



Andrea Skevington

Jesus said, 'I am'

Finding life in the everyday

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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To the women of my Thursday afternoon group.
Thank you for your love and wisdom.
It is a privilege to walk with you.

To St John's, Woodbridge, especially those on
the Advent retreat, and the Otley Hall retreaters,
who graciously tried out early ideas for this book.
Your responses helped to shape it.

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Preface

Jesus said many startling, strange things, but few can match the 'I am' sayings for originality, for opening our eyes to see things differently. This book will begin to explore these sayings in John's gospel, with a particular aim in mind: to encourage us to find ways of living out Jesus' teaching in our daily lives. John says, 'We have seen his glory' (1:14) and, strangely, this glory shows itself in these simple examples from daily lived experience – bread, light, gates, shepherds, life, ways. In doing so, it sparks the imagination. These 'I am' sayings go deep, disclosing their truth slowly, little by little, as we can begin to accept it.

So, this book will explore the signs and stories that surround these 'I am' sayings of Jesus. We will look at what they might mean for us as we seek to deepen our understanding of Jesus and, perhaps, walk along his way.

It is an everyday grammatical necessity, saying 'I am' – *ego eimi* in Greek – and Jesus says it 24 times in John's account. Seven of these are usually called 'I am' sayings, and these form the core of the book. We will also give a chapter to the saying associated with the woman at the well, too interesting to overlook, as well as nodding to others. I believe each one of these has a claim to be considered part of John's great project of revealing who Jesus is, and that in him is abundant life.

Writing this book has changed the way I see following Jesus. My discipleship has become more fluid, more lived, more compassionate and outward looking. It is more grounded in relationship and service. The commands to love seem in sharper focus. I hope that, as you

read it, you may go deeper into the adventure of discovering who Jesus is and who you are.

Each chapter is in two parts. The first half is an exploration of the saying and its context; the second is a selection of things you can do – ‘reflection and response’. I have tried to make this as broad and varied as I can, hoping you will find something that draws you on a first reading, but also offers depth and breadth for a future reading. There are questions to take you deeper, and further reading if you want to explore the ideas more. There are prayer and meditation prompts, creative activities, suggestions for activities you can do with and in service of your community. Some of the ideas suggested are things I have done with small groups, in retreat settings or in informal church settings. Others are practices I follow myself. Many of the ideas could be used in newly imagined ways of doing church, for example the Fresh Expressions movement, or small informal groups that meet in houses, coffee shops, pubs or dance studios. Most of the active and reflective ideas could be used in all-age settings and services, in families and with children’s or youth groups. I hope that nearly all the ideas can be used by one person, or more than one, as it suits your circumstances.

There is plenty of choice, so pick one thing that catches your attention and try it. If it suits you better, choose a section, and pick the first item, and just do that. I hope this book will provide you with resources for many years of exploring what it means to live out the words of Jesus. May it help you to walk in the light.

1

I am: Moses and Abraham

One day Moses was taking care of Jethro's flock... When Moses led the flock to the west side of the desert, he came to Sinai, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire coming out of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire, but it was not burning up. So he said, 'I will go closer to this strange thing. How can a bush continue burning without burning up?'

When the Lord saw that Moses was coming to look at the bush, God called to him from the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'

And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

Then God said, 'Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' Moses covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, 'I have seen the troubles my people have suffered in Egypt, and I have heard their cries when the Egyptian slave masters hurt them. I am concerned about their pain, and I have come down to save them from the Egyptians. I will bring them out of that land and lead them to a good land with lots of room – a fertile land. It is the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. I have heard the cries of the people of Israel, and I have seen the way the Egyptians have made life hard for them. So now I am sending you to the king of Egypt. Go! Bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt!'

But Moses said to God, 'I am not a great man! How can I go to the king and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?'

God said, ‘I will be with you. This will be the proof that I am sending you. After you lead the people out of Egypt, all of you will worship me on this mountain.’

Moses said to God, ‘When I go to the Israelites, I will say to them, “The God of your ancestors sent me to you.” What if the people say, “What is his name?” What should I tell them?’

