

(Mis)translating John 8:58

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“Before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:58)

Yeshua is 100% man.

Of course! But when I go on to assert that He is also 100% God and preexisted the creation of the world, some will slam the brakes. “No way, man. Stop right there! *We’re not polytheists!*”

As you might imagine, John 8:58 is one of those texts that must be navigated for those who would uphold the canon of the Apostolic Writings (aka “New Testament”) yet deny Yeshua’s preexistence or deity. As of late I have encountered two different internet teachers making bold claims about the meaning of Yeshua’s words, and I want to address them both. The first writer argues from an Aramaic (Syriac) text, the second from the Greek.

What I see here concerns me: incompetent “translators” promoting erroneous ideas.

I. “I come before Abraham does” – John 8:58 from the “original Aramaic”

I recently came across a site where the (unidentified) author argues for an interpretation of John 8:58 that, he believes, disarms those of us who see here a statement implying Yeshua’s deity. It is based upon a “reading” (note my parentheses) of the “original” (yes, again) Peshitta version of the Gospel. [I clicked the “email” button on the site but it was a dead-end... If anyone knows who wrote this, let me know.] The basic claim is that our traditional reading of the verse is way off.

After providing a transliterated text from the Syriac Peshitta (in fact a 4th-ish century Christian rework of earlier Syriac translations *of the Greek**), the author writes the following.

Without adding or subtracting any words from the original Aramaic text, this is the correctly parsed form.

“YESHUA SAID TO THEM, TRUTHFULLY, TRUTHFULLY, I SAY TO YOU THAT I COME BEFORE ABRAHAM DOES.”

For those of you who haven’t studied the dialects of ancient Aramaic, please trust me when I tell you that this is absolute nonsense. The author does not know what he/she is even talking about. I’m not going to get into all the details of the grammar here, but I will make two simple points: First, the verb this author identifies as “HWA” (see his page) does not mean “does,” as he insists. Rather, it means “was,” as ܐܘܪܗܝܡ/ܐܘܪܗܝܡ is the root of the Aramaic verb “to be, to exist.” Now there is a very different word for “does” or “to do,” as we find recorded earlier in the same conversation:

If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the deeds of Abraham.
But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God; Abraham did not do this. (John 8:39b-40)

Three times we see this word concerned with Abraham’s “doing.” The Peshitta uses the familiar root ܐܘܪܗܝܡ/ܐܘܪܗܝܡ, ‘avad in each instance. But in 8:58 we find a verb meaning “was” and

has nothing to do with Abraham “doing” anything. [I’m using the Peshitta because that’s the text the author is using, not because it is “original” as he imagines.]

Second, the Peshitta’s phrase אָנָא אִיְהִי (transliterated into modern Hebrew font as אָנָא אִיְהִי) means, quite simply, “I am.” It’s used throughout the Peshitta of John’s Gospel and is the regular translation of the Greek *ego eimi*. There’s no way around it. By insisting that this means “come,” the author’s incompetence is showing; my best guess is that he has not only misidentified the root, but neither grasps the basics of the Aramaic verb system and has no sound exegetical method.

In the end, the argued interpretation, “YESHUA SAID TO THEM, TRUTHFULLY, TRUTHFULLY, I SAY TO YOU THAT I COME BEFORE ABRAHAM DOES,” fails.

For anyone interested, the Aramaic Scriptures Research Society in Israel did a fine job translating the Peshitta of this verse into Modern Hebrew, “בְּטֶרֶם הִיָּה אַבְרָהָם אָנִי הוּא” “*Before Abraham was, I am (He)*.” Funny, they seem to have a decent grasp of both languages! [Read: **they are competent.**]

II. “Before Abraham comes to be, I will” – John 8:58 from the Greek

In their ebook rejecting the preexistence of Yeshua, *Who Then Is This...* [sic], authors John Cordaro and Matthew Janzen offer a similar reading of John 8:58. [Note: On Dec 2, 2014, Matthew Janzen clarified that the section dealing with John 8:58 was written solely by his co-author. It does not necessarily represent Janzen’s view. ~RV] But instead of looking to an “original” Aramaic, these authors seek to expound the Greek text. To their credit, Cordaro/Janzen have the conscience to preface their interpretation of the verse “...we are not currently certain what Yeshua meant...” (p. 62). Here is the core of their interpretation:

“Was” is from the Greek *ginomai* meaning, “to come into being, to arise.” What Yeshua actually meant was, ‘Before Abraham comes into being (at his resurrection unto eternal life), I will.’ (p. 62)

In other words, although properly written, “Before Abraham comes to be, I am,” with “I am” in the simple present tense, the meaning points to the future, “Before Abraham comes to be, I will.” (p. 63)

I have two comments here as well.

