

The Trinity: Unity in Plurality

The Plurality of the Godhead

- Of the 39 books of the OT the Hebrew word "god" is used 3070 times. In over 2300 occasions the word *elohim* was chosen by the original writers. Thirty-four of the thirty-nine books of the OT use this plural word for God.
- The very first verse of the Bible uses the plural for God (*elohim*).
- We also find the plurality of the Godhead in the account of creation:
 - The plural *elohim* is used for every day of creation
 - The plural pronouns "us" and "our" are used
 - In Genesis 1:26 the Hebrew word *asah* is used in its plural form as the verb "make" following the plural pronoun "us"
 - Commenting on the plural "let us" in Genesis 1:26, Gerhard F. Hasel writes: "This plural supposes that there is within the divine Being the distinction of personalities, a plurality within the deity, 'a unanimity of intention and plan.' In other words, a distinction in the divine Being with regard to a plurality of persons is here represented as a germinal idea. Thus the phrase 'let us' expresses through its plural of fullness an intra-divine deliberation among 'persons' within the divine Being." - Gerhard F. Hasel, "Meaning of 'Let Us' in Genesis 1:26," Andrews University Seminary Studies 13.1 (1975)
 - In Genesis 1:2 the "Spirit of God" (*ruach Elohim*) is seen as taking an active role in creation, "hovering" (*rāchaph*) over the water. The word *rāchaph* occurs again in Deuteronomy 32:11,12, where God is said to protect His people just as an eagle "hovers" (*rāchaph*) over its young, providing evidence that the activity conveyed through the word *rāchaph* is that of an individual and not an impersonal element. The mention of *Elohim* and *ruach Elohim* in Genesis 1 provides further evidence for the idea of a plurality within God.
- The plurality of God is also present in the following:
 - "Behold, the man has become like one of us [plural], to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22)
 - "Let us [plural] go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:7)
 - "Remember now your Creator." [literally "creators"] (Ecclesiastes 12:1)
 - "Let Israel rejoice in their Maker." [literally "makers"] (Psalm 149:2)
 - "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us [plural]?' (Isaiah 6:8)
 - Note: Against the view that the angelic host is being addressed in Isaiah 6:8, it may be noted that in 40:13, 14 the Lord seems to indicate that He has no need of counseling with His creatures, who may include created heavenly beings.
 - "For your Maker is your husband." [literally "Makers", "husbands"] (Isaiah 54:5)
- The term *elohim* or the name *Yahweh* is applied to two personalities of the Godhead in these verses:
 - In Psalm 45:6,7 the first *Elohim* is being addressed by the second *Elohim*: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."
 - In Hosea 1:7 the speaker is *Elohim* who says that He will save the house of Judah by the instrumentality of *Yahweh*. So *Elohim* number one will save Israel by means of *Elohim*

number two. "I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen."

- In Genesis 19:24 *Yahweh* number one is on earth raining sulfur and fire from a second *Yahweh* who is in heaven: "Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven"
- In Zechariah 2:8,9 we have one *Yahweh* sending another *Yahweh* to perform a specific task: "For thus says the LORD of Hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: 'Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who served them. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me.'"
- The titles "Angel of the Lord" or "Angel of God" appear about 70 times in the Old Testament. In most instances these titles are referring to a divine person. Since the Angel of the Lord/God is a "messenger" (*mal'ak*), He must be distinct from the Lord/God Himself. And since the messenger is identified with the Lord/God, we can only conclude that there is a plurality of persons in God.
 - In Genesis 16, the Angel appears to Hagar and gives her divine promises (vs. 7–12). These promises are made by the Angel himself, as if he were *Yahweh*. Not only does the name *Yahweh* in verse 11 seem to refer to the Angel, but having understood the Angel to be *Yahweh*, Hagar subsequently calls Him God (v. 13).
 - In Genesis 31 and 32 the Angel appears to Jacob and identifies Himself as the "God of Bethel" (vs. 13). The Man who subsequently wrestles with Jacob (32:24) is identified as God both by the Man Himself (vs. 28) and by Jacob (vs. 30). Hosea identifies this Man as the Angel who is God (Hosea 12:4,5).
 - Exodus 3:2-4 identifies the Angel with *Yahweh* and God:

"And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I."

