

John 8:58: How do we translate?

Kelton Graham

KGRAHAM0938@comcast.net

Jesus said to them, truly, truly I say to you before Abraham was born I AM. Whenever there is a discussion about the nature of Jesus, whether one claims that he is YHWH or that Jesus is simply “a god,” no doubt John 8:58 comes into the discussion. Those who support the idea that Jesus is claiming deity point to the fact that Jesus calls himself the “I AM” and quickly point to Exodus 3:14. In more recent scholarship some argue that Jesus’ words in John 8:58 reflect a strong linguistic connection with Isaiah. 40-55. אֲנִי־יְהוָה “I am he.” Those on the opposite side of the fence quickly allude to the fact that Jesus is not directly quoting Exodus because the LXX reads “ὁ ὢν” instead of εἰμί.. They go on to argue that if Jesus was quoting this passage he would have used ὁ ὢν, but instead he said ἐγὼ εἰμί. and go on to argue that ἐγὼ εἰμί. should be translated as “I have been” as opposed to “I AM.” They do on the supposition that in this verse is an example of a special use of the present tense, known in Greek grammar as Present of Past Action Still in Progress (PPA)

First, what is a PPA? Wallace describes a PPA in the following manner.

The present tense may be used to describe an action which, began in the past and continues in the present. The emphasis is on the present time...it is different from the progressive present in that it reaches back in time and usually has some sort of temporal indication, such as an adverbial phrase, to show this past-referring element...The key to this usage is normally to translate the present tense as an English present perfect¹

Several passages that he lists in this example include 1 John 3:8 ὅτι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος (ἀμαρτάνει..) The devil has been sinning from the beginning

ἀμαρτάνει. is present tense verb, but when translated to English, takes an English present perfect translation. Notice that the present tense verb further explains the preposition ἀπό, so if one asks how long has the devil been sinning, the answer would be “from the beginning.” If we applied this to John 8:58 it would translate as “I have been since before the birth of Abraham.”

¹ Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

Some other examples would be Luke 13:7 Ἰδοὺ τρία ἔτη ἀφ' οὗ ἔρχομαι ζητῶν καρπὸν Behold for three years from which I have been coming looking for fruit.

The present tense verb ἔρχομαι (I come) is translated as a present perfect tense (I have been coming) to further explain ἀφ'.

The last example used here is Luke 15:29, Ἰδοὺ τοσαῦτα ἔτη δουλεύω Behold for so many years I have served you.

The present tense verb δουλεύω (I serve) is translated as a present perfect. I have been serving...

So, if John 8:58 is a PPA, it would focus on Jesus' existence prior to Abraham' and continue all the way up to the point where he is presently speaking. However, it is my opinion that this is not all Jesus is saying, for when lined up with the context of the rest of the verse, this translation does not seem to fit.

In verse 56 when Jesus tells the Jews that Abraham rejoiced to see his day; the obvious response is how can this be since Jesus was not even 50 years of age? If John 8:58 is a PPA, Jesus tells them that he existed prior to Abraham. If this is all that Jesus is saying, one has difficulty explaining why the Jews then sought to stone him. What could be so bad about what Jesus said that it caused the leaders to want to kill him? This reaction happened only two other times, once in John 5:18, the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because they believed he was making himself God and again in John 10:31-33 the Jews once again believed Jesus was claiming to be God and wanted to stone him. I believe that John intends his readers to associate the three pericopes. John 8:58 is following the same pattern. The Jews believe once again that Jesus is claiming deity and desire to stone him. The goal of this paper is to prove that.

A LOOK AT GREEK SYNTAX:

εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί.

