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The Christian doctrine of God is important, yet difficult to comprehend and explain. This is not surprising because the finite human mind cannot fully comprehend the infinite God.¹ At the center of the doctrine of God is the Godhead or Trinity, by which is meant that “*God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.*”² Thus, Christians generally believe in one multi-personal God—a *triune* God—not three Gods. The concept of the Godhead is central to the Christian understanding of God and the work of salvation through Jesus Christ.³ But fundamental as it is to Christian theology, the concept is nevertheless shrouded in mystery: “The Trinity is an *absolute mystery* in the sense that we do not understand it even after it has been revealed.”⁴ For this reason, the subject has been studied throughout the ages of Christianity.⁵ While for some Christians the subject is “only a matter of intellectual curiosity,” for others it is a “somewhat arbitrary test of faith.”⁶ The extreme perceptual polarization notwithstanding, the Christian understanding of God cannot adequately be expressed apart from the concept of the Trinity. There is the need, therefore, to continue the study of this subject.

Although scholars generally agree that the Godhead/Trinity is biblical, there is some doubt whether the concept is expressed in the Old Testament. For example, it is claimed that “because the Old Testament is pre-Christian, it does not provide any Trinitarian understanding of God,” so that “it would be theologically unjustifiable to suggest some ‘foreshadowing’ of the Trinity in the Old Testament.”⁷ Other theologians, however, do find the concept of the Trinity in the Old

¹ See e.g., Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 89.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 226. Emphasis in the original.

³ See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 347.

⁴ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, revised and updated (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 316. See also Raoul Dederen, “Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 8 (1970): 1–22; Gerhard Pfandl, “The Trinity in Scripture,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14.2 (2003): 80–94.

⁵ For a brief summary of the history of the doctrine, see McBrien, 275–330; Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 140–148.

⁶ McBrien, 321.

⁷ McBrien, 280.

Testament.⁸ The present study presupposes that while the Godhead is clearer in the New Testament, the Old Testament nonetheless contains some indications of this concept. The Old Testament expresses and insists particularly on the oneness of God. Yet, the oneness of God seems to be presented as a plurality-in-oneness—a plurality *within* one God.⁹ In what follows, an attempt is made to demonstrate that the monotheism expressed in the Old Testament, and clearly found in the New Testament,¹⁰ does not preclude the conception of a plurality of persons within the *one* God of the Hebrews.

The Oneness of God

The Old Testament leaves no room for polytheistic belief and worship. The Hebrew religion was unequivocally monotheistic (Exod 20:1–3; Josh 24:1–24). There are instances where some individuals or generations worshipped Canaanite deities, yet the perspective of the biblical text is strictly against polytheism (e.g., Judg 2:10–15). Even those who practiced syncretistic worship often acknowledged their rebellious deviation from monotheism (Judg 10:10–16). The doctrine of monotheism is highlighted in the Old Testament through (1) the use of singular verbs and pronouns for God and (2) direct statements regarding the oneness of God.

The Use of Singular Verbs and Pronouns

Throughout the Old Testament singular verbs are used for God (e.g., Gen 1:1, 3–5; Exod 3:4, 7–10; etc.). Even though the English word “God” is the translation of the Hebrew word *Elohim* which is a plural noun, this word almost always takes a singular verb (Gen 1:1–5). God speaks of Himself through the use of singular verbs (e.g., Gen 6:7), and biblical writers report His actions through the use of singular verbs (e.g., Gen 1:27).

In addition to the use of singular verbs, pronominal references to God are almost always in the singular. For example, God refers to Himself as “I” (Gen 9:9; Isa 43:10, 11), “Me” (Gen 9:12), “My” (Gen 9:9), and “I am He” (Isa 43:10). In Isaiah 42:8 God says, “*I am* the LORD, that *is My* name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved

⁸ Berkhof, 85; Erickson, 347; Norman R. Gulley, “Trinity in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17.1 (2006): 80–97; Canale, 121–123; Grudem, 226.

⁹ As we shall see below, the evidence in the Old Testament contradicts the view that God is one divine person who appears in different modes of revelation. Cf. “Monarchianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 440–441, and “Unitarianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 700.

¹⁰ As in the Old Testament, there are explicit statements in the New Testament regarding the oneness of God (e.g., Rom 3:29, 30; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:5, 6; 1 Tim 2:5; Jas 2:19).

images.”¹¹ The use of singular pronouns for God throughout Scripture clearly indicates that there is only *one* true God, the God of Israel.

Explicit Statements Regarding the Oneness of God

Several statements in the Old Testament require the Israelites to adhere strictly to monotheism because there is only one true God. For example:

1. “To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD Himself *is* God; *there is* none other besides Him . . . Therefore know this day, and consider *it* in your heart, that the LORD Himself *is* God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; *there is* no other” (Deut 4:35, 39).
2. “I *am* the LORD, that *is* My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images” (Isa 42:8).
3. “I, *even* I, *am* the LORD, And besides Me *there is* no savior” (Isa 43:11).
4. “I *am* the LORD, and *there is* no other; *There is* no God besides Me” (Isa 45:5).
5. “Remember the former things of old, For I *am* God, and *there is* no other; I *am* God, and *there is* none like Me” (Isa 46:9).

The belief in and worship of one God is so fundamental to the Judeo-Christian religion that it takes priority in the Decalogue:

I *am* the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness *of anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth (Exod 20:2–4).

In this commandment, the God of Israel refers to graven images that are considered gods by the surrounding nations, but are not comparable to Him; He is the only true God who deserves worship. Monotheism is also emphasized in Joshua’s parting words in Joshua 23 and 24. In these two chapters, Joshua recalls the first commandment (Exod 20:1–3) and reiterates the fact that the Lord would no longer fulfill His promises if Israel worshipped the Canaanite gods (e.g., Josh 23:16; 24:14, 15, 20, 23, 24). King David would later affirm, “Therefore You are great, O LORD GOD. For *there is* none like You,

¹¹All Bible texts are from the New King James Version, unless indicated otherwise.

nor *is there any* God besides You” (2 Sam 7:22).

Among non-Israelites, the God of Israel was also recognized by some as the only living God, whose deeds are not comparable to those of other gods. For example, Rahab refers to the God of Israel as “the LORD your God, He *is* God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh 2:11). And King Nebuchadnezzar declares, “Truly your God *is* the God of gods, the Lord of kings” (Dan 2:47) and “there is no other God who can deliver” like the God of Israel (3:29).