In the verses that follow, the Angel requires Moses to remove his sandals in reverence to God (vs. 5), and subsequently refers to himself several times as *Yahweh* and as God (vss. 7-18). The Angel also calls Himself "I AM" (vs. 14). Thus, in this passage the divinity of the Angel is clearly marked; He is fully God as He is identified with *Yahweh*/God.

- In His interactions with Gideon in Judges 6:11-25, the Angel is referred to as *Yahweh* (vs. 14, 16, 23-25). When Gideon perceives that it is the Angel who appears to him, he cries out, "Alas, O LORD GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face" (vs. 22). It is clear that Gideon recognized this Angel as a divine person.
- The same is true of the Angel who appeared to Manoah's wife (Judges 13). The reaction of Manoah shows that He not only believed Him to be an angel, but a divine person (vs. 22)
- While the Angel is *Yahweh*/God, He is yet distinct from *Yahweh*/God. Genesis 22 opens with the command of "God" (*Elohim*) to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (vss. 1,2). Subsequently, it is the Angel who calls out of Heaven to stop the patriarch from sacrificing his son (vs. 11), stating "Now I know that you fear God" (vs. 12). Abraham acknowledges that it is *Yahweh* who provided the lamb in place of Isaac (vs. 14), and the Angel seems to report the words of *Yahweh* in the solemn oath that follows (vss. 15-18). In Genesis 22, therefore, it appears the Angel is different from *Yahweh*/God.

- The distinction between *Yahweh*/God and the Angel comes up again in Numbers 22:22–38, where references are made to God (v. 22), *Yahweh* (vs. 28, 31), and the Angel (vs. 22–27, 31–35). God in His anger against Balaam seems to send the Angel to oppose the prophet on his way (v. 22). In the encounter, it is *Yahweh* who opens the mouth of the donkey (v. 28). *Yahweh* also opens Balaam’s eyes and enables him to see the Angel (v. 31). The Angel speaks to Balaam as God would: “Your way is perverse before me” (v. 32), and Balaam refers to Him as God (v. 38; cf. v. 35). In Numbers 22, therefore, *Yahweh* and the Angel are God.
- In Joshua 5:13-15, the Commander of the army of the Lord presents Himself as divine, and Joshua worships Him as such. Like Moses before the ‘burning bush’ (Exod 3), Joshua is required to remove his sandals (Joshua 5:15). The connection between Exodus 3 and Joshua 5 shows that the Angel who appears to Moses is identical to the Commander who appears to Joshua. This would further confirm that the divine Angel is the one whom *Yahweh* sends to lead Israel to the land of Canaan (Exodus 23:20–23). Accordingly, the Angel would later reveal to Israel that it was He who had led them out of Egypt in fulfillment of His promise, but that He would no longer drive out the Canaanites from the land because of Israel’s persistent disobedience (Judges 2:1–4). Following the words of the Angel, the Israelites weep bitterly and then offer sacrifices not to the Angel but to *Yahweh* (v. 5). The Israelites seemed to have distinguished between *Yahweh* and the Angel; both of them, nonetheless, were recognized as divine.
- Other texts where a distinction is made between *Yahweh* and the Angel are Exodus 23:20, 21; 2 Samuel 24:15, 16; and Zechariah 3.
- In summary, the deity of the Angel is highlighted in several ways in the Old Testament: 1) He is identified and recognized as God, 2) He is described in terms that apply to the deity only, 3) He calls Himself God, 4) He is worshiped, 5) He speaks with divine authority. Yet, while the Angels is a divine person, there are instances where a distinction is made between Him and *Yahweh*/God, providing further evidence that God is more than one divine person.

All of these elements - plural pronouns, the name of God in plural form, His oneness in composite unity, passages that identify the persons of the Godhead, the Angel of *Yahweh*/God - provide clear and abundant evidence of the plurality of God in the OT Scriptures.

