theory 'that Mani (AD 216–275) had been raised among the Mandaeans'.¹ This belief was undermined by the publication of the *Cologne Codex* in 1970, which showed Mani was raised by the Jewish-Christian Elchasaites.² Any interdependence between the language of John and that of Manichaeism therefore probably stems from Mani's knowledge of John rather than from a mutual dependence on Mandaeism. However, McArthur still contends for the possibility of a proto-Mandaeism which existed in the first century and which influenced the predicated 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel:

Certainly the evangelist would not have supported an ultimate dualism, but the radical contrast that is expressed exceeds what might have been expected from the Jewish tradition or popular Platonism (see 3.3, 7, 13, 31ff.; 6.35, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58, 62; 7.29; 8.23, 42).³

More recently MacRae took up the similarities of the 'I'-form in John and in Gnostic literature. He acknowledges that, but for one exception,⁴ it is hard to find any evidence for the use of an absolute 'I am' and suggests that 'There is no positive indication in this Gnostic *mythologoumenon* that the Gnostics were aware of the absolute use of ἐγώ εἰμι as a claim to divinity...'⁵ MacRae argues that the Coptic Gnostic literature from Nag Hammadi contain 'I am' sayings with a predicate similar to those in the Fourth Gospel:

1. Yamauchi, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 474.

2. Yamauchi, *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 474.

3. H.K. McArthur, 'Christological Perspectives in the Predicates of the Johannine Ego Eimi Sayings', in R.F. Berkey and S.A. Edwards (eds.), *Christological Perspectives: Festschrift H.K. McArthur* (New York: Pilgrims Press, 1982), p. 85. McArthur gives a very good overview of the Mandaean/Gnostic question as it affects ἐγώ εἰμι in John, though he admits to going against modern trends in acknowledging a proto-Mandaean influence on John. See also more recent research in which some are again arguing for an early Palestinian provenance of Mandaeism independent of John. E.g. G. Widengren (ed.), *Der Mandäismus* (Wege der Forschung, 167; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

4. In the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* 2.24,6: B. Rehm (ed.), *Die Pseudo-klementinen*. I. *Die griechische christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1969), p. 45.

5. G.W. MacRae, 'The Ego-Proclamation in Gnostic sources', in E. Bammel (ed.), *The Trial of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 129.