A central statement regarding the oneness of God is Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one!” This text has traditionally been known among the Jews as the *Shema*,¹² as it commands Israel to “listen” and respond to the fact that the Lord God of Israel is the only true God. Translators and Hebrew grammarians have struggled with the translation and interpretation of this text.¹³ Some translations read as follows:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD” (KJV)

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one!” (ESV)

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”
(NAU; cf. NET)

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” (Heb. *’echād*) in verse 4 mean? Does it mean God is one person (i.e., solitariness)?¹⁴ Or does it mean God is a unity of more than one person? The word *’echād* mostly means “one” in contrast to two or three. Yet, it can also convey the notion of a plurality-in-oneness.¹⁵ For example, in Exodus 24:3 the Israelites are said to have answered the Lord with “one” voice. In this instance, the idea is that the people answered in unison. More instructive is Genesis 2:24, which states that a married

¹² *Shema* (“hear”) is the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4.

¹³ See Peter C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 168; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6a rev. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 142; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2002), 140–141.

¹⁴ Some would even suggest that *’echād* is a title or name for God (Craigie, 168). The thrust of the argument in Deuteronomy 6—to worship only Yahweh—suggests, however, that *’echād* is not intended to be understood as a name but rather as the uniqueness and unity of Yahweh.

¹⁵ Herbert Wolf, *’ehād*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1980), 1:30, notes that *’echād* “stresses unity while recognizing diversity within that oneness.”

couple becomes “one” (*ʿechād*) flesh. The implication is that while the word *ʿechād* conveys the idea of oneness, it also allows a plurality within that oneness.¹⁶ For this reason, the oneness of God expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4 is not to be understood necessarily as precluding a plurality within the one God of Israel. The main point is to prohibit Israel from recognizing and worshipping the deities of surrounding cultures. And so in Deuteronomy 6:13–15, Israel is commanded to fear and serve Yahweh alone. This injunction not to follow “other gods” further emphasizes the statement in verse 4 that Yahweh is the only true God.¹⁷

The foregoing discussion allows for the observation that the oneness of God is a significant doctrine in the Old Testament. The question is whether Scripture presents the oneness of God to preclude any notion of a plurality-in-oneness. Some have concluded that the Hebrews could never have conceived of God as existing in a unity of three persons (i.e., three-in-oneness). Such a conclusion, however, does not stem from evidence in the Old Testament itself, but probably from later Jewish traditions.¹⁸

We certainly cannot assume that the Israelites in Old Testament times officially recognized the existence of the triune Godhead and articulated such a doctrine. But the fact that they may not have recognized the existence of the Trinity/Godhead does not mean that it never found an expression in the Old Testament. What is clear is that while the Old Testament does not explicitly present the Godhead as

¹⁶ Some scholars have recognized that *ʿechād* in the *Shema* expresses not only uniqueness but also the unity of God (Christensen, 145; Craigie, 169). According to Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 33–34, the *Shema* speaks of the uniqueness of God as the only true God, but it also “refers to the oneness that results from a unity of numerous persons.”

¹⁷ Zechariah 14:9 is close to Deuteronomy 6:4 by stating that in the latter days “Yahweh will be one, and his name shall be one.” As suggested in Zechariah 14, 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 divine person who is called God. Cf. McConville, 141.

¹⁸ In later Jewish theology, there seems to have been intimations of some mysterious type of plurality within God. For example, in commenting on Deuteronomy 6:4 the *Zohar* refers to “the mystery of the threefold divine manifestations designated by YHVH *Elohenu* YHVH—three modes which yet form one unity” (*The Zohar*, 5 vols. trans. H. Sperling, M. Simon and P. Levertoff [London: Soncino, 1984], 3:134). Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven, Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 164, 173, has pointed to traditions of a ‘second God’ in Judaism as in Philo, who speaks of the *logos* as “God’s partner in creation. [And] to this effect, he calls the *logos*, ‘The Beginning,’ ‘The Ruler of the Angels,’ and significantly ‘the Name of God.’ [And] . . . because the *logos* is an emanation of God, [he] can also talk about him as God’s offspring, or the first-born son of God.” Philo’s reference to a ‘second God’ was based on his reading of such passages that speak of God in plural terms, the distinction between God and the Angel of Yahweh, and other texts such as Exodus 24 and Daniel 7 (Segal, 183–184).

consisting of three persons, its depiction of the oneness of God nowhere precludes by default any conceptions of a Godhead or Trinity.

What we find is that in the passages which assert the oneness of God, 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. In other words, when the Old Testament asserts the oneness of God, such oneness excludes only false deities, not a plurality of persons within the true God. If more than one person constitutes the one true God, the other person(s) within that Godhead are definitely not “other gods” as understood in the Old Testament. The “other gods” that Israel is commanded not to worship are gods of human production (Exod 20:1–6).

To summarize: The oneness of God consistently expressed in the Old Testament does not address the issue of whether or not there is only one divine person; the oneness of God only excludes the worship of demonic and/or human-made gods. Hence, it cannot be said that because the Old Testament emphasizes the oneness of God, it knows nothing of a plurality within God: that is, that several divine persons could legitimately constitute one God.¹⁹

Plurality-in-Oneness Within God

In the Old Testament, divine names appear in both singular and plural word-forms. There are also a few instances of a juxtaposition of singular and plural references to God. The use of these singular-plural word-forms seems to convey the idea of a plurality-in-oneness within God.

Yahweh, Elohim, Adonay

The personal name of the God of Israel is *Yahweh* (Exod 6:2–8; Isa 42:8). This name is always singular in form and takes singular verbs and singular personal pronouns (e.g., Gen 2:4–9, 15–22). By implication, *Yahweh* is one God (Deut 6:4). Unlike the name *Yahweh*, the names *Elohim* “God” and *Adonay* “Lord” are plural in form (e.g., Deut 10:17; Ps 35:23; 38:15). *Elohim* can refer to the God of Israel (Gen 1) or to the gods of the nations (e.g., Josh 24:2, 14, 23). When it refers to the God of Israel, *Elohim* takes singular verbs and pronouns (Gen 1:1, 35). But when the reference is to human-made gods or demons, plural verbs and pronouns are usually used (e.g., Exod 32:1, 8; 1 Kgs 20:10; Isa

¹⁹ An interesting New Testament illustration of the plurality-in-oneness of God is in this statement of Jesus Christ, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), which He further explains as “the Father is in Me, and I in Him” (v. 38). In John 10, Jesus makes claims to divinity (cf. v. 33) and thus makes clear that though God is one, there is more than one person who is God.