We conclude that there are many evidences in the Hebrew Scriptures that address this truth: there is only One God, yet this one God is revealed in the unity of three Persons: Father (Isa 63:16;64:8), Son (Isa 9:5,6;Pro 30:4), and the Holy Spirit (Isa 48:16;63:10,14).

Elohim Denotes Greatness Rather Than Plurality?

Anti-Trinitarians make the argument from Exo 7:1 that since Moses was described as a god using the plural word *elohim*, this proves that this word is not to be understood as plural (since Moses was a solitary person), but rather that it denotes greatness.

This argument only has merit if Exo 7:1 is actually saying that Moses was in fact a god (in which case we'd be in good company with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons). But let's understand what this verse is really saying.

Modern translations of the Bible are clearer than the KJV as to the true meaning of this text:

ESV: "And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you **like God** to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet."

NASB: "Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you **as God** to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet."

NLT: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pay close attention to this. I will make you **seem like God** to Pharaoh, and your brother, Aaron, will be your prophet.'"

The translations (and others, including the HCSB, NET, NIV, NKJV, and NRSV) make it clear that Moses is representing God to Pharaoh. Moses is not being told that he is a god, but that he will relate to Pharaoh as if he were God. In other words, Moses is functioning as God's representative or agent.

Ellen White understood this text in this way. In *Spiritual Gifts*, book 3, page 250 she quotes the above text and then says this:

"The Lord brought up his people from their long servitude in a signal manner, giving the Egyptians an opportunity to exhibit the feeble wisdom of their mighty men, and array the power of their gods in opposition to the God of Heaven. **The Lord showed them by his servant Moses that the Maker of the heavens and the earth is the living and all-powerful God, above all gods.**" (emphasis supplied)

A similar idea is found in Exodus 4:15-17, where God tells Moses that Aaron will be the spokesman for Moses and Moses in turn will represent God to Aaron:

ESV: "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

In the Greek Septuagint translation the last clause of this verse is paraphrased, "thou shalt be for him in things pertaining to God." (source: <https://tinyurl.com/j947s5kk>)

Clearly, the LXX translators also understood the Hebrew to be saying something other than that Moses was God or a god. Rather, Moses is to serve as the representative of God (*Elohim*) to Aaron, just as he does to Pharaoh.

Moses has been set up as God the Father, Aaron would later become the high priest of Israel as a type of Jesus our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-15), and they would work their signs and miracles through the rod or staff, which here is representing the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; c.f. Psalm 23:4).

This is in parallel with the New Testament in which God the Father is teaching and speaking through Jesus, God the Son, and they are working their miracles through the Holy Spirit. Aaron would stand in the same relation to Moses as a prophet to God: the prophet only spoke what God inspired him with, and Moses would be the inspiring God to him. So Jesus, as God's mouthpiece on earth, would only speak what God inspired Him with (John 5:19, 30; 12:49; 14:10).

Thus, we see that the word *Elohim* in both of these texts does not apply to Moses but to God Himself, and thus is consistent with all of the other instances in which *Elohim* is applied to the Godhead. Exodus 7:1 lends yet additional support to the plural Godhead.

As to the word *elohim* signifying "greatness" or "majesty" rather than a plural noun for "gods", there are no other instances in Scripture in which a king of Israel or Judah is referred to in the plural. Royalty are all addressed in the singular. In the biblical records, there is no evidence that any Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Judean, or other ancient ruler would speak of themselves in the plural or be referred to in the plural. (Source: <https://tinyurl.com/s3jw2zf4>)

Further, if the use of the plural word *elohim* for God is the use by a single God of the royal plural, then why on other occasions do we find other words which are singular used for God? For example:

- Isa 9:6 - "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, **The mighty God**, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."
- The Hebrew word for God employed in this passage is *el*, which is singular.
- Since Christ alone is the mighty God referred to in this passage, the use of the singular word for God, *el*, is appropriate. This fact weakens the case that the plural, *elohim*, refers to a single God who uses the human royal plural as a means of upholding His elevated status.