First, the suggestion that the Greek *ginomai* means “to come into being, to arise” is half the story. For Cordaro/Janzen to tell their readers it means “to arise” and immediately assert that it refers to Abraham’s resurrection is misleading. It only means “arise” in cases of natural phenomena or other occurrences wherein in English, we would use the word “arise.” Like Mark 4:37 “a storm *arose*...” This just sounds better to the English ear than “there was a storm.” Also, a persecution, a discussion, strife, etc... In English we can say “There *arose* a persecution...” (Matt. 13:21). This is due to how we speak in English though, and has nothing to do with the Greek.

In the Gospel of John, when Yeshua talks about resurrection, it is unmistakable. The specific words for resurrect/resurrection *ανιστημι/αναστασις anistemi,anastasis* are used at least eleven times. The basic meaning here is “to stand again.” I don’t know of any Scriptures where in the verb *ginomai* refers to resurrection.

In addition, their translation of the **aorist infinitive** as “comes to be” rather than “was” is problematic for the simple fact that Abraham did not cease to be, so that at the resurrection he

will once again come into being. Do Cordaro/Janzen suggest to us that Abraham does not presently exist? Rather, Yeshua Himself expounds upon the mystery directly from the Torah:

He says, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. (Matt. 22)

Second, Cordaro/Janzen suggest we read the Greek *εγω ειμι* *ego eimi* “I am” as a future verb, “I will,” with an appeal to a poetic device called *heterosis*. In other words, though Yeshua literally says “I am,” he really means, “I will (be).”

The main problem with this claim is that in the Gospel of John alone, **Yeshua says “ego eimi” nearly two dozen times**. Here are just a few examples:

4:26 Jesus said to her, “I am (*ego eimi*) he, the one who is speaking with you.”

Are we to read this, “I will, the one who is speaking with you”?

6:20 But he said to them, “It is I (*ego eimi*). Do not be afraid.”

Shall we read this, “I will. Do not be afraid”?

6:41 The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am (*ego eimi*) the bread that came down from heaven...”

This one is really fun... “I will be the bread that came down from heaven...” ???

I could go on, but you get the point. The idea that we should understand this to be “I will” rather than “I am” is misguided. The Greek construction of John 8:58 stands unique in all the Apostolic Writings. It is meant to be a difficult saying (as many in John are!). The main clause is clearly in the **present tense**. Throughout the Gospel of John we find this phrase repeated; a single, specific point comes across to us: **Yeshua is. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever!** There are simply no grounds by which this “ego eimi” statement should be translated as if it was a future tense.

So, the Cordaro/Janzen interpretation fails as well.

Since there’s no reason to change it, I’ll be sticking with the good ol’ translation many of us have enjoyed:

Before Abraham was, I am.

III. Incompetence is Free

Remarkably, these independent efforts to “re-translate” John 8:58 for us produced very similar results. Though they come from very different source texts, both present a reading that runs counter to the history of interpretation of this passage. They attempt to undermine claims of Yeshua’s preexistence or divinity. How do we explain the similarity of these interpretations? Have they really uncovered the “truth” of Yeshua’s words?

Rather... Is it possible that they come to their texts with their shared doctrine (namely, that Yeshua did not exist prior to being born of Mary) already in mind? Did they know in advance what the text *could not* mean? Did they twist meanings and tenses around until it resembled something they could live with? Yes, this is what happened.

Both translations are tortured. Because of their poor grasp of the very languages they’re supposedly “translating,” these teachers are practicing *eisegesis* and not *exegesis*. What can I say? At worst, they are deceivers. At best, they’re just incompetent. To give the benefit of the doubt I lean toward the latter.

And what exactly is “incompetence”? Is it a mean word? Let’s start with a definition of **competence**. Merriam-Webster says, “the quality or state of being functionally adequate.”

I say that these authors lack functional adequacy, or competence, in the languages of the very texts they are claiming to exegete for us. I advise people to stay clear of their “translations.” It is quite OK to be suspicious of their doctrines, especially those that offer “new revelation” or “insight,” based upon the original languages or texts.

Finally, competence in ancient languages is something you *can* acquire, but not without a cost. It requires hard work, patience, and persistence over a long period of time. It means having some good teachers, and spending some of your hard-earned money. But it can be done, with God’s help.

* “The Peshitta John is not an independent translation from the Greek, but represents a process of revision of earlier Syriac versions (the Diatessaron and the Old Syriac), culminating in the early fifth century, after which the Peshitta became the standard form of the Gospel text for all the Syriac Churches.” ~ Excerpt from overview of *The Gospel of John According to the Syriac Peshitta Version with English Translation*, (2014 Gorgias Press). The English translation in this 2014 volume agrees with our traditional reading, “Before Abraham was, I am.” In a footnote the translator offers the alternative as a possible rendering: “Before Abraham was, I was.” In any case, *Yeshua’s preexistence is assumed by John, whether we’re reading Greek or Syriac.*