Trinity Seminar Week 3

Lesson #4 Israel's Monotheism

"*John's Gospel is not abandoning monotheism but reformulating it Christologically."*
D.A. Carson

The belief in one God, or monotheism, was vital to Judaism. And this is at the crux of the theological crisis produced through the divinity of the Son. This lesson will highlight this core belief in the history of Israel and thus highlight how a new theological articulation was required while remaining loyal to Torah revelations about Israel's one true Elohim.

Israel's commitment to monotheism is rooted in its Scriptures, especially the confession found in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This declaration (the Shema) shaped every aspect of Jewish belief and identity, setting Israel apart from surrounding nations that practiced polytheism. The God of Israel, often identified by the covenant name Yahweh, was understood to be the sole Creator, sovereign over all things, and unmatched by any other being. This conviction was reinforced through the Law, the prophets, and Israel's history, particularly in contrast to idolatry, which was consistently condemned. By the time of Second Temple Judaism, monotheism was not just a doctrine but a defining marker of Jewish faithfulness.

The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were fiercely committed to the absolute oneness of God, confessing daily the *Shema*. In their understanding, any human claiming to share God's unique identity was not merely mistaken—it was blasphemy worthy of death (Lev. 24:16). Consequently, when Jesus declared, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58), claimed authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5–12), called God His own Father "making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18), and affirmed, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), the religious leaders were outraged. They attempted to stone Him, explaining, "because you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:33). Their opposition to Jesus was therefore fueled not simply by political concerns or personal jealousy, but by the conviction that His claims violated Israel's uncompromising monotheism.

And this conviction has continued throughout the last 2000 years by Jewish rabbis who believe that the Christian story is an affront to true monotheism. A representative example comes from the Orthodox Jewish counter-missionary Rabbi Tovia Singer, who argues that Christian belief in Jesus as God is incompatible with biblical monotheism:

"If the one God of the universe, Creator of the heavens and the earth, wanted to convey to His people that He alone was God and there was no other who shared this unique distinction with Him, what words would He use so that there would be no possibility for error?… The Hebrew Bible repeatedly declares that God alone is God. Therefore, the Christian claim that Jesus is God is irreconcilable with the Bible's uncompromising monotheism."

Into this firmly monotheistic context, the claims of Jesus in the Gospel of John presented a profound challenge. John portrays Jesus not merely as a prophet or

teacher, but as sharing in the very identity of the one God. As stated, the opening of the Gospel declares that the Word "was with God" and "was God," and Jesus' later statements, especially the "I am" sayings, echo the divine name revealed in Exodus 3:14. When Jesus speaks of His unity with the Father ("I and the Father are one") and claims authority to give life or judge the world, He is doing things that, within Jewish thought, belong uniquely to God. This explains why some of His contemporaries thought it was blasphemous and inconsistent with Judaism to claim to be God.

It is important to note that the earliest followers of Jesus remained firmly committed to Jewish monotheism even while proclaiming the divine identity of Christ. Jesus himself affirmed the central confession of Israel, the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Mark 12:29), while also speaking and acting in ways that identified himself uniquely with God's authority, glory, and name. The apostles continued this same conviction after the resurrection. In First Epistle to the Corinthians 8:4–6, Paul explicitly states that "there is no God but one," yet he includes Jesus within this divine identity by speaking of "one God, the Father" and "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things." Rather than abandoning monotheism, the apostles redefined their understanding of the one God around the revelation of the Father and the Son. The disciples worshiped Jesus, prayed in his name, and proclaimed him as sharing in God's eternal authority, yet they never described Christianity as belief in multiple gods. Instead, they believed that the one God of Israel had revealed himself decisively in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson #4 Questions:

16. What is monotheism and what religions believe this?
17. What is polytheism and what religions believe this?
18. Where does the concept of monotheism originate in Judaism?
19. How does Jesus Christ cause a crisis to monotheism?
20. Is Jesus monotheistic?
21. Are the 12 apostles and Paul monotheistic?
22. Was Christianity perceived as monotheistic by the religious leaders of the Jews?