The *Shema*

Deuteronomy 6:4 - "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD"

In this text, Moses is teaching that *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, is "one." Unlike the surrounding cultures who may believe in and worship many gods, Israel has only One God, *Yahweh*. But what does "one" in this text mean? Does it mean that God is one person (i.e. solitary)? Or does it mean that God is a unity of more than one person?

There are two words for "one" in the Hebrew: *yâchîyd* and *'echâd*.

The first word literally means "only" or "solitary", as in "thine only son" (Gen 22:2) or "only child" (Jdg 11:34).

The second word has the meaning of "united", "together", a unity made up of plurality, as the following examples illustrate:

- Gen 1:5 - And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first [*'echâd*] day.

Here we see a unity (one day) with the idea of plurality (made up of evening and morning).

- Gen 2:24 - Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one [*'echâd*] flesh.

Here again we see plurality (man and wife) becoming one flesh. The idea is not of singleness or aloneness, but rather of unity of diversity.

- Exo 24:3 - ...and all the people answered with one [*'echâd*] voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do.

In this instance, the idea is that the people answered in unison.

- Ezra 2:64 - The whole congregation together [*'echâd*] was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,

Here we are told that the whole assembly was one, though it was composed of numerous people.

- Eze 37:17 - And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one [*'echâd*] in thine hand.

Here God tells Ezekiel to join together two sticks into one (*'echâd*), speaking again of a unity (one stick) made up of a plurality (the two sticks).

Thus, the word *'echâd* conveys the idea of oneness, but it also allows a plurality within that oneness.

Deu 6:4 follows the same pattern as the above verses, where there is plurality (*Elohim*) united together as one (*'echâd*). The *Shema* stresses the uniqueness and unity of God compared to polytheism. The members of the Godhead are "as one": of one mind and heart, of one purpose, of one function.

If Moses intended to teach God's absolute oneness instead of as a compound unity, *yâchîyd* would have been a far more appropriate word. But this Hebrew word for "one" meaning solitary, or without others, is not used in the *Shema*.

Indeed, *'echâd* is always used in the OT Scriptures to describe the divine nature, as in the following examples:

Zechariah 14:9 - And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one [*'echâd*] LORD, and his name one [*'echâd*].

Malachi 2:10 - Have we not all one [*'echâd*] father? hath not one [*'echâd*] God created us?

The oneness of *Yahweh* concerns itself with the worship of *Yahweh* alone as opposed to other gods; it does not mean that there is only one solitary person who is called God.

If *yâchîyd* had instead been used to describe the divine nature it would have been a strong denial of the reality of the plural nature of God (and to the deity of Christ).

In fact, so strong are the implications of the word *'echâd* in the *Shema* that the scholar Maimonides, when composing his *Thirteen Articles of Faith*, substituted *yâchîyd* (absolute one) for *'echâd* (unity in plurality) in describing the nature of God. Ever since, the notion of an indivisible unity of God has been fostered in Judaism. But *yâchîyd* is never used in reference to God anywhere in the Bible. It is always *'echâd*.

What we find is that in the *Shema* and in other Old Testament passages which assert the oneness of God (e.g. Exo 20:2-4; Deu 4:35,39; Josh 23:16; 24:14-24; 2 Sam 7:22; Isa 42:8; 43:11; 45:5; 46:9), the contrast is consistently between the God of Israel on the one hand and the gods of the Canaanites on the other. The contrast is never between the one-person God and a plurality within that one God.

Instead of contradicting the plurality of the Godhead, the *Shema* actually establishes this doctrine!

Jesus Said There is Only One God

Another argument against the plurality of the Godhead comes from Mark 12:28-32 when Jesus Himself says that there is only one God, and the Jewish Scribe agrees (Mark 12:28-32).

But anti-Trinitarians are reading their own beliefs into this passage. They assume that Jesus and the Scribe would have understood the *Shema* with an Arian and anti-Trinitarian understanding. But they would have understood the *Shema* in the clear way that the original Hebrew expresses it: the plural God (*Elohim*) united as one (*'echâd*). The anti-Trinitarian understanding of "one Lord" as "solitary" (*yâchîyd*) is unfortunately very different from the actual meaning of the text, and thus at odds with the way that Jesus and the Scribe understood it.

