

## **John 51 – Before Abraham Was**

**04/27/2025**

### **Scripture 1: (Jn. 8:46-59 ESV)**

Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

## Sermon:

If you have been a Christian for any significant time, and if you have ever engaged with John's Gospel, then it is near certain that you are aware of Jesus making several "I AM" statements: certain specific claims of His divinity and self-identification as the LORD. There are seven statements generally identified and grouped together to support His self-identification as God {the bread of life; the light of the world; the good shepherd; the door/sheep gate; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; and, the true vine} and, through our study together we have already encountered two of them, when Jesus said: "*I am the bread of life*" (John 6:35) and "*I am the light of the world*" (John 8:12).

Theologically, we like the number seven because it is the divine "number of completion": particularly identified with the seven days of creation and the several "sets of seven" found in John's book of the Revelation. The evangelist also likes the number seven and he uses it to demonstrate a sense of completion and totality for his twin arguments: seven signs identified as evidence proving that Jesus is the LORD God and, seven "I AM" statements where Jesus declares Himself to be the LORD God. However, our pericope today contains an eighth declaration which is different enough to justify its exclusion from the list of seven, and important enough to warrant its own, independent examination. The primary difference between this and the other seven is their absolute use of the definite article "**the**", being something specifically unique (**the** light; **the** bread), whereas here, this declaration is closer to Exodus 3:14 as an absolute statement of Being; that Jesus is, was, and always will be the LORD, making this the most definitive statement made by Jesus declaring Himself to be the LORD. Certainly it is His most explosive statement. Yet, when we read it more closely, we discover that it unlocks how we find and see Christ in and throughout the Old Testament.

Meanwhile, in our narrative, Jesus has been going back and forth with the Jews. He has been affirming the rightness of His teaching and its consistency with the Scriptures, against the inconsistency of their teachings and traditions; accusing them of not knowing the LORD, of not keeping His commandments, and of actually being children of the devil. They were just getting more and more upset and mad at Him; feeling insulted and personally attacked by Jesus' proclamation of the truth. But, no matter what they tried {like bringing the woman accused of adultery} or said {calling His testimony invalid}, they were unable to refute Jesus or prove Him to be in error. All that they could do was to just devolve to name calling and slander, replying "*Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?*".

- Calling Jesus "a Samaritan" implied that He was an ethnic "half-breed" and painted Him as a religious heretic or apostate. It suggested that He did not belong or have any right to be in the Temple precincts.
- Accusing Jesus of having a demon was meant exactly as it sounded. They believed Him to be in league with the "spiritual opposition", as was also suggested in the the Synoptics (Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15) and, in one sense, they were correct except they had the spiritual "teams" reversed. But, since they could not deny that Jesus possessed supernatural power and abilities, and since miracles are naturally "impossible", and since there had not been a confirmed prophet in over four hundred years, and since they refused to recognize and openly acknowledge Who Jesus was sent by: the LORD, God the Father; their only reasonable attribution was to the devil and his demonic angels.

Yet, calling Jesus a Samaritan and saying that He had a demon, was not just simply a statement against Him; it was also slander against everyone that paid attention to Him; to everyone that believed Him, believed in Him, and who supported Him and His ministry. Even by this point in John's narrative, their condemnation and contempt already extended beyond Jesus to include all of His followers also; a position which (technically) has still not changed, two thousand years later, since the Talmud {a written collection of and commentary on the "oral Torah" and the principal Jewish educational text} presents many slanderous accusations against Jesus in

contradiction to the Gospel accounts<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, they had no evidence or proof to support their accusations; all they had were “mean words” spoken simply to be hurtful.

But Jesus refused to sink down to their level. Although He had just publicly pronounced against them, that “*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.*” (Jn. 8:44 ESV), He did not resort to childish name calling. He was not speaking slander but the truth and He had the receipts to prove it. He had told them that “*If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.*” (Jn. 8:39-40 ESV), knowing that they were presently conspiring against Him and plotting His earthly demise (7:14, 7:32; 8:6). Countering their slander, Jesus plainly asserted before the crowd, “*I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.*”. Jesus said the “quiet part, out loud”. He was “calling a spade, a spade”, and “naming a thing for what it is”, and explained precisely what was going on:

- He denied being either possessed by a demon or in league with the devil;
- He claimed to honor God with everything He did and taught; and,
- He pointed out that they, the religious authorities, were the ones unjustly disparaging Him and His followers.
- He reminded them that they were dishonoring themselves by their attempts to dishonor Him.