37:19). Similarly, *Adonay* is plural in form (literally “my lords,” e.g., Gen 19:2, 18) but it is treated as singular when it refers to the God of Israel (Gen 15:2). Despite the use of these plural name forms, corresponding singular forms are attested in the Old Testament: *El* “God,” *Eloah* “God,” and *Adon* “Lord” are each used with reference to the God of Israel.²⁰

Although *Elohim* often refers to deities in general, it is also a title or name of the one true God. In the latter case, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch note that “*Elohim* . . . is not used for the abstract, in the sense of divinity, but . . . is used without the article, as a proper name for the true God.”²¹ But if *Elohim* is a title or name of the one true God, why is it in the plural form? And why does the plural form mostly take singular verbs and pronouns?

The use of the plural forms *Elohim* and *Adonay* for the God of Israel has been understood in several ways.²² A common interpretation is that these plural forms are plurals of majesty or royal plurals. Among theologians, for example, Walter Eichrodt has suggested that *Elohim* is a plural of majesty that presents the Creator God as the sovereign ruler of the universe.²³ As we shall observe during our discussion on the use of plural verbs and pronouns with *Elohim* in Genesis 1:26, the “plural of majesty” interpretation does not seem to be supported by biblical evidence. Not only does the Old Testament not attest to a plural of majesty, it is difficult to explain why only the divine names are in plural while the accompanying verbs and pronouns are almost always in singular, even in passages reporting solemn, direct divine speeches.

While the specific function of the plural forms *Elohim* and *Adonay* may be debated, it may be noted that the consistent use of plural verb and pronoun forms for *Elohim* in its reference to “gods” indicates that these gods are understood to be different entities. The biblical writers thus seem to be careful in their use of verbs and pronouns for *Elohim* in reference both to the one God of Israel and to the multiplicity of gods in the surrounding nations.

²⁰ For *El* see e.g., Genesis 31:13; 35:1, 3; Deuteronomy 7:9; 10:17; Joshua 3:10; Nehemiah 9:31; Isaiah 5:16; 42:5. For *Eloah* see e.g., Deuteronomy 32:15, 17; Nehemiah 9:17; Job 3:4; 12:6; Psalm 18:31; 50:22; Isaiah 44:8; Habakkuk 3:3. *Eloah* can refer to “god(s)” (e.g., 2 Chron 32:15; Dan 11:37, 38). It appears that while *El* and *Elohim* seem to be closely related, *Elohim* may not necessarily be the plural of *El*, since the latter has its own plural form, *Elim* “gods” (e.g., Exod 15:11; Pss 29:1; 89:7; Dan 11:36). For *Adon*, see e.g., Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Joshua 3:11, 13. Each of these terms is also used with reference to “god” or “gods.”

²¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. James Martin (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 1:73.

²² D. W. Baker, “God, Names of,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 362.

²³ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1961), 1:187.

Arguing against the view that *Elohim* is a plural of majesty, G. A. F. Knight has noted that such understanding reads a modern concept into the ancient Hebrew text, since the kings of Israel/Judah are all addressed in singular. Instead, Knight suggests that *Elohim* is an example of a quantitative plural. Like the Hebrew nouns *mayim* “water” and *shāmayim* “heaven”—nouns which are plural in form but singular in meaning—*Elohim* expresses a quantitative diversity in unity.²⁴ Keil and Delitzsch have argued that *Elohim* is to be taken as a plural of intensification: outside of Israel *Elohim* is “an external (numerical)” plural, but in Israel it is “an internally multiplying (intensive) plural.”²⁵ This would mean that with reference to the God of Israel, *Elohim* expresses a plurality of persons in God.²⁶

The use of the singular name *Yahweh* alongside the plural name-forms *Elohim* and *Adonay* could be an indication that the God of Israel is singular and plural at the same time. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain why one divine designation should consistently appear in the singular form while others are in the plural, even though singular forms of such designations are attested. Yet, a plurality within the true God must be different from that of the Canaanite gods, for unlike these other *Elohim*, the true *Elohim* regularly takes singular verbs and pronouns. This is not to assume, though, that the Israelites of Old Testament times necessarily understood the plural name-forms to denote plurality within God.

Before turning to the next section, a word needs to be said regarding the interpretation of *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. In monotheistic contexts, *Elohim* and *Yahweh* refer to the God of Israel. *Yahweh* is *Elohim*, and *Elohim* is *Yahweh*—*Yahweh Elohim*. Again, in such contexts *Elohim* is a title/name. In the section discussing the Angel of *Yahweh*, we will observe that *Yahweh* and *Elohim* mostly refer to the same divine *person*. Yet there are some instances where a subtle distinction seems to apply between the two (e.g., Gen 22; Judg 13).²⁷ While the distinction is not all too clear in the Old Testament, the New Testament—, in its interpretation of many Old Testament passages, primarily reserves “God” (Gr. *theos* translating Heb. *Elohim*) for the Father but often uses “Lord” (Gr. *kyrios* translating Heb. *Yahweh*) for Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt 3:3/Isa 40:3; Rom 10:13/Joel 2:32;

²⁴ G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), 20.

²⁵ Keil and Delitzsch, 73.

²⁶ Gulley, 84; Herman Bavnick, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 2:261.

²⁷ Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, 113; J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1978), 6–7.

Rom 14:10, 11/Isa 45:23; 1 Pet 2:8/Isa 8:14; Heb 1:8/Ps 45:6, 7).²⁸ Yet because the persons within the Godhead are equal, each can be called *Elohim* or *Yahweh*.

Juxtaposition of Singular-Plural References to God

Genesis 1:26, 27 provides an interesting platform for understanding a plurality-in-oneness. God creates *'ādām* “man” as male and female (Gen 1:26; 5:2). The man and the woman are considered one, *'ādām* “human.” In Genesis 1:27 the use of a singular pronominal suffix “him” underscores the oneness of *'ādām*. Yet the use of the plural verb, “let them rule,” in verse 26 means that the oneness of *'ādām* “human” is a multi-personal unity—*'ādām* refers to more than one person. Genesis 2:23, 24 further demonstrates that two persons who are equal in nature and share the same substance can be “one flesh” (*'echād bāsār*). The singularity-plurality feature of *'ādām* in Genesis 1 and 2 could reflect some aspect of *Elohim* who is presented both as singular and plural in Genesis 1:26, 27. We shall discuss this in detail in the next section. Suffice it to highlight the usage of singular and plural verbs and pronouns in these verses as follows:

Then God said, [singular] ‘Let Us make [plural] man in Our image [plural], according to Our likeness [plural]. . . So God created [singular] man in His own image [singular] in the image of God He created [singular] him; male and female He created [singular] them’ (Gen 1:26–27).

