

John 8 - THE I AM BEFORE ABRAHAM

Introduction

In my many years of interfaith dialogues, I think this question has come up like one hundred times. "But isn't the text clear that Yeshua said: Before Abraham was I am? What can this mean if not that he's God, since the text plainly adds that people wanted to stone him after hearing this?"

Well, the problem is that this verse is being isolated, not only from its context but also from the whole narrative techniques, and even the theological system that are constantly used in the book of John. In other words, the book of John follows a series of patterns that become, so to say, the blueprints to understand the text. I must be honest, it's not easy for common people to see the pattern, and most theologians ignore it, but someone with basic notions of literature (and of course of Judaism) will see them everywhere.

So, in a real life, face-to-face dialogue, I don't have the time to go through the book of John step by step and show them the patterns. In a face-to-face dialogue people tend to abruptly change from one subject to another, especially when they've got queries, they will ask every and any question that comes to their mind and they will demand short answers for each one of them. The more complex a topic is, the more difficult to give a short answer is.

So now that I've got some time, let's give some important clues and let's hope everyone will see with me the same patterns.

A - WHY THE AUDIENCE IS SECONDARY

First of all, in the book of John, what really matters is Yeshua's message. What the audience thinks or says about Yeshua or his message is secondary, and at times irrelevant. People should not put their focus on how the audience understood Yeshua's message, because, in few words, people in the book of John DO NOT understand Yeshua's message.

Everything that happens AROUND the message is just a literary device, probably never happened in real life (See how John contradicts the synoptic Gospels in several occasions). There are many precedents in Jewish literature. The biggest example would be the Zohar. What really matters in the Zohar is its message; all those stories about Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai travelling to Cappadocia, meeting kids in the street that happen to be the Shekhina... all those things are literary devices that connect one teaching with the next. It doesn't matter if it happened literally in real life, because it probably never did. Yeshua cleanses the temple at the beginning of his ministry in John, but in the Synoptic Gospels the cleansing of the Temple (which threatened the Roman peace that people "enjoyed" in Judea and produced a terrible agitation) is one of the main things that caused him to be arrested and executed. So it is very unlikely that he did this at the beginning of his ministry, let alone that he did it twice. It's three Gospels against one. All of this is because John's stories should not be taken literally. John is a spiritual (mystical) book, with spiritual (mystical) teachings, so rule number one, Stop reading John as if it was a history book. It isn't. The message isn't straightforward either; it always hints to something deeper.

Rule number two, You must notice the author (or authors) make constant use of a literary device called the "**technique of misunderstanding**". Yeshua means one thing, and the people understand something completely different. Sometimes the author tells us what Yeshua meant to say, and other times the author wants us to find the meaning by ourselves. The narrator wants the reader to feel superior - either by reading or studying - to the obviously less intelligent characters in the story. From Yeshua's first preaching until the end of the book, Yeshua is constantly misunderstood by those who are listening. Hence the reason that the audience's opinion is secondary or even irrelevant.

First preaching, Yeshua cleanses the temple. Then he says: Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days (*John 2:19*). What else can he mean? He's in the Temple! The Judeans thought he was talking of the building, but he was talking about his own body (*v.21*), because as we know, it is taught that the body is a Temple for the Shekhina.

Chapter 3, Yeshua meets Nicodemus and he tells him that he must be born again. Even though this is a Pharisaic teaching and Nicodemus knows (or should know) about it, he asks concerning a literal birth: Can a person enter again into his mother's womb to be born? (*John 3:4*).

By the time we reach our third example the thing starts to get even comical. Yeshua sits down by a well and a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Yeshua talks of giving her living water (which would also mean: running water). The woman is thinking about the water in the well. "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep" (*John 4:11*). Yeshua keeps talking about his water, and the woman keeps thinking of literal water. Yeshua doesn't correct her at all, he just goes with it to the point he wants to make.

Later in the same chapter, the disciples tell him to eat something, and he talks about the Torah (the will of the Father) being his food, but they don't understand. They think that maybe someone brought him extra food (*John 4:33*).

In chapter 5, after healing someone on Shabbat, Yeshua says: My Father works to this day and so I too work. He's clearly talking of doing good things and correcting the world, which can also be done on Shabbat. But the audience accuses him of two sins here: of Breaking Shabbat and making himself equal to God (*John 5:18*). To this point, I don't need to say that the accusation is false, because actually, if Yeshua really broke Shabbat, he's a false Messiah, because Messiah comes to do and teach the Torah, not to break it. So those Christians who side with the audience are causing a disservice to Yeshua's cause. In the text he defends himself from the second accusation: he tries to explain how's the relationship between the Father and the Son and he says the Son can do nothing by his own. It is the Father who gives him power and entrusts him with authority. This means he's not making himself equal to God.

In chapter 6 Yeshua says he's the bread that came down from heaven; an obvious metaphor based on their previous mention of the manna. But people understand here that he literally descended from the sky like an alien. Can't you see how at times this can get really idiotic?