Then He insisted, “*Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is **the judge**.*”; first, He denied the implication that He is an attention-seeker, a rabble-rouser, or just indulging in vain-glorious self-promotion and that secondly, there is Someone who does actively desire His glorification {the King James expresses this better by saying that “*there is one that seeketh and judgeth*” (Jn. 8:50 KJG), implying that the One actively working for His glorification (and by “judgeth”) is rightly able to justly ascribe glory to Him}.

Up until this moment in the present discourse, everything Jesus has said could be simply chalked up as nothing more or less than, “he said, she said”; but then Jesus said something to make everyone stop, take notice, and pay attention. Jesus said, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*”. Remember,

- Verbal repetition, by Hebrew/Jewish speakers, is a sign of emphasis and great importance;
- Underlying the English translation of “*Truly, truly...*” or what was once “*Verily, verily...*” is the Hebrew expression {transliterated into the Greek} of “*amen, amen*”, conveying the absolute sense of “LORD, let it be”; or as Yul Brenner would have said it, “So let it be written. So let it be done.” (The Ten Commandments; Cecil B DeMille).
- “*I say to you...*” was a direct pronouncement by Jesus without appeal or reliance upon any other or greater authority: much as He made during the Sermon on the Mount in Galilee, that caused the crowd to be so astonished at His teaching because “*...he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*” (Matt. 7:29 ESV); and therefore, it carried the imperative force of command.

Then Jesus made the most shocking pronouncement (yet), “*...if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*”. This was not only shocking to His Jewish hearers, but it would also be unreasonable and unbelievable to anyone. Jesus promised something illogical and which would be considered easily disprovable as soon as one of His followers died. Yet, in order to claim that Jesus was disproved, the part which must be ignored is the present fact of all their prior sins; even if they were perfect going forward, their past failures and sin would still disqualify them, apart from God's atoning grace and mercy of forgiveness. This is why we need both

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<sup>1</sup><https://israelmyglory.org/article/jesus-in-the-rabbinical-literature/>

forgiveness for our past, present, and future sins and the imputation of Christ's active righteousness and obedience.

However, this declaration is even more shocking because of how Jesus claimed both:

- the divine prerogative of granting/preserving eternal life; and,
- of personally possessing an authority equal to that of the LORD by making an equal and identical promise to God, *“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”* (Lev. 18:5 ESV).

Therefore, through this pronouncement, Jesus unequivocally implied that He is the LORD; that His words are the same as God's Word; and that His Words truly are *“the words of eternal life”* as previously confessed by Peter (John 6:68). But, they did not initially take Jesus's claim seriously because they replied, *“Now we know that you have a demon!”*, accepting His statement as proof of demonic possession (as evidenced by false claims of power and authority; as being a liar) or as evidence of insanity (demon-possessed persons were also considered to be “mad” on account of their affliction). They accepted this as proof for what they wanted to believe about Jesus, since it was “safer” and easier for them to accept than to believe God's honest truth.

- Even today, what is our reaction to a person who claims that they are a god? We will assume that they are crazy and would try to get them under psychiatric observation and evaluation. Yet, we would not think it a criminal affliction; just a pitiable one.
- Or, from a certain perspective, presuming that Jesus was crazy, really was the most charitable view because otherwise what He claimed was blasphemy and therefore, He was deserving of death (if untrue).

Even still, although Jesus implied it, He had not yet outright claimed it. So, they asked some qualifying questions to try and get Him to specifically say what they thought He meant, *“Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died!”*.

Remember, from the Jewish perspective, the only person greater than Abraham: the primogenitor of their religion; was God. The other patriarchs were held in high regard, the prophets were held in high regard {by the Pharisees and later Israel, but not during their own lifetimes}, David and Solomon were great; but Abraham was considered greater than all of the rest and so, they asked Jesus, *“Who do you make yourself out to be?”*; {Who do you think you are?}.

At which point *“Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.”*.