From these verses, we may conclude that just as “man” is a plurality-in-oneness as revealed through the use of singular and plural verbs and pronouns, so may the similar use of singular-plural verbs and pronouns depict a plurality-in-oneness within God.²⁹ The picture we have here is not perfect, but it is not without exegetical support, as we shall soon see.

Plurality of Divine Persons: Godhead

A number of passages in the Old Testament imply that God exists as more than a solitary divine person. In a few passages God speaks to Himself through the use of plural verbs and pronouns. The Angel of *Yahweh* is identified with *Yahweh*/God and yet sometimes distinct

²⁸ Thus, things that are in the Old Testament said of *Yahweh*, God are in the New Testament said of Jesus Christ (Ps 68:18/Eph 4:8–10; Ps 102:25, 27/Heb 1:10–12; Isa 8:14/1 Pet 2:8).

²⁹ Gulley (89) states that “the Persons of the Godhead are imaged in the oneness of man and woman in marriage.”

from *Yahweh*/God. There are also references to more than one divine person simultaneously in some texts. Finally, some passages seem to present three personalities who constitute God, hence the concept of the Godhead/Trinity.

Use of Plural Verbs and Pronouns for God

Several passages are known for their use of plural verbs and pronouns with reference to *Elohim*/*Yahweh*. These include (1) Genesis 1:26, 27; (2) Genesis 3:22; (3) Genesis 11:7; and (4) Isaiah 6:8.³⁰ In Genesis 1:26, God's intention to create human beings is expressed, unlike the other acts of creation in the chapter, by the first common plural verb "let us make."³¹ This plural verb is followed by two nouns with plural pronominal suffixes: "in our image" and "according to our likeness." Some see these plural forms in Genesis 1:26 as evidence of a plurality within God,³² others interpret them as a plural of majesty,³³ and some believe that God in this text is addressing the heavenly host.³⁴

The best way to understand the plural forms in Genesis 1:26 is that *Elohim* speaks to other divine beings.³⁵ While those who prefer the idea of the plural of majesty or self-deliberation can cite a few ancient monarchs who referred to themselves in the plural,³⁶ the countless instances where *Elohim* talks about Himself or deliberates with Himself only in the singular do not allow for the conclusion that Genesis 1:26 is a case of the plural of majesty or self-deliberation. Furthermore, a plural of majesty or self-deliberation cannot explain the shift from singular to plural in verse 26. Those who argue that *Elohim* addresses the angelic

³⁰ Apart from these, other passages in the Old Testament use plural verb forms and adjectives for *Elohim* (e.g., Gen 35:7; Josh 24:19; 2 Sam 7:23; Job 35:10; Ps 58:11; Prov 30:3; Eccl 12:1; Isa 41:23; 54:5).

³¹ In the words of Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 64, "The impersonal 'let there be' (or its equivalents) of the seven preceding creative acts is replaced by the personal 'let us'. Only in the creation of humanity is the divine intent announced beforehand. The formula 'and so it was' is replaced by a threefold blessing. In these ways, the narrator places humankind closer to God than the rest of creation." See also Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 11.

³² P. J. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation in Genesis* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977), 197; David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 68–69.

³³ John James Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 79; John T. Willis, *Genesis* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1984), 87.

³⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 27–28; Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements, no. 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1978), 9–26.

³⁵ See also Grudem, 227; Keil and Delitzsch, 48.

³⁶ 1 Macc 10:19 and 11:31 report kings Alexander and Demetrius respectively using plurals of majesty, but these are examples too late to be read into the Old Testament.

host face the problem that such an interpretation would mean Adam and Eve were created in the image of *Elohim* and the angels. Such understanding runs counter to verse 27, which unequivocally states that humans were created in the image of *Elohim*, not the angels.

Genesis 1 and the entire biblical record do not allow for a polytheistic understanding of *Elohim* when used with reference to the true God. But as we shall see below, the Old Testament allows for plurality of persons in the one true God. The use of plural forms in Genesis 1:26 hints at such plurality. Gerhard F. Hasel has reviewed the major scholarly views on the plural “let us” in Genesis 1:26, concluding that it is a plural of fullness:³⁷

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.³⁸

Hasel’s suggestion that “let us” is a plural of fullness bears affinity with the view that the name *Elohim* (and *Adonay*) is an internal plural (Keil and Delitzsch) or a quantitative diversity in unity (Knight). In other words, the plural form is probably used to emphasize the point that the decision to create human beings was taken by a plurality of persons who constitute God.³⁹ What is clear is that the parallel phrases “our likeness” and “our image” indicate that the human beings *Elohim* created (v. 27) share some characteristics with their Creator⁴⁰ that other creatures in Genesis 1 do not share, be they spiritual, physical, or both.

Although the idea of plurality within *Elohim* appears to be underscored in verse 26, it is not possible to determine how many divine persons were involved. The conclusion that the Trinity is referred to in verse 26 is plausible, but this can be supported only by further

³⁷ Gerhard F. Hasel, “Meaning of ‘Let Us’ in Genesis 1:26,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13.1 (1975): 65; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 50–52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Richard M. Davidson, “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1–2,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26.1 (1988): 9. Commenting on the phrase “Let us make man” he says, “The aspect of personal relationship between the male and female is further highlighted by the analogy of God’s own differentiation and relationship in contemplating the creation of humanity.”

revelation in Scripture of the persons of the Godhead. In two other instances in the book of Genesis, *Yahweh*/God speaks in the plural. The words that occur in plural forms in the Hebrew are underlined:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil” (Gen 3:22).

And the LORD said, “Indeed the people *are* one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen 11:6, 7).

As in Genesis 1:26, these plural forms occur in direct quotations whereby the Lord speaks to Himself, or addresses others including Himself. Again, while in 1:26 plural forms are used in the direct speeches of the Lord, the execution of the actions intended in the speeches are reported through singular verb forms: (1) After God said, “let us [pl.] make man” (Gen 1:26), God “created [sg.] man” (v. 27); (2) after God said, “man has become like one of us [pl.]” (3:22), God “sent [sg.]” the man and his wife out of the garden; and (3) after God said, “let us [pl.] go down and there confuse their language” (11:7), the LORD “scattered [sg.]” the people abroad. It is worth observing that even though the human writer keeps the divine speeches in plural forms, his reports of the divine actions betray his understanding that *Yahweh*/God is one. Hence the use of singular expressions.