γενέσθαι is an infinitive. It has a wide range of meaning such as become, origin, created, happened, etc. The subject of an infinitive will be in the accusative case; in this sentence the subject is Abraham. So what we have is a little noun phrase, which comes out to Abraham's coming forth or Abraham's birth. πρὶν therefore is governing this noun phrase, and Abraham's coming forth is the object of πρὶν so we get "before Abraham's coming forth. Whenever, πρὶν or πρὸ+ an infinitive, the action of the infinitive occurs after the action of the controlling verb, meaning that before the birth of Abraham, something happened. This prepositional phrase πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι is modifying the main verb εἰμί. adverbially telling the reader when something happened. I AM before Abraham's coming forth, or I AM before the birth of Abraham. Namely, I existed prior to Abraham.

At this point, there is not much difference between those who support the PPA translation and what is being argued here. As a matter of fact, they probably would argue that in English their translation is better suited. However, the problem with the PPA is that it does not fully grasp the full range of ἔστιν in either biblical Greek or philosophical Greek. There is an existential sense of the word εἰμί., and if this is the sense in which Christ is speaking it would mean that he is not just talking about him being simply before Abraham and still existing up to the point of speaking. He is saying that he eternally existed before Abraham and will continue to exist forever and beyond, making his words a strict claim of deity.

Consider the uses of εἰμί., in Hebrews 11:6 πιστεῦσαι γὰρ δεῖ τὸν προσερχόμενον τῷ θεῷ ὅτι (ἔστιν) “for the who comes to God must believe that He is” Notice the sense in which ἔστιν is used: “that He is, that He exist. “ Not just in the present but he is eternally. BDAG,² gives the example of the Greek use of εἰμί in philosophy. Quoting Parmenides it reads “of the eternal we cannot say ἦν οὐδ' ἐσταί only ἐστιν , “He (it) was nor he (it) will be only he (it) is.”) In both cases when εἰμι in used in this light it signifies eternity, not just in the sense of existing in the past to the present point, but existing forever.

Another such use found in the LXX is, Psalm 89:1 which is Psalm 90 in the English text. It reads πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη γενηθῆναι καὶ πλασθῆναι τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν οἰκουμένην καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος σὺ εἶ

Before the mountains came to be and the making of the land and earth and from the ages to the ages you are. (Namely you exist)

God existed not only prior to the forming of the mountains but even now and will continue forever. Before discussing this; however, it should be noted that I am always wary of comparing LXX grammar to that of the NT, simply because it is a translation of the Hebrew. Since it is impossible to tell what type of translation technique the translators of the LXX used (literal or dynamic) we can only guess how certain verbs are used.

Some may argue that this could be translated as a PPA as well. If so, this verse would likely be translated, “Before the mountains were formed and you gave birth to the land and world, from the age to the age you have existed.” In order for this to be a PPA ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος must be referring to past time events. Noting that in the previous verse Moses is speaking of a past record. κύριε καταφυγή ἐγενήθης ἡμῖν ἐν γενεᾷ καὶ γενεᾷ. “Lord you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” So the

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev and aug. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago : University of Chicago Press 2000), 283.

argument would be that εἶ here is illustrating that God existed in the past and still exist at this point and time.

While this is a plausible argument, this does not seem to best represent the Hebrew text. In the Hebrew text the last phrase reads 'אלֹהֶיךָ אַתָּה' namely you are God. It appears that the אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew is pointed as אֵל (not) in the Greek, and placed in verse 3 as μὴ. So Moses is saying that before everything was, you are God. That is the context of the passage; he is not saying you have been God, but rather before everything else came to be you are whom you are. This seems to be the best sense in which to take this passage, Moses is contrasting what came to be with what already is. And the LXX translators rendered this eternal with the present tense εἶμι.