- Again, Jesus reiterated that He was not self-aggrandizing, but that God the Father, the LORD, was glorifying Him and arguing that if the Jewish authorities truly knew God, then they should already know and understand that.
- Again, Jesus called them liars; people falsely claiming to be in a right covenantal relationship with the LORD.
- Again, Jesus affirmed the quality of His relationship with the LORD: with God as His Father and Himself as the beloved and obedient Son.

As extraordinary as this conversation already was, it next took a strange turn, and it is this twist that we will focus upon.

Jesus continued saying, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.””

Now, whenever Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you...” we know that the following is exceptionally important, “...before Abraham was, I am.”. Although the grammar of this phrase sounds horrible in English {the Greek grammar works properly, yet it feels wrong:  $\pi\rho\iota\nu$  – conjunction, “before”;  $\text{Ἀβραάμ}$  – noun, proper name, “Abraham”;  $\gammaενέσθαι$  – verb, infinitive aorist (completed, past tense) middle (subject was acted upon by the verb), “was caused to be/become”;  $\epsilon\gamma\omega$  – personal pronoun, “I”;  $\epsilon\iota\mu\acute{\iota}$  – verb, indicative 1<sup>st</sup> person present (continuing/not complete, present tense) active, “I am” (a statement of “being”) (Jn. 8:58 BGT)} due to the mixing of tenses, the meaning that this phrase conveys is:

- before (the lifetime of) Abraham (a real historical figure), Jesus (a definite, living and present [in this narrative] historical person) already existed;
- before the time when Abraham existed, Jesus **was** and, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century present Jesus **is** and, therefore, Jesus **will also continue to be**, into the future.

As with the other “I AM” declarations, Jesus uses the Greek expression of *ego eimi*: the 1<sup>st</sup> person, personal pronoun meaning “I” coupled with the 1<sup>st</sup> person, active verb meaning “to be; I am”; technically, emphatically saying “I, I AM” or, as God named Himself to Moses from the “burning bush”, “**I AM WHO I AM.**” (Exod. 3:14 ESV). Therefore, by this:

- Jesus **did not** say that He was “a god”;
- Jesus **did not** say that He was “like God”;
- Jesus **did not** say that He was “another God”; Instead,
- Jesus said that He is “the LORD, God”;
- Jesus said that He is “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”;
- Jesus said that He is “God”.

This emphatic, uncompromising, and undeniable declaration is why “...they picked up stones to throw at him...”. This was too much for them to handle. This was too difficult for them to accept or believe. Their unregenerate hearts could not receive this truth. Therefore, they had no choice except to blindly try and follow the Law of Moses and stone Jesus to death for blasphemy.

Truly, this was a tragic turn of events. But, this narrative does provide us with a key that unlocks an important and necessary aspect of the Old Testament for us. This narrative helps us to better identify and see the work of Jesus within the Old Testament; not just as types and shadows pointing ahead (Hebrews 10:1) but also, as a very knowable presence of the pre-Incarnate Christ, God the Son.

A mysterious figure appears frequently across Old Testament Scripture, more often than we realize, but He is never expressly named. Instead, He is known by a title, the: *malach adonai*, or the “Angel of the LORD”. Now a *malach*, or *angelos* in the Greek, are terms which mean “messenger” and, that is rightly descriptive of His function, role, and duty: to bring a message from God. Similar to those called apostles (with a lowercase “a”), this messenger was sent but, sent differently from the New Testament apostles, evangelists, and the prophets before them. He spoke differently from them. He spoke with a different kind of authority. While the message of the prophets and apostles was always spoken as by a mediator, proclaiming “Thus saith the LORD...”, but the

Angel of the LORD would sometimes speak from God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Person (Genesis 22:16; “declares the LORD”) **and** He would also speak divine pronouncements in the 1<sup>st</sup> Person (as I or Me).

Messengers in the ancient world carried a tremendous weight of authority and responsibility. Since they were empowered to represent kings and kingdoms, whatever they did, or said, or had done to them, was treated as if it was done by or to their Master. While they spoke on behalf of their Master (speaking for their Master), they still did not speak as their Master, but the Angel of the LORD did.