Another instance in the Old Testament where a plural pronoun is used by God is Isaiah 6:8—“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here *am* I! Send me.’” In this chapter, Isaiah sees the Lord (*Adonay*) seated in the temple. The prophet does not see other divine persons apart from the Lord, who is being attended by the *seraphim*. Yet when the Lord speaks, He does so both in the first person singular—“whom shall I send” (first person singular)—and in the first person plural—“who shall go for Us.”

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. In any case, it is still puzzling to find that the Lord speaks both in the singular and in the plural within parallel sentences in 6:8. In chapter 6 there is an interesting use of the divine names *Adonay* and *Yahweh*: (1) Isaiah sees *Adonay* seated (v. 1), the seraphim praise Him as *Yahweh* of hosts (v. 3), and Isaiah declares

his unworthiness upon seeing *Yahweh* (v. 5) and (2) *Adonay* speaks directly with Isaiah (vs. 8, 11), but in His speech He mentions that *Yahweh* (instead of “I” or “We”) will certainly remove His people (v. 12). While the reason for the switch from *Adonay* to *Yahweh* and back is unclear, it is possible to think of a plurality of persons in *Adonay/Yahweh*. Within this context the use of the plural pronoun “us” in verse 8, “while not proving the Trinity, suggests that there is a plurality of beings in the speaker.”⁴¹

In Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7, 8, and Isaiah 6:8, the juxtaposition of singular and plural forms seems to portray a plurality within God. This said, however, we should acknowledge that the plural verbal and pronominal references to God are still somewhat mysterious. But if these passages refer to plurality within God, then the mystery surrounding the juxtaposition of singular-plural forms only reflects the mystery of the Godhead. It also appears that while the writers of these passages faithfully reported the speeches of God, they may not necessarily have clearly understood the plural-singularity within God. This is suggested by the fact that while the divine quotations are kept in the plural, the executions of the divine actions are always conveyed by the human writers through the use of singular verbs and pronouns.

God and the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2

A common interpretation of the phrase “Spirit of God” (*ruach Elohim*) in Genesis 1:2 is that it refers to the Holy Spirit, which must be seen as taking an active role in creation.⁴² Another option is to take *ruach Elohim* to mean “wind of God”—meaning either a wind in which is the divine presence or a “mighty” wind.⁴³ The phrase *ruach Elohim* elsewhere has the meaning of divine spirit (e.g., Gen 41:38, NAS), Spirit of God (Exod 31:3; 35:31; Num 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10; 11:6; 19:20, 23; 2 Chr 15:1; 24:20), or evil spirit from God (e.g., 1 Sam 16:15, 16, 23; 18:10). This would suggest that *ruach Elohim*, in the context of Genesis 1:2, refers to the Holy Spirit. If Moses in Genesis 1:2 intended only to refer to a “wind” blowing over the earth, why would he add *Elohim*?

⁴¹ Pfandl, 82. See also Geoffrey Grogan, “Isaiah,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed., Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 6:57.

⁴² See e.g., Taekje Jansma, “And the Spirit of God Moved upon the Face of the Waters,” *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970): 16–24; Paul Elbert, “Genesis 1 and the Spirit: A Narrative-Rhetorical Ancient Near Eastern Reading in Light of Modern Science,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 15 (2006): 25–26; Hasel, 65.

⁴³ E.g., G. Henton Davies, “The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament,” *Review and Expositor* 63 (1966): 130; Edward P. Arbez and John P. Weisengoff, “Exegetical Notes on Genesis 1:1–2,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 10 (1948): 147–150; Sabatino Moscati, “The Wind in Biblical and Phoenician Cosmology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66 (1947): 305–310.

And would he describe the blowing of a wind by the word “hovering” (Heb. *rāchaph*)? It is somewhat difficult to answer these questions while maintaining the position that *ruach Elohim* refers to “wind.” But the view that *ruach* refers to the Holy Spirit does not go without difficulties either. For example, if *ruach Elohim* refers to a divine personality (i.e., the Holy Spirit), what is His function in verse 2, and why is He not referred to again in the narrative proper? Moreover, if *ruach Elohim* is a divine person, why would He be said to be “hovering” (*rāchaph*) over the waters which seemingly cover the entire earth? The word *rāchaph* occurs again in Deuteronomy 32:11, 12. There, God is said to protect His people just as an eagle “hovers” (*rāchaph*) over its young. It appears from Deuteronomy 32 that the activity conveyed through the word *rāchaph* is that of an individual, not an impersonal element.⁴⁴

The usage of the phrase *ruach Elohim* elsewhere and in the context of creation seems to give the phrase the meaning “Spirit of God.” The view that *ruach* refers to the Holy Spirit is the interpretation favored by most Evangelical and Adventist scholars. If the Holy Spirit is in view in verse 2, then the mention of *Elohim* and *ruach Elohim* in Genesis 1 provides evidence for the idea of a plurality within God.

Yahweh, God, and the Angel of Yahweh

The Old Testament makes many references to the Angel of *Yahweh* or the Angel of *Elohim*. The three names *Elohim*, *Yahweh*, and Angel of *Yahweh/Elohim* can all refer to one divine person. With reference to the one true God, *Elohim* and *Yahweh* are synonymous, though as indicated above, the New Testament seems to interpret these terms sometimes to refer to distinct divine persons. In several instances in the Old Testament, however, *Yahweh/Elohim* and Angel of *Yahweh/Elohim* are presented as distinct divine persons. This means that the Angel of *Yahweh* may either be synonymous to, or distinct from, *Elohim* or *Yahweh*.⁴⁵ A few passages can be cited to illustrate both the identity and the distinction between *Yahweh/Elohim* and Angel of *Yahweh* (shortened henceforth as “Angel”).

⁴⁴ See E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 36–37; Roberto Ouro, “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part 3,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 38 (2000): 63.

⁴⁵ The title “Angel of the Lord” and its cognate “Angel of God” appear about seventy times in the Old Testament. In a few instances, the “Angel of the Lord” is presented as a created being (i.e., ordinary angel), but in most instances, the “Angel of the Lord” is a technical title of a divine person. The Hebrew *mal'ak* (often translated “angel”) simply means “messenger,” human or a heavenly being. Since the Angel of the Lord/God is a “messenger,” he must be distinct from the Lord/God himself. And when the “messenger” is identified with the Lord/God, we can only conclude that there is a plurality of persons in God.