Further, we don't get to heaven by our understanding of the nature of the Godhead or lack thereof. When Jesus said, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God", He was affirming the Scribe in his understanding of the gospel, which is summed up in the two commands of supreme love to God and loving one's neighbor as yourself (see Rom 13:8-9; 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:14; Jam 2:8-13; 1Joh 4:21, etc). The Scribe's precise understanding of the Godhead had nothing to do with Jesus' commendation of him.

God works by progressive revelation, and the revelation of the nature and character of the Godhead is no exception to this principle. Much more has been revealed in the NT regarding the Godhead than was available in the OT (as in Matthew 28:19, "...baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."), although as noted above the OT certainly reveals the truth of the plural Godhead if not the triune Godhead. If the Scribe didn't understand the nuances of this truth, it was beside the point and Jesus wasn't going to get distracted with the theology of the Godhead at this particular time.

"One God", "One Lord"

What about passages in the NT that refer to "one God" or "one Lord"? Do these prove the anti-Trinitarian view that the Father is the only God, and that Christ is "Lord" but not fully God in the same sense as the Father?

Consider the following:

1. Besides the quotations of the *Shema* in Mark 12, there are 11 other passages in the NT where the word "one" is used in connection with "God". These are Mat 19:17; Mar 10:18; Mar 12:32; Luk 18:19; Rom 3:30; 1Cor 8:4; 1Cor 8:6; Gal 3:20; Eph 4:5,6; 1Tim 2:5; Jam 2:19). In every one of these instances the word "one" comes from the Greek word *heis*, which has the same range of meanings as *'echâd* in the OT, which includes the idea of "union", "joined in one". Here are some of the NT verses in which the Greek word *heis*, translated "one" and highlighted in bold below, has the meaning of "joined together" and "in unity":
 - Joh 10:30 I and my Father are **one**.
 - Joh 11:52 And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in **one** the children of God that were scattered abroad.
 - Joh 17:21 That they all may be **one**; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be **one** in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.
 - Joh 17:22 And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be **one**, even as we are **one**:

- Joh 17:23 I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in **one**; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.
 - 1Co 10:17 For we being many are **one** bread, and **one** body: for we are all partakers of that **one** bread.
 - Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all **one** in Christ Jesus.
 - Eph 2:14 For he is our peace, who hath made both **one**, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;
 - Eph 2:15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain **one** new man, so making peace;
 - Eph 2:16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in **one** body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
 - Php 2:2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of **one** mind.
 - Heb 2:11 For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of **one**: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,
2. From these texts it's clear that there is no basis for concluding, from the Scriptural use of the word "one", that God the Father is the one and only being in the universe that can rightfully be called God or that He is the only being that has an absolute, past eternal existence.
3. But let's suppose for argument's sake that the word *heis* in the verses describing God as "one" meaning single unit or solitary. Not only would this interpretation deprive Jesus of any kind of Deity, it also deprives the Father of being Lord, since there would only be "one Lord Jesus Christ" according to this view.
- But in the Greek translation of the OT (LXX) the word "Jehovah" is translated "Lord" (Gr. *kurios*), and if Jehovah is Lord in the OT but He is not Lord in the NT, then something is very wrong.
 - Further, NT quotations of these OT verses invariably use *kurios* even when referring to the Father. For example:
 - Mat 4:7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the **Lord thy God**.
 - Mat 4:10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the **Lord thy God**, and him only shalt thou serve.
 - Luk 1:16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the **Lord their God**.
 - Luk 1:32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the **Lord God** shall give unto him the throne of his father David:
 - Luk 4:8 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the **Lord thy God**, and him only shalt thou serve.
 - Act 3:22 For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the **Lord your God** raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you.
 - Jud 1:4 For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only **Lord God**, and our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - Rev 21:22 And I saw no temple therein: for the **Lord God Almighty** and the Lamb are the temple of it.
 - If the Greek word *heis* means "joined in one" "in unity" there is no problem with any of these verses. The Father is God, but Jesus is not excluded. Jesus is Lord, but the Father is not excluded.