In chapter 7 Yeshua says he will go where people cannot find him. The author does not explain what Yeshua meant, but the audience come up with all kind of theories. "Will he go to the Greeks?"

When we arrive to chapter 8, Yeshua is teaching in the Temple, and he's found in the middle of a heated debate with certain Judeans that seem to hate him. Precisely because of this, the "literary technique of misunderstanding" is used more than in any other chapter. Yeshua says his Father is his witness. The audience is thinking of a biological father (*John 8:18-19*). Yeshua says: "Where I go you cannot come" and they think he was going to kill himself (*John 8:22*). Yeshua speaks of He who sent him, they don't know who is he talking about (*8:27*). Yeshua tells them "you'll be free", he meant from sin, but they understood this to be free from slavery (*8:33*).

Now Yeshua is talking to a group that seeks to kill him (never forget this, because Yeshua's message in this portion is not ABOUT ALL JEWS; that would be plainly anti-semitic; Yeshua himself says that "Salvation is of the Jews"). He's talking to what we call in Judaism: the Erev-Rav (the mixed multitude): people who are externally Jewish but inside they are evil, selfish, seeking their own glory, money.... etc.

So, we arrive to this point and Yeshua tells them they are the sons of their father, and they claim that their father is Abraham, and God himself is their Father... etc. Yeshua tells them they are sons of Satan, because they do according to their father's deeds, and since they want to kill him, they reflect the deeds of Satan, not of Abraham. They think he's crazy. Yeshua repeats that if they keep his word (which is the word of God), they will never see death. And again, they take this literally. "Even Abraham - who did God's will - died!", they say (*8:52*). Yeshua says Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his day, he saw it and was glad (*John 8:56*). What is this day Yeshua is talking about? The day of the Messianic era, the day of Messiah, the day of resurrection, the day of redemption. This is alluding to the Akeida (Isaac's sacrifice), as it is written: "On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the Place afar off" (*Genesis 22:4*). This is a mystical teaching, as Yonah came out of the belly of Sheol at the third day (*Yonah 1:17, 2:2*). "From afar off" refers to a distant future time, referring to the resurrection of the dead in the Messianic era, as there are many midrashim that connect the Akeida with the topic of resurrection (*cf. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer Ch 30*), and other interpretations connect Isaac and also the title given to him - Naar (young man) - with the spiritual Messianic force of Messiah ben Yosef (*cf. Kol haTor 1:23*).

But did the audience understand anything of this? No. They were mad at him, they thought he was crazy, and they didn't have time nor will to analyze with spiritual eyes what he was talking about. They actually understood the opposite of what Yeshua was saying. "You are not even fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?" (*John 8:57*). Yeshua didn't say that he met Abraham. What he said is that Abraham saw his day, the day of Messiah, and the day in which those who follow God's word will never see death. What the audience is understanding has nothing to do with what Yeshua is saying! But then, Yeshua uses this misunderstanding to teach something even deeper.

"Amen I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (*John 8:58*).

B - SYMBOLISM

One of the most frequently literary techniques used in John is that of **symbolism**. The very beginning of the book uses the symbol of "the Word" and the "Light", which are also represented throughout the book with the symbols of "water" and "food". Yeshua himself is defined through a series of symbols, such as bread, and Yeshua himself is a symbol of God's will on earth. Through all these symbols, the book of John is one of the earliest works to dive into the mystical definition, status, attributes, and characteristics of "The Tzaddik" (the righteous person). If one could see past the figure of Yeshua, who is the hero of the story, one can actually see that in John there's everything one needs to know about the figure of the Tzaddik and their relationship with God and with people. Yeshua is a symbol for the Tzaddik, and many of the symbols used to define Yeshua in the book of John are also found in mystical literature such as the Zohar, in reference to the Tzaddik (the saint one) of the generation. In the Zohar the Tzaddik is Shimon bar Yohai. In the mystical Gospel of Thomas, it is said of Yaakov the Just (Yeshua's brother, and the righteous person who led the Nazarene movement after him), that "for his sake heaven and earth were created" (*Thomas #12*).

In other words: Whatever we find about the "Tzaddik" in Jewish literature is already codified in the book of John through the figure of Yeshua. This is important because John is not saying in any moment at all that Yeshua is God. In chapter 10 Yeshua is directly accused of making himself equal to God, and he defends himself using a very well known Psalm (*82:6*): "**I have said you all are God**" (Eloqim atem). The judges of Israel are called God, and yet you accuse me because I said I'm God's son! It doesn't make any sense! I didn't say any blasphemy here! I do the will of God, we have a relationship of will and obedience, and I take care of his business here on earth! So I and the Father are one. I'm not saying I am God. I also said that I want the people and I to be one. So what's the problem?

C - GRAMMAR

Let's go back to our "**Before Abraham was, I am**" (*John 8:58*).