The Angel is Yahweh/Elohim – 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,⁴⁶ but having understood the Angel to be *Yahweh*, Hagar subsequently calls Him God (v. 13).

The identity of the Angel with *Yahweh*/God is also clearly found in Genesis 31 and 32. While in Genesis 28 it is *Yahweh*/God who appears to Jacob, in 31:11 the Angel identifies Himself as the “God of Bethel” (v. 13). The Man who subsequently wrestles with Jacob (32:24) is identified as God both by the Man Himself (v. 28) and by Jacob (v. 30).⁴⁷ Hosea identifies this Man as the Angel, who is God (Hos 12:4, 5). Exodus 3:2–4 identifies the Angel with *Yahweh*/God:

And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush *was* not consumed. Then Moses said, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.” So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”

In these verses, the Angel is also called *Yahweh* and God (v. 4). In the verses that follow, the Angel requires Moses to remove his sandals in reverence to God (v. 5), and subsequently refers to himself several times as *Yahweh* and as God (vs. 7–18). The Angel also calls Himself “I Am” (v. 14). Thus, in this passage the divinity of the Angel is clearly marked; he is fully God as he is identified with *Yahweh*/God.

Again, 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” (v. 22). Read against such passages as Genesis 32:30 and Exodus 33:11, it appears that Gideon, as did the Israelites in general, recognized this

⁴⁶ Some have seen in verse 11 a distinction between two divine persons: The “Angel of the Lord, who is *Yahweh*, is presented as referring to *Yahweh* in the third person (v. 11), thus hinting at the existence of a possible difference between the Angel of the Lord that is *Yahweh*, and *Yahweh*” (Canale, 122).

⁴⁷ In Genesis 48, Jacob himself identifies the Angel with God: “And he blessed Joseph, and said: ‘God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has fed me all my life long to this day, The Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads . . .’” (Gen 48:15, 16; cf. 24:7, 40; Exod 32:34).

Angel as a divine person. The same is true of the Angel who appeared to Manoah's wife (Judg 13). While the Angel is *Yahweh*/God, he is sometimes presented as a distinct divine person. This leads us to the second assertion regarding the Angel.

The Angel is God yet distinct from Yahweh/God – Genesis 22 opens with the command of “God” (*Elohim*) to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (vs. 1, 2). Subsequently, it is the Angel who calls out of Heaven to stop the patriarch from sacrificing his son (v. 11), stating, “Now I know that you fear God” (v. 12). Abraham acknowledges that it is *Yahweh* who provided the lamb in place of Isaac (v. 14), and the Angel seems to report the words of *Yahweh* in the solemn oath that ensues (vs. 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 (Josh 5:15). The connection between Exodus 3 and Joshua 5 allows for the conclusion that the Angel who appears to Moses is probably 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 (Exod 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 (Judg 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). Here, as in several other instances, 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 befit the deity alone, (3) He calls himself

God, (4) He is worshipped, and (5) He speaks with divine authority.⁴⁸ The Angel is fully God as He is identified with *Yahweh*/God. But while the Angel is a divine person, there are instances where a distinction is made between Him and *Yahweh*/God. Thus, the Angel is also fully God even when He is presented as a person distinct from *Yahweh*/God. We conclude, therefore, that in the Old Testament *God* can be more than one divine person.

Other References to Divine Plurality

In addition to the distinction made between the Angel and *Yahweh*/God, some other passages in the Old Testament depict a plurality within the God of Israel. As Wayne Grudem says, “there are passages where one person is called ‘God’ or ‘the Lord’ and is distinguished from another person who is also said to be God.”⁴⁹ We will briefly discuss a few of these passages in this section.

Like the Angel of *Yahweh* passages reviewed above, Psalms 45 and 110 suggest that at least two persons can be referred to as *God* in non-polytheistic contexts. The New Testament specifically interprets Psalm 45:6, 7 to refer to God and His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:8, 9). Similarly, in His interpretation of Psalm 110:1 in Matthew 22:43–46, Jesus Christ seems to indicate that *Yahweh* in Psalm 110:1 refers to God the Father and *Adonay* refers to Himself (i.e., God the Son).

Isaiah 9 describes future glories that would attend God’s people (v. 1). The one who will bring about the glorious future is a divine Son: “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6).

The yet-to-be-revealed God-son will exercise endless authority on the throne of David (v. 7; cf. 22:22). And “the LORD [*Yahweh*] of hosts” is said to make this happen (v. 7). In verses 6, 7, then, we find references to two divine persons: *Yahweh* (v. 7) and the God-son who is also called “Mighty God” (v. 6).⁵⁰ The specifics of the prophecy of

⁴⁸ Cf. M. F. Rooker, “Theophany,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 863–864. G. C. Aalders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 300, notes that “this ‘messenger’ [the Angel] must be seen as a special manifestation of the being of God himself.”

⁴⁹ Grudem, 227.

⁵⁰ See the discussion of divine titles in Isaiah 9:6 in Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:332–340. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 247, has argued that while attempts have been made to read *‘el gibbor* as “great hero,” the phrase is best translated “mighty God.”

Isaiah 9 find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who not only is born as the son of David, but also as the Son of God, and therefore is God (Matt 14:33; John 3:16; 20:28; Phil 2:6; Titus 2:13). Thus, in Isaiah 9 both *Yahweh* and the promised Son *are* God.

The concept of servant is recurrent in Isaiah 42–53.⁵¹ The servant is sometimes identified with Israel/Jacob (e.g., 41:8, 9; 44:1), but other times the reference is to the promised Messiah (e.g., 49:5, 7; 50:10). In the latter case, the Servant is described as “my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (42:1, ESV; cf. Matt 3:17). The Servant of *Yahweh* is further described as a suffering Servant, dying to cleanse humans from their sins and iniquities (52:13–53:12). In these passages the Servant and *Yahweh* are distinct persons; it is *Yahweh* who accomplishes His purposes for humanity through the Servant.⁵² For example, the distinction between the two persons is highlighted in Isaiah 53:10: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him [the Servant]; He has put *Him* to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see *His* seed, He shall prolong *His* days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.” The New Testament description of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ clearly recalls the suffering servant motif in Isaiah 52 and 53.⁵³ If the Servant is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, then He and *Yahweh* are divine, yet distinct persons.