Then God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. When you go to the people of Israel, tell them, “I am sent me to you.”’

EXODUS 3:1–14 (NCV)

John’s gospel looks back to Moses’ ancient story, recording for us how Jesus called himself by this name – ‘I am’. This name, which emerged from a burning bush so long ago, is one of the most identifiable features of John’s account. It resonated with his early readers and listeners in Greek Ephesus, and it stirs our imagination even today, millennia later. Before we go deep into John’s account, and explore why that may be, we will look back to Moses’ story and see what we understand of this earliest ‘I am’.

The story of Moses

At the moment when Moses first glimpses the burning bush, it is a story of failure: he had been at the centre of power and influence, and now was pushed beyond the margins. Moses went from being high in Pharaoh’s court to a nomad shepherd, living in the wilderness. Moses – rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter, raised in the richest and most powerful household in the known world – killed an Egyptian slave master and was exiled. In exile, he again showed his acute sense of justice, defending Jethro’s daughters. So, on his way down, he was involved in two rescues – one led to murder, the second to marriage. Even in his descent, there are signs of hope and growth.

The decades he spent in the wilderness, keeping Jethro’s flocks, gave him time to learn what he needed to learn before bringing the ex-slaves through this same desert. There were practical things –

how to navigate, lead, find water, grazing and shelter from weather, and hide or fight predators. More importantly, there were matters of character. This is slow-growing fruit. He learned humility, among other things; after all, his high hopes had come to nothing. Perhaps he was learning some of the way described by Jesus so much later: the way of losing before you can find, of the first becoming last and the last, first (Matthew 16:25; 19:30).

Nothing is wasted in God's economy. God used the rubbish – and the good – in Moses' upbringing and his life as a shepherd. He became ideally suited to his task. As well as his circumstances and experience, God used his character; in this case, a sense of justice and an indignation at bullies. What must have felt like failure and a downwards path was the place where Moses encountered God.

We do not know if he was seeking God when God appeared. We do know that he was in the middle of his everyday, working life, and that God did something strange to arrest his attention, awaken his curiosity, draw him nearer. Attention and curiosity can guide you, can awaken you to God in the burning bushes we pass every day.

Moses certainly didn't seem to be looking for a job, let alone a great mission. It is easy to read his rather thin excuses and wonder why he spent so long arguing. His unwillingness to respond seems to come from uncertainty.

Who?

Moses is uncertain about himself, and he is uncertain about God.

His uncertainty about himself is understandable: plucked from death, set apart for great things, and then fallen, feared, unable to help his suffering people (Exodus 1–2). He has had a long time to tell himself this story – the story of one who missed his moment and squandered his opportunities, unable to fulfil his destiny. So when the moment came back to him, he did not know what to do with it.

Moses had lost his sense of his true nature. How did he respond to God's?

He is afraid to look on God – the God of people, his ancestors. It is interesting that God here chooses to be known by relationship – God could have spoken of being almighty, powerful, the Lord of hosts. Instead, God identifies as the one who has walked with people and has known people. It is a wonderful thing to be known for relationship like this: to be the God who is with us and for us. But it carries a risk: that people may go from thinking God is for them to thinking God is against others. There is a risk of exclusivity, superiority, built in the way flawed humans respond to the love of God. The great tragedy is that this is how the Israelites came to think at times, and how many tribes of believers have come to think even to the present day. Nevertheless, the story we have in the scriptures is one of gradually unfolding relationship, with people, communities, nations. This God is and will be a light for all (Revelation 21:23–24).

‘I am’: the name of God?

The God of ancestors is how God identifies himself. It is not enough for Moses; he wants more. Perhaps he knows he may be thought of as a traitor to his people – these ancestors – and wants the authority a specific name gives. And this is the name he is offered:

I am what I am [or, ‘I will be what I will be’].