In your own words describe how the Bible is monotheistic and how John's gospel causes a theological crisis?

Lesson # 5 The "I Am's" in John

"John portrays Jesus doing and saying what Israel's God had promised He Himself would do."
N.T. Wright

In the former lessons, we looked at the stunning theological statements in the prologue of the book of John. This created a theological crisis in the midst of Jewish monotheism of no small measure. But it doesn't stop there in the book of John. A radical link of Jesus to the Old Testament revelation of God's name and character is about to be repetitively and systematically applied to the Man Christ Jesus that will extend the crisis to new levels.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' "I am" statements (Greek: *egō eimi*) carry deep theological weight, especially in light of the Old Testament revelation of God's name. In Exodus 3:14, God reveals Himself to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM" (associated with the divine name Yahweh), expressing His eternal, self-existent nature. John's Gospel deliberately echoes this language when Jesus says things like "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world." These are not merely poetic metaphors; they are loaded with divine significance, drawing a direct line between Jesus' identity and the covenant name of God revealed in Israel's Scriptures. Actually, there are 14 "I am" statements, 7 are explicit, and 7 are implicit.

The 7 Explicit I Am's:

23. **"I am the Bread of Life."** — John 6:35
24. **"I am the Light of the World."** — John 8:12
25. **"I am the Door (Gate) of the Sheep."** — John 10:7, 9
26. **"I am the Good Shepherd."** — John 10:11, 14
27. **"I am the Resurrection and the Life."** — John 11:25
28. **"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."** — John 14:6
29. **"I am the True Vine."** — John 15:1, 5

The 7 Implicit I Am's:

30. **"I who speak to you am he."** (literally, "I am.") — John 4:26
31. **"It is I; do not be afraid."** (literally, "I am.") — John 6:20
32. **"Unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins."** — John 8:24
33. **"Then you will know that I am."** — John 8:28
34. **"Before Abraham was, I am."** — John 8:58
35. **"So that…you may believe that I am."** — John 13:19
36. **"Jesus said to them, 'I am.'"** — John 18:5–6 (at His arrest, where the soldiers draw back and fall to the ground).

There are the implicit "I Am's" that are largely manifest in conversations. All are worth

mentioning, but the one in John 8 is arguably the most radical. The reaction of Jesus' audience reinforces this claim. In John 8:58–59, when Jesus declares "before Abraham was I am", His listeners attempt to stone Him for blasphemy. They do this because they understand Him to be claiming equality with God. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus often veils His identity more subtly, John presents all of these "I Am" statements as open and unmistakable claims. He has used multiple "I am" statements to communicate truths about Himself. But the declaration in John 8 could not be more clear. This is not a metaphorical proclamation but rather a radical theological one as He proclaims that He existed before Abraham some 2000 years previous. And not only is this a striking statement about His pre-existence before Abraham, it is also a statement of preeminence over Abraham. So, Jesus puts Himself at the center of Judaism and the center of the Godhead in one profound encounter. Taken together, these "I am" declarations strongly suggest that Jesus is identifying Himself with Yahweh, not as a separate or lesser being, but as God present in human form. John's Gospel presents this not as a philosophical abstraction, but as a lived reality in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal "I AM" who has entered history. This is central to John's purpose: to show that in encountering Jesus, one is encountering the very presence of God. As said before, the incarnation and the divine name converge here, making the "I am" statements some of the clearest expressions in the New Testament of Jesus' claim to be Yahweh revealed in the flesh. The Gospel's portrait is not subtle; Jesus is presented as Yahweh made known in the flesh, the same God who spoke in the Old Testament is now personally present and active among His people.

Lesson #5 Questions:

37. Who was the first to learn the name Yahweh?
38. Where did God reveal this name?
39. What does the name mean?
40. How does John link Yahweh to Jesus?
41. How did the Jewish leaders respond to Jesus declaring he was Yahweh in flesh?
42. What does it mean to us personally that Jesus is Yahweh in flesh?
43. How many Yahwehs are there?

In your own words, describe the importance of the name Yahweh and how John's gospel declares that Jesus the man is Yahweh in flesh.