Thus far, we have seen that the God of Israel in the Old Testament is not necessarily conceived of as strictly one divine person. There is a plurality of divine persons within God. Sometimes the plurality is presented without reference to a specific number of divine persons (e.g., Gen 1:26). At other times the plurality is presented in a binary sense, that is, two divine beings (e.g., Angel of *Yahweh* and *Yahweh*/God). The notion of two divine beings is more common in the Old Testament than the concept of a trinity of divine beings. In a few passages, however, references are made to three persons who are God. To this we now turn.

⁵¹ On the so-called “Servant Songs” see Grogan, 14–20.

⁵² The descriptions of the Servant in Isaiah suggest clearly that He is to be identified with the God-son in Isaiah 9:6. The same person is said to be the Shoot/Branch of Jesse (Isa 11:1, 10) or of David (Jer 23:5) or *Yahweh’s* Servant who is the Branch (Zech 3:8; 6:12). For example, in Jeremiah 23:5, 6 and 33:14–18, *Yahweh* promises to raise a Branch from David who shall reign forever. In Micah 5:2 the reference is to the coming of “One to be Ruler in Israel,” an eternal King who shall stand in the strength of *Yahweh* and in the majesty of the name of *Yahweh* his God (v. 4). Both *Yahweh* and the promised Branch are presented as divine persons. Matthew 2:5, 6 specifically records the fulfillment of this prophecy of Micah 5:2 in Jesus Christ.

⁵³ Matthew 8:17; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32, 33; 1 Peter 2:22. See also John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 375–379, 391; Grogan, 300–303.

Three Persons of the Godhead

In light of the discussion above, one cannot deny that the Old Testament conceives of a plurality in God. We have observed that even within monotheistic contexts, there is more than one person who is called God. What this means is that the one-God concept is not understood to mean that God is a *solitary* divine person. In other words, Old Testament monotheism does not preclude a plurality of persons within the *one* God. Within the overarching theme of the oneness of God, we find that (1) God speaks in plural terms within Himself; (2) the Angel of *Yahweh* is called *Yahweh*/God, but is at the same time presented as a divine person distinct from *Yahweh*/God; (3) God ordains and commissions God; and (4) the divine Servant of *Yahweh*—the Messiah—is distinct from *Yahweh*/God, yet is Himself the “Mighty God.” Besides the general concept of a plurality in God, some passages in the Old Testament, specifically in the book of Isaiah, seem to suggest that the plurality in God is a three-in-oneness plurality. These passages include Isaiah 42:1; 48:16; 61:1–3; and 63:8–12, 16.

The Servant of *Yahweh* concept in Isaiah 42–53, as briefly noted in the previous section, is particularly important for understanding Isaiah 42:1, “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One *in whom* My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.” The speaker in this verse is *Yahweh* (41:21; 42:5, 6). *Yahweh* refers to His servant and to His Spirit, which in Isaiah is often the endowment of the Servant. The servant in Isaiah 42:1 does not seem to be the nation Israel. The fact that this servant is specially introduced here may imply that he is different from the servant already mentioned in 41:8 (i.e., Israel). Furthermore, since Isaiah 42 is addressed to Israel, it is not likely that the nation itself is the servant. It is probable that here the servant is the divine Servant, the Messiah (Isa 9:6).⁵⁴ In Isaiah 42 the Spirit is not specifically presented as a person, but rather as a “divine force and supernatural power who equips the recipient to perform his task.”⁵⁵ While the personhood of the Spirit is not clear, Isaiah 42 doubtless presents three distinct entities inseparably united in the divine mission and purpose: *Yahweh*, the Servant, and the Spirit.

Isaiah 61:1–3 also seems to make reference to three divine personalities: the Spirit of *Adonay Yahweh*, *Yahweh*, and the Anointed

⁵⁴ Young, 3:108–109; Oswalt, *Chapters 40–66*, 107–110; Grogan, 255. The New Testament echoes Isaiah 42:1 in the context of the baptism of Jesus Christ (Matt 3:17), thereby adding weight to the conclusion that the servant in Isaiah 42:1 is the divine Servant.

⁵⁵ Young, 3:110.

One, who is sent by *Yahweh* to proclaim salvation to His people. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ applied Isaiah 61 to Himself in Luke 4:16–21. The Servant in Isaiah 52, 53, and 61 has generally been identified with Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ Taking Isaiah 42:1 together with 52:13–53:12 and 61:1–3, we can conclude that the Servant of *Yahweh* is the pre-incarnate Messiah who is sent by God the Father to save the world through His life, ministry, death, and resurrection (cf. Mark 16:6; John 3:16, 17). While the Spirit of *Yahweh* is not clearly presented as a person in Isaiah 61:1, its otherwise consistent occurrence in Messianic contexts in Isaiah as the indispensable divine endowment in the mission of the Servant sent by *Yahweh* gives the impression that in such contexts *Yahweh*, the Servant, and *Yahweh*, the Spirit are distinct, divine personalities.⁵⁷

The distinction made in Isaiah 42:1 and 61:1–3 of three divine personalities continues in Isaiah 63 with further clarity. The chapter opens with a description of “One . . . glorious in His apparel” and who is “mighty to save” (v. 1). There is mention of the soaking of His garments in blood, depicting the vengeance He metes out against the enemy in order to effect salvation for “my redeemed” (vs. 2–6). Thus, the description is that of a divine Person who saves His people and judges His enemies. From verse 7 on, the prophet is proclaiming the “lovingkindnesses of the LORD.” In verses 8–12, 16, we read:

For He said, ‘Surely they *are* My people, Children *who* will not lie.’ So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the Angel of His Presence saved them; In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them All the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; So He turned Himself against them as an enemy, *And* He fought against them. . . . Doubtless You *are* our Father, Though Abraham was ignorant of us, And Israel does not acknowledge us. You, O LORD, *are* our Father; Our Redeemer from Everlasting *is* Your name.

In these verses, reference is made to *Yahweh*, the Angel of His Presence, and the Holy Spirit. None would question the divinity of

⁵⁶ Oswalt, *Chapters 40-66*, 562–563; Grogan, 16–20; Young, *Isaiah*, 3:458.

⁵⁷ In Isaiah 61:1 “there is a notable contrast between *Spirit* at the beginning of the first clause and *me* at the close of the second, and in each clause the Lord is mentioned. This is a Trinitarian shade that should not be overlooked. Not to be overlooked also is the emphasis upon *me*, which suggests that the speaker is a person of unusual significance” (Young, *Isaiah*, 3:459).