Is the "I am" used here the Sacred Name? Is that the reason people wanted to stone him? The answer is No. In the Greek manuscripts Yeshua says: "ego eimi" (It's me, I am). He uses this phrase several times in the Gospels with the sense of "it's me". In the story of the Samaritan woman, she says: I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us. Yeshua answers: ego eimi (I am, it's me), the one who is talking to you. In this context he means he's the Messiah. When he walks on the water, the disciples see a figure in the distance and think it's a ghost. Yeshua tells them: ego eimi (it's me), don't be afraid. Even in the story when Yeshua heals a blind man and people is asking about him, the blind man says "ego eimi (it's me, I am) the blind man". So you see, the expression has nothing to do with the Sacred Name. It simply means it's me, or I am, like when he says: "I am (ego eimi) from above - [you are from below]" (*John 8:23*).

The equivalent in Hebrew is "Ani Hu" (I am, it's me).

Now, when we check the famous story in the burning bush, in which God tells his Name to Moses, most Bibles translate the Name as "I am that I am". When people connect this Name

with Yeshua's "I am", they are (a) relying on an English rendering instead of the original text and (b) making a grave mistake.

First of all, in the original Hebrew, the Sacred Name is: "**Ehyeh asher ehyeh**". Even though we might want to translate it as "I am that I am" for reading comfort, the truth is that the Name is in future tense. It literally reads as "**I will be that I will be**". This means that the name has NOTHING to do with what Yeshua said. Making the connection through English translations is just a fabricated sophistry that intentionally ignores the fact that the expressions are not the same. Yeshua says "Ani Hu" (It's me, I am), and God says that his name is "**Ehyeh**" (I shall be).

"And thus you shall say to the children of Israel, **Ehyeh** (I shall be) has sent me unto you" (*Exodus 3:14*).

What about the Greek? Does the Septuagint use "Ego Eimi" (I am) as God's Name? Again, the truth is that No, it doesn't. In the LXX God's Name is "**Ho On**" (The Being One). "And thus you shall say to the children of Israel, **Ho On** (The being One) has sent me unto you". Right, the expression ego eimi (I am) is used in the text for a moment, but it's NOT part of God's name. It's only used to emphasize the person who is talking, like in many other verses by many other different characters.

Moses says: "When they ask me about his name, what will I respond to them? And God said to Moses: I am **Ho On** (I am the Being One)". The idea that God's Name is: 'ego eimi' is not supported by the rules of hermeneutics; it's a wishful thought.

D - THE I AM THING

So, we have seen some important elements to take into consideration before trying to understand this famous verse:

- 1 - Yeshua's 'I am' is not related to the Sacred Name. At all.
- 2 - Yeshua didn't think to be God.
- 3 - the audience misunderstand Yeshua.
- 4 - so the audience's reaction to Yeshua's words is irrelevant.
- 5 - Yeshua's words are deeper than appear on the surface.
- 6 - Yeshua is a whole symbol that represents mystical concepts.
- 7 - In the immediate context, Yeshua is talking of following the Word of God which makes one never to see death.
- 8 - Abraham saw Yeshua's day and was glad. The day of Messiah, the day of Messianic era, the day of resurrection.

Now, using the audience's misunderstanding, Yeshua says something even deeper.

"Before Abraham was even born, it's me".

It's me, the Messiah, the character that represents the final redemption of the world, the resurrection of the dead, and the will of God on earth. Like Sefer Yetzirah says: "**The end is embedded in the beginning**" (*Yetzirah 1:7*). The last tool of redemption is also the first. The Soul of Messiah exists before the world was created (*cf. Pesakhim 54a*). "He was chosen of God before the creation of the world and forever" (*Hanokh 48:6*). There are two thrones in Heaven, and according to Rabbi Akiva, one is for God, and one is for Messiah (*Hagiga 14a, cf. Hanokh 49:2, 4*).

Obviously the person meant to be Messiah is born in this world naturally through a father and a mother. But the mystical soul of Messiah is ready, in Heaven, waiting to descend on this righteous man. He will then realize who he is and what his mission will be (*cf. Arizal, Arba Meot Shekel Kesef p. 241*).

E - KABBALAH

It is taught in Kabbalah that Messiah's soul is rooted on the highest point of the highest Sefirah: Keter of Keter, in other words, Atika Kadisha (the Holy Ancient one), as it is written: I was seeing in night visions and there was before me like a son of man coming with the clouds, and he came near to [the level of] Atik Yomim (the Ancient of Days)... and he was given authority..." (*Daniel 7:13*).

This figure seen in the vision is the Messiah (*Rashi*).

Atika Kadisha is the highest level of Keter, above the triple column structure in the Sefirot. Atika Kadisha transcends time and space, it transcends it all. The Soul of Messiah, which is the Yekhida (the unifying Soul of all Israel) is rooted on this level of Keter.

Interestingly, it is from this level, the skull of Atika Kadisha, where the dew comes from. The dew that resurrects the dead (*Zohar III: 128b, Idra Rabba*). And this is how everything Yeshua was talking about in this section is connected, even though the audience only saw random sentences and misunderstood everything to the point of picking stones to stone him.

-Xus Casal -