EXODUS 3:14

This is a God who is beyond naming. God just is, or maybe God is the ground of being. There is more here that we miss because we are reading a translation. There is a connection between the verb ‘to be’ and the letters of the word YHWH – usually translated as ‘Lord’ in English Bibles – one of the principal names for God in the Hebrew scriptures. The one who is, is Lord. And there is more: the sounding out of two syllables of YHWH is like a breath, in and out. It is the word

of life itself. It is both beyond our naming and as intimate as breath. Later, Moses will be given a set of commandments for the people when they have left slavery (Exodus 20), and this is the third of the ten:

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

EXODUS 20:7

Names matter. Names have power. One interpretation of this command I have heard from a Jewish perspective is that anything we say about God will be at best incomplete, at worst wrong. God is beyond our language and more than we can know. To speak of God may lead to making a false image in our minds of what God is like. So, be humble in how you use the name. This 'I am' given to Moses is a name beyond names.

It balances the specificity of the previous name, 'the God of...' and makes us consider that this God is a God who has something to say to the Egyptians, too.

Two ways God identifies himself: as the God of individuals, walking alongside, knowing and loving people; and the God beyond our imagining, the God in whom we all live and move (Acts 17:28). The God of our every breath. Both. This is a mystery worth pondering.

But the conversation returns to the particular very rapidly.

So, go – you have a job to do.

'Who am I?' Moses asks (Exodus 3:11). That is the question – a very profound question. Who you are is less important than the presence of the God who is God of relationship, it seems. The answer is, 'I will be with you.'

And then, Moses asks for a sign. God's answer is a little unsatisfactory to Moses. The sign is that you will succeed. When you have

brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain – this very mountain where the bush burns. You trust, you go, it works. This sign is no help in giving you confidence or certainty to step forward and do this hard thing. The sign is that you will look back when you have done it, and then you know that it really was God who was with you. Life often makes more sense when we read it backwards.

Eventually, when he gets to the point of believing and accepting God, Moses still does not believe or accept himself. It's as if he thinks God doesn't know who he's chosen. When Moses points out that he's not a good orator, God's reply suggests: 'I know very well what your limitations are. I still choose you.' God will give what is necessary for the job to be done. And once he finally leaves on this journey, he sees Aaron, his brother, whom he has not seen for many years, coming to meet him. Why did Aaron come to find his brother now, we wonder? This is the kind of sign that helps. God does not leave Moses alone. In this story with strange signs and wonders, with plagues and snakes and magicians, we have another example of apparently ordinary things, like reconciliation with a long-lost brother, transformed and illuminated with the glory of God.

'In the beginning was the Word'

John structured his gospel, his account of the life of Jesus, around this 'I am', this ancient and mysterious word for God. Why?

John starts his gospel (1:1–18) at the beginning, before anything was made, and places the Word, in Greek the *Logos*, there, with God – beyond understanding, beyond definition.

Then, this happens. The Word does not stay intangible:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace

and truth... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

JOHN 1:14, 18

We can see John's intention here: to show that this *Logos* and Jesus of Nazareth are the same: that Jesus is Christ, existing since the foundation of the world, and yet someone he has seen. In seeing Jesus, he says, we can see what God is like.

John uses the word 'Christ' twice in his gospel in his own voice, rather than in the speech of others: once in the first chapter (1:17), and once again when he is explaining that in believing, we may have life (20:31).

In between these two bold statements, he unfolds and develops the meaning in different ways. The idea needs to grow in our minds. It takes time for us to see it.

John is saying the mysterious unknowable *Logos* is embodied in the person he ate with and laughed with and wept with, whose mother he cared for in her grief. It is a bold task to attempt. The 'I am's are part of this process, ringing through John's account, inviting us to consider that Jesus is at one time this great 'I am', and also as tangible as bread, as a vine laden with grapes.

Before Abraham

We begin briefly, then, not with the first 'I am' saying, but possibly the strangest. Not drawing on natural world or symbol, but speaking to the religious leaders of his day directly and dramatically.

Before Abraham was, I am.

JOHN 8:58

What might it mean?

