

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## I Am

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## I Am

### Abstract

"In just a few short words, Jesus has revealed his own name, and has thereby shown himself to be LORD. 'Before Abraham was, I am.'"

Posting about God's infinite existence from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/i-am-3/>

### Keywords

In All Things, lectionary, Abraham, Jesus, play on words

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Leah Zuidema

## Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)

[Jeremiah 26:20-24](#)

[John 8:48-59](#)

| *Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." – John 8:58*

What did you do "before it was cool"? If you're familiar with this meme, you'll know that it's often used with a little irony. Here's an example that makes me laugh: a [t-shirt printed with "Reformed before it was cool"](#) and the face of one very serious-looking (but not widely recognized) Reformer, gazing out and daring you to guess his name. The shirt plays with the idea of name-dropping. To show that you're in the know, you need to be able to recognize the name on the shirt....except that it's the face printed there, not the name. It's a tough game to win! And then there's another layer of play: if you correctly identify the figure on the shirt, are you the winner? Or the loser? Does your credibility go up? Are you "cool"?

A version of the ironic name-dropping game plays out in [John 8: 48-59](#), too. The punchline to this one also makes me laugh. The scene starts earlier in chapter 8, with the religious leaders challenging Jesus' credibility and authority at every turn. Essentially, they are asking: "Who do you think you are, Jesus? What gives you the right to preach, heal, and forgive sins?" As they try to undercut Jesus, they simultaneously seek to elevate themselves with repeated attempts at name-dropping. First, they insinuate that only they are true to the law of Moses (John 8:1-8). For a while, they attack directly, asserting to Jesus that his testimony is not valid (John 8:12-20). When these attacks fail to deter him (John 8:21-30), they repeatedly refer to themselves as descendants of Abraham, arguing that this lineage makes them the authorities (John 8:31-47).

By the time we enter the story in today's passage, the religious teachers are so frustrated with Jesus that they are ready to say whatever it takes to turn the crowd against him. They begin with a smug opening line that slyly makes it sound to the listening crowd as though they are being perfectly reasonable ("*Aren't we right that...*"), after which they introduce two ridiculous claims:

*Aren't we right that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?* (v. 48)

Even though Jesus flatly denies their accusation ("*I do not have a demon.*" vs. 49), they steamroll ahead with their unfounded argument:

*Now we know that you have a demon.* (v. 52)

The religious experts go on to twist his words, using them to set rhetorical traps. Jesus says, "Whoever keeps my word will never see death" (v. 51). They go into a long-winded interpretation of this statement, boldly implying that Jesus is a blasphemer. The crux of their argument? To all present, it goes without saying that Abraham and the prophets were the greatest. But Abraham and the prophets died. So Jesus must be claiming that he is greater than Abraham and the prophets, because he said that the only way to avoid death was to keep his word—to obey him. He must be claiming to be God. Any person who makes such a claim is a blasphemer, and they all know that the punishment for blasphemy is death.

Picture the religious authorities tying the knot on this logical loop: hands on hips, eyebrows high, lips sneering, staring Jesus down as if to say, “Take that!”

Just when they think they’ve caught him in his own words, Jesus shuts down all their sophistry with his own name-dropping game. Get ready for the punchline: “*Before Abraham was cool...*”

No, that’s not what he said. How about this? “*Before Abraham was, I was.*” No, that’s not it either. Here’s what Jesus said to them:

“*Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.*” (John 8:58)

And this makes me laugh—loudly. It’s the mismatched verb tenses that get me. “*Before Abraham was, I am.*” Bad grammar? No. “Perfect” present tense! It’s infinitely funnier than any “before it was cool” wordplay.

In just a few short words, Jesus has revealed his own name, and has thereby shown himself to be LORD. “*Before Abraham was, I am.*” The very same “*I am who I am.*” Jesus is the God who spoke to Moses through the burning bush ([Exodus 3](#)). The heir of Abraham, and yet his creator, too. He can out-name-drop any teacher of the law. Before and beyond all time.

Laugh with me, will you? It’s the laughter of Sarah laboring, Miriam dancing, Elizabeth singing. It’s the laughter of triumph over the grave.

**Prayer:** *Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*