Some who believe John 8:58 is a PPA point Jer 1:5, which in the LXX reads πρὸ τοῦ με πλάσαι σε ἐν κοιλίᾳ ἐπίσταμαι σε

If the present tense ἐπίσταμαι (know) is a PPA, it would be translated: “ I have known you since before I formed you in the womb,” Such a translation would mean that God knew Jeremiah in the past and still knows him while speaking to him. While this is plausible, once again there should be a comparison with the Hebrew text. Notice the following.

d	c	b	a
בְּטָרַם	בְּבֶטֶן	אֶצְרִיךָ	יְדַעְתִּיךָ
d1	c1	b1	a1
בְּטָרַם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקֶּדֶשׁ שְׁתִּיךָ			

It is important to know that יְדַעְתִּיךָ is a qal perfect affix, and according to the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament³ יָדַע here is parallel with הִקְדַּשְׁתִּיךָ which means to choose. God at one point and time chose (knew), appointed, and placed Jeremiah. All these are affix verbs, two being qal and the other being a hiphil, each pointing to a specific event. If this is the case, then it is reasonable to translate this verse as “before I formed you in the womb I knew/chose you.” If this is the case then this verse does not have to be translated as a PPA.

Some may ask did the translator translate the Hebrew perfect as a present tense verb if the Hebrew should be translated as a past tense why didn't the translator simply use an aorist. I think the answer lies in the verb itself, verbs that communicate the idea of “knowing or I knew” can be translated as a present tense as “I know.” Similar in some respects to the

³ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Study Edition*, vol I. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

Greek verb οἶδα even though it is perfect tense, it is translated as a present. It seems as though the translator of the LXX decided to use this understanding as the way to translate this particular passage. For if he really wanted to communicate a perfect tense idea, he could use the perfect tense and be even more effective.

Returning to Jn 8:58, the question remains, however, why were the leaders so angry? It seems reasonable to assume that they recognized what Jesus meant when he said πρὸς Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί. Had Jesus merely been claiming to have been alive before Abraham, it is difficult to understand why the leaders sought to stone him. However, if John intends his readers to associate this periscope with the others in which the Jews seek to stone Jesus, the existential use of εἰμί. makes perfect sense. Namely, “I existed and always will exist.” This use would cause the Jews to think about Exodus 3:14 rendering in the LXX ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν or maybe אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה. They would have recognized that Jesus was equating Himself with the I AM who spoke to Moses – a clear claim to deity, just as in John 5 and John 10.

Now it is argued that Jesus is not quoting Exodus 3:14, but he does not have to. All he has to do is allude to the passage. Indeed, it may be suggested that Ps 89 (LXX) and Isaiah 41-51 also allude to Ex 3:14 in their use of the existential present tense use of εἰμί.

But this idea is not met without opposition, for many will argue that the best translation the Hebrew would be “I will be who I will be” pointing only to the future, since this is a prefix 1 cs qal imperfect in Hebrew. Others basing their arguments on the LXX would say that ἐγὼ εἰμι is not a name. They would suggest that ὁ ὢν is the Divine Name in the LXX, Jesus does not say ὁ ὢν he says ἐγὼ εἰμί.

Looking at the Exodus 3, we find in verse 13 that Moses asked God מַה־שְּׁמוֹ “What is his name?” This question posed by Moses to YHWH is really asking, “What do you want them to call you?” If YHWH answered the question, “I will be who I will be,” this does not answer Moses’ question. Moses is looking for a name, and what seems to fit best here is אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה “I AM who I AM” namely, I exist. Grammatically, אֶהְיֶה is a 1 cs of YHWH, literally meaning “He is.” If this is the case, then one could translate אֶהְיֶה as “I AM,” not only meaning that he existed in the past and up to the present, but he exists eternally, forever. Thus in John 8:58, if Jesus were speaking Hebrew, he could have said אֶהְיֶה or I AM. This would explain why the Jews were so angry, angry enough to kill him. If he were speaking Greek, this idea of eternal existence which εἰμί. carries still would allude to Exodus 3:14, in the sense that Jesus is eternal much like יְהוָה is eternal.

In conclusion, it seems best to translate John 8:58 as “I AM” as opposed to “I have been” because it fits best within the context of the passage. It is grammatically plausible and takes into account the existential aspect of εἰμί.,