This extraordinary saying brings to an end a rather heated exchange, which began after Jesus sends away the woman caught in adultery (8:12). The religious leaders question his authority and freely claim the name and authority of Abraham. As he speaks, Jesus points to a closeness to God, a knowledge and a life within God, a life which is not confined to a human lifespan, which gives him precedence even over Abraham. As we read it, we remember what John said as he introduced us to the story of Jesus: 'He was in the beginning with God' (1:1-4). This 'I am' saying takes us into the territory of the mysterious burning bush most closely. It is an outrageous, blasphemous saying in the eyes of the religious leaders, and they pick up stones for him, as they did for the woman. They respond in anger, but Jesus slips away, for now, and the story continues.

As we read together, as we explore these sayings, we will come to see how other people responded to him. We will see too how he listened, how he fed, healed, encouraged and set people on their feet. We will follow him as he walks alongside the lost and despairing, and kneels before his friends. We will see one who is 'full of grace and truth' (1:14), and who was described as having words of life (6:68).



Reflection and response

Study

Exodus 3

- Do you think that the mountain was already regarded as holy, or did this encounter make it so (vv. 1, 5)?
- Are there places in which you find it easier to become aware of the presence of God? If so, what are they like?

- Consider the significance of the burning bush – on fire but not consumed. Has God caught your attention lately (vv. 2–4)? How did you respond (vv. 5–6)?
- Do you have a tradition of faith in your family? Is there a faith of your ancestors? Whether you do or not – what does that mean for you (v. 6)?
- How does God respond to his suffering people? What does he want to do, and how (vv. 7–10)?
- Why do you think Moses asks for a definite name for God (v. 13)?
- How do you tend to think of God – as 'I am', or as the God of people in your past, or some other way? What does God as 'I am' mean to you?

Further study

John 1:1–18

- In what ways do you think John draws on Genesis 1 to begin his gospel? Are there echoes, and words or ideas that are picked up? It is a strange way to begin a life story. Why might he have done it this way?
- What difference might it make to our view of creation to see it as described in verses 3–4?
- How does John speak of light and life? What connections do you see between the two ideas (vv. 4–5)?
- What expectations of the story of Jesus are being set up?
- Do you think there are ways we might miss recognising and receiving Jesus now (vv. 10–11)?
- What do you understand by Jesus coming from the Father and living among us (vv. 14, 16–18)?
- What do you think John meant when he said he had seen his glory (v. 14)?
- What kind of blessings/gifts do you think John meant here (v. 16–17)?
- What might it mean that Jesus makes God known (v. 18)?

Prayer and meditation

The God of Abraham

How do you respond to the idea that God can be the God of a person as well as a people? That Jesus makes God known to us? Find some quiet time, and open yourself to God in silent prayer, asking, if you can, to be aware of the presence of God. As distracting thoughts arrive, keep turning back to God. God wants to be known by direct experience.

Breath prayer

The Hebrew name for God, similar in sound to the Hebrew for 'I am', is also similar to the pattern of breath: YHWH. You might like to find another word, or a pair of words, to use as a breath prayer. Practise in times of calm; it may help in times of distress. Suggestions to breathe in and out:

- Love, Thanks
- Peace, Joy
- Good, Love

Prayer for liberation

Many things can hold us, and those we love, captive. Pray for yourself and others to be set free from fear, debt, mental and physical distress, addiction, patterns of wrongdoing, etc. Pray for those who work to set others free. Pray too for those caught up in modern slavery in various forms. Pray for liberation.

Creative response

Maps (Moses' story)

Remember that the events of Moses' life, both good and bad, were places on the road to this encounter and his task. When we look back at our past successes and failures, what do we see?

Reflect on your life – you might like to draw a map to represent your journey. You can connect it to real places, or symbolic ones like in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). For this exercise, do you see good emerging in unexpected ways? It doesn't always, of course.

Alternatively, rewrite your own life's story, again focusing on real or symbolic places along the way.

Burning bush

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61)¹

As you start your day, pray for open eyes to see where God may be at work, or may be seeking to catch your attention today. Set off with open eyes, a camera and a notepad. Record anything that draws your attention. At the end of the day, mull over what you have recorded in prayer. What did you see?