- When the Angel visited Hagar after she fled into the wilderness, “*The angel of the LORD also said to her, 'I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.'*” (Gen. 16:10 ESV) and she responded, saying “*Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.*” (Gen. 16:13 ESV) because she believed that she had seen the Person of God.
- After the Angel appeared to Manoah and his wife, and after He had ascended to heaven upon a pillar of fire, “*Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God.'*” (Jdg. 13:21-22 ESV), also recognizing the Angel as God.
- When Moses was in the wilderness, “*...the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.' When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'*” (Exod. 3:2-4 ESV), affirming the Angel as God; Who then answers Moses's question “*Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'*” (Exod. 3:13-14 ESV).

Therefore, Jesus claimed to be both the LORD and He identified Himself with the Angel of the LORD; a claim which **forces** us to identify, recognize, and acknowledge this “angel” as also being God the Son, the pre-Incarnate Christ, and His work in the Old Testament, hence why we often call them “Christophanies” {a manifestation or appearance of Christ}. Identifying God the Son as the Angel of the LORD, does not injure His deity, because this use of *malach* describes His role and work, rather than implying He had a creaturely status as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons wrongly assert (heresy), and this has serious implications for Christology: our understanding of Christ's **character**.

These implications disprove and refute the dualistic heresy of Marcion, who wrongly taught that the “god of the Old Testament, (YHVH)” was an evil and lesser deity different from the good, loving “god of the New Testament (Jesus)” because:

- if Jesus is God the Son (and He is) and,
- He is also the Angel of the LORD (which I believe Scripture teaches) then,
- He is the powerful military defender and protector of God's people (Psalm 34 and 35), as;
  - the “*commander of the army of the LORD*” (Jos. 5:14 ESV) who helped Joshua against Jericho; and as,
  - the one who struck down Sennacherib's Assyrian army that besieged Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 32:21; Isaiah 37:36);
- then He is also the executor of divine judgment, as:
  - the one who stood in the road with His sword drawn against Balaam (Numbers 22);

- the one who condemned Israel for its disobedience by not fully cleansing Canaan (Judges 2:1-4);
- the one who punished Jerusalem and king David for his sinful census (1 Chronicles 21);
- then He is also the one who called and supported God's chosen agents, as:
  - the one who called Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3);
  - the one who called Gideon and Samson (Judges 6 and 13); and,
  - the one who defended Joshua, the high priest, against the accusations of Satan (Zechariah 3).

These implications further support, affirm, and prove the consistency and continuity between the Old and New Testaments (concerning the character of Christ), because Jesus:

- chose and called to Himself and sent out disciples, evangelists, and Apostles (Matthew 28:18-20);
- executed divine judgment and wrath against the money-changers and sacrifice-sellers in the Temple (John 2:13-17); and,
- is promised and expected to return, leading at the head of the heavenly hosts, to finally and utterly defeat Satan and his minions: rescuing, protecting, and defending all of God's people against sin, death, and all the powers of darkness (Revelation 19).

Therefore, it is rightly said that Jesus remains “...*the same yesterday and today and forever.*” (Heb. 13:8 ESV). He is eternally consistent. God did not change Himself between the Old and New Testaments. Yet, apart from asserting that Jesus, being God the Son and the Christ, pre-existed the time Abraham, what does this have to do with Abraham?

Jesus had just said something very special and specific, speaking an easily overlooked detail. He said, “*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. **He saw it and was glad.***”; {καὶ εἶδεν – an indicative aorist (completed, past tense) active (performed by the subject) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verb, καὶ ἐχάρη – an indicative aorist passive (performed upon the subject) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verb (Jn. 8:56 BGT) “he saw 'Jesus' day' and was inspired to rejoice”.} He did not imply that Abraham experienced a vision of the future, nor did it refer to Abraham's present spiritual status; instead, it was the past tense. Since Abraham was not presently alive and on earth, Jesus could only mean that Abraham saw **Him** “in the flesh” and therefore, was glad, sometime during Abraham's natural lifetime. But, when or where could that have been? {Although the author of Hebrews implies that Melchizedek may also have been a Christophany, this does not well describe the occasion of their meeting; even if it was likely at a nearby location.} It was on Mount Moriah, when Abraham was prevented from sacrificing his son, Isaac.

- “*But the **angel of the LORD** called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"*” (Gen. 22:11 ESV)
  - Allow me to suggest that it was the Angel of the LORD, the pre-Incarnate Christ, who intervened in Abraham's attempted sacrifice.
- “*And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind **him** was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns.*”
  - Behind who? When a person looks up, they look ahead and perhaps beyond whatever is in front of them.