Yahweh, the God of Israel (Isa 42:8). In Isaiah 63:16 *Yahweh* is called Savior and Father. The term “father” is not a technical term as often used in the New Testament, yet it reveals the understanding that He is the true Father of Israel. But again, *Yahweh* is distinct from the Angel of His Presence and His Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ The reference to the “Angel of His Presence” clearly recalls passages such as Exodus 14:19 and 23:20–23, where *Yahweh* is said to have sent His Angel before Israel—the Angel in whom is the *name* of *Yahweh*. Within this context, the angel in Isaiah 63 is no ordinary angel, but the Angel of *Yahweh* who is a divine person sometimes identical to, and at other times distinguishable from, *Yahweh*.⁵⁹

The third divine personality in Isaiah 63 is the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ The Spirit is here said to have been put within Israel during the Exodus, but Israel rebelled and grieved the Spirit (vs. 10, 11). The Hebrew word for “grieved” (*‘ätzab*) has a range of nuances including “hurt” (1 Chron 4:10; Eccl 10:9), “twist” (Ps 56:5), and “distress” or “grieve” (Gen 6:6; 34:7; 45:5; 1 Sam 20:3; Ps 78:40; Isa 54:6). It is never used for an impersonal subject or object, since only a person can be grieved. By using “grieved” in Isaiah 63:10, Isaiah explicitly touches on the personhood of the Holy Spirit which is found only implicitly elsewhere (e.g., 42:1; 48:16; 61:1). As in Isaiah 63:10, Psalm 78:40 combines the verbs “rebel” and “grieve” to convey how Israel rebelled and grieved God during the Exodus. The grieving of *Yahweh* in Psalm 78 is equated with the grieving of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 63, since both passages share the same thematic context. Yet, because Isaiah consistently individualizes *Yahweh* and the Holy Spirit, the two ought to be seen as distinct,⁶¹ divine personalities in addition to the Angel,⁶² the three sharing the same nature and being inseparable in their purpose

⁵⁸ The individuality of the Holy Spirit need not be questioned simply because the text says “His Holy Spirit” (cf. Isa 42:1; 48:16). In several places in Isaiah *Yahweh* refers to “My Servant,” yet it is clear that *Yahweh* is different from His Servant (e.g., 42:1; 52:13; 53:11).

⁵⁹ Cf. Gulley, 85. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 387, notes that the Angel “speaks as the Lord and is yet distinct from him, in whom the holy God ‘accommodates’ himself to live among sinners, an Old Testament anticipation of Jesus.”

⁶⁰ The phrase “Holy Spirit” is rare in the Old Testament. It is mentioned in Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10, 11. Similar phraseology occurs in the Aramaic texts of Daniel 4:8, 9, 18; 5:11.

⁶¹ Cf. Oswalt, *Chapters 40–66*, 607: “Since the adjective *holy* is used of God’s Spirit only here, in verse 11, and Psalm 51:11, we may safely assume that it is used on purpose, and is not just part of an honorific title.”

⁶² Gulley, 92, has noted that in Isaiah 63 we have “(1) *Yahweh*, (2) angel of *Yahweh*, and (3) Spirit of *Yahweh*, and explicit reference to the Trinity, and a specified relationship between them: the Son and Spirit are related to the Father, for they both share the name *Yahweh* with the Father. The Trinity is *chesed* love (cf. ‘God is love’, Gr. *agape*, 1 John 4:8, 16).”

for humanity.⁶³ The references to God's "lovingkindness" and Israel's rebellion—distressing and grieving the Spirit, yet their redemption by the Angel is ample evidence that the three persons of the Godhead have always actively been involved in salvation history.⁶⁴

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The New Testament revelation of the titles of the three persons of the Godhead as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is implicit in the Old Testament. God is called Father (Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16; 64:8; Mal 1:6; 2:10), fatherly attributes are ascribed to Him (Deut 1:31; 8:5; Prov 3:12; Isa 1:2; 30:1, 9), He is the Father of Israel (Jer 3:4; Hos 11:1), and Israel is His firstborn (Exod 4:22). In a special sense, God is the Father of the Davidic kings (2 Sam 7:14) and of the Messiah (Ps 2:2, 7). Although God is called Father in the Old Testament, the "father" appellation is not a technical term that designates the first person of the Godhead as we find in the New Testament.

The Old Testament also speaks of a God-Son yet to be born (Isa 7:14; 9:6) who shall reign on the Davidic throne as the divine Branch (Jer 23:5, 6; 33:14–18; Zech 3:8; 6:12) in everlasting peace and righteousness (Isa 11:1–16). This God-Son is also pictured as the Servant of *Yahweh*, whose suffering and death would bring healing to humanity (e.g., Isa 52, 53). The God-son is mysteriously begotten by God (Ps 2:7) and is Himself God (e.g., Ps 45:6, 7; Isa 9:6). And the references to the birth and the divinity of the Son suggest that He is the God-man (Isa 7:14; 9:6; Dan 7:13).⁶⁵

The Old Testament also makes references to the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God. The Spirit is presented as taking an active role in creation (e.g., Gen 1:2; Job 33:4; 34:14, 15). The Spirit of God dwells in human beings (e.g., Gen 41:38; Num 27:18; 1 Sam 16:13) and enables individuals to perform certain tasks (Exod 31:3; 35:31; Num 11:25; 24:2; Dan 4:8, 9; 5:11). For example, the judges and the prophets executed their duties through the Spirit (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 1 Sam 10:6–10; 2 Chron 15:1; Mic 3:8). The Spirit speaks through people (2 Sam 23:2; 1 Kgs 22:24). In 2 Samuel 23:2, 3 the "Spirit of the Lord" parallels the "God of Israel" (also Isa 30:1). Psalm 139:7, 8 attributes the divine characteristic of omnipresence to the Spirit and equates *Yahweh's* presence with the Spirit. The Spirit can take actions on His own (2 Kgs 2:16; Ezek 11:5, 24; Mic 2:7). For example, Ezekiel 11 reports the Spirit's falling upon the prophet and instructing him

⁶³ Grudem, 238; Dederen, 16. See also Grogan, 342; Delitzsch, 454–455.

⁶⁴ Dederen, 20.

⁶⁵ See also Oswalt, *Chapters 1–39*, 245; Grogan, 74.

to speak the words of the Lord (v. 5). The Spirit brings about revival and change of heart (Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 36:26, 27; 37:1–14). People can take counsel with the Lord as well as with the Spirit (Isa 30:1). Finally, Isaiah