John's prologue: re-imagining

What particularly strikes you about John's prologue (John 1:1–18)? Stay with any words/images that catch your attention or puzzle you. Use pencils or paints to capture the movements and moods of this passage. You could engage in 'holy doodling' with the words and any shapes and patterns that emerge from them.

Alternatively, write a retelling, emphasising the aspects that caught your attention.

Life and service

God appeared to Moses to call him to lead his people. Are there ways God may be calling you to love and service?

Holy

God meets us and, where he does, it is holy ground. Can you see all ground as holy? Can you say that of the places and spaces you visit today? Pray over them. Then, if appropriate, mark the places in some way, with a temporary reminder.

Our abilities and our story

Think of how God used Moses' character and history to bring the people out of slavery. What about you – your character and history? Do you have abilities you are using, or could use? (Use the 'Maps' exercise from page 17 if you did it.)

You could ask people you trust to help you see your own talents, what you have to offer and what you are already doing. If you wish, consider going further.

Are there ways you can use your talents and experience for the benefit of others? Are there people you can walk alongside and encourage? Can you be generous with what you can do? Can even the really hard times enable you to help someone going through something similar? Even if you feel you have nothing, you have the capacity to listen with compassion, to encourage another, to say a prayer.

'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace' (John 1:16). Are there ways in which you could increasingly be part of passing on blessings?

Pray for God's kingdom to come.

Slavery and freedom

Moses was called to lead his people out of slavery. Research modern slavery, racism or discrimination. Consider ways you could be part of the solution – by prayer, campaigning, awareness, providing practical support for those affected, etc.

'Through him all things were made'

Spend time in the natural world, or bring pictures and objects in to where you are. Consider them, delight in them, as you remember the mystery of the Word through whom they were made.

Can you join in with the care of creation? Here are a few suggestions: growing things, providing homes for wildlife, buying local food,

avoiding chemicals, reducing your carbon footprint, supporting campaigns to protect the environment.

Other creative ideas

There may be ways you can participate in this outpouring of creativity in any field. Consider ways in which you were creative as a child, which you have left behind: crafting, engaging with science and engineering, making and restoring, as well as more traditional arts. Which can you engage in to the glory of God?

Further reading

Shane Claiborne, *Jesus for President* (Zondervan, 2008)

Malcolm Guite, *Parable and Paradox* (Canterbury Press, 2016),
especially the 'I am' sonnets

John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Zondervan, 2014)

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (Canterbury Press, 2009)

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper, 1988)

Tom Wright, *John for Everyone* (SPCK, 2002)

Closing prayer

Lord,

We hope to see your glory, full of grace and truth.

*We thank you that you are 'I am'; you are our ground of being,
as close as breath.*

*We give thanks that you are the one who walked with Moses to set
the people free.*

Thank you that, through Jesus, your nature is known to us.

*Thank you that our everyday realities – a bush, a loaf of bread,
a vine – can be signs of grace and truth.*

Help us to be signs of your love and liberation where we are.

Help us to be people of the 'I am'.

Amen



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Drawing on the imagery of the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus identifies himself as the 'I am' of Israel's narrative.

Through sensitive retelling, thoughtful discussion and creative exercises, Andrea Skevington shows the transforming power of Jesus' words. Each chapter focuses on a different 'I am' saying and offers ideas for reflection and response, including suggestions for further study, prayer and meditation, creative response, 'life and service' practical outreach, music and further reading.

Jesus Said, 'I Am' integrates faith and imagination, story and study, helping the reader towards a well-grounded and more profound faith.



Andrea Skevington lives in Suffolk with her family. She writes for both adults and children, winning the Christian Book of the Year award (Speaking Volumes) for her retelling, *The Lion Classic Bible* (Lion Hudson, 2011). She also preaches and leads Bible studies and children's groups, creative writing workshops and retreats.



Cover image: Jordan river, near Bethany Betharaba, where John baptised Jesus © Thinkstock



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