- Allow me to suggest that the Angel of the LORD, the pre-Incarnate Christ was physically there, present and fully visible to Abraham.
  - Abraham was stopped by Jesus, who then gave and showed him the ram to use as a substitute offering.
- *And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.*” (Gen. 22:13 ESV)
  - Finally, allow me to suggest that by receiving his son back from an anticipated death; that by not needing to actually sacrifice or kill his son; that by receiving this ram as a substitute from the LORD's hand, Abraham had an exceptionally good and a very great reason to “be glad” and to rejoice upon seeing Jesus.

Therefore, although Jesus was less than fifty years old {most likely closer to 33} in His Incarnate form as the God-man, He actually had seen and had been seen by Israel's patriarch, Abraham.

Recognizing and understanding that Jesus is eternally God and that, not only was He “*before Abraham was*”, and that Abraham and many others knew Him as the Angel of the LORD; although those were surely exciting spiritual experiences, what does that have to do with us today? Why does all that matter for us?

- Knowing this helps us to better understand part of our Christian faith. One of the most challenging questions that believing Christians face, from within ourselves and from those on the outside, relates to the Trinity: the three Persons and their distinct work; and their knowable presence in the Old Testament. Since the term “Trinity” is not found in Scripture and because of the strict monotheistic perspective expressed by the *Shema*, “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*” (Deut. 6:4 ESV), identifying these three Persons as one God from the Hebrew Scripture can be troublesome.
  - God the Father is easily identifiable in the direct references to the LORD, YHVH, or God as *elohim*.
  - God the Holy Spirit can be recognized by references to the “Spirit of God” (Genesis 1:2) or the “Spirit of the LORD” (1 Samuel 10:6).
  - Whereas identifying God the Son in the Old Testament, otherwise requires significant “theological gymnastics” and interpretations, such as correlating God the Son, as the Divine Word, to the verbal pronouncement of Creation. But, once we see Him as the “angel” and “messenger” of the LORD, thereby fulfilling particular roles (as the Holy Spirit fulfills particular roles) then, we may feel more confident understanding that the Trinity: that God is Three distinct Persons; is true.
- Knowing this also helps us to refute arguments which suggest our Christian faith is inconsistent:
  - that suggest the character of our God changed from **wrath** in the Old Testament to **love** in the New, as the Marcionite heresy suggests (or modern preachers like Andy Stanley), because God is immutable; or,
  - that suggest the person of our God, the Person whom we worship, changed between the two Testaments; or,
  - that suggest that the idea of the Trinity was something newly created by Christians {while the idea is new and unique to Christianity, it was not something we created but instead received}; or,
  - that suggest God cannot at once be: One God and also Three distinct Persons: defending against the Modalist heresy, which suggests that **Who** God is depends on **what** He is doing at any given time.



- Knowing this helps us to better understand the inherent consistency of Jesus' revealed character. Just as the Marcionites were tempted to try and distance the more seemingly, nice and loving Jesus from the seemingly, wrathful and judgmental “god of the Old Testament”, some modern Christians have tried to keep the “Jesus of the Gospels” separate from the “Jesus of Revelation” by downplaying or outright ignoring the clear promise of His Return in glorious judgment, and wrath, and power. These theological liberals and progressives just “pick and choose” whatever preferred moralistic “sound-bites” best seem to justify or support their immediate position.
- Rather, by viewing the Old Testament Angel of the LORD through the New Testament lens of “Jesus”, we can better see the expression of His divine restraint and mercy in redemptive history, and, by considering the character of Jesus in light of His past performance as this Old Testament “messenger”, we can better understand and be more confident in the prophetic promise of His impending return.
  - That the Jesus of the past, is the same Jesus of the Gospels, and that He will also be the same Jesus in the future of the *eschaton*; in the last days of the end.

The LORD God, Jesus the Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Scripture are always perfectly consistent and constant. This certitude provides us with confidence and faith; building up our hope in all God's promises and in their eventual fulfillment and completion in His divinely ordained *kairos*.

- God has always been faithful and true.
- God is always faithful and true.
- God will always be faithful and true.

We can believe this and we can trust this because: even before Abraham was, Jesus is, and even after we are gone, Jesus will still be.

Jesus is God, forever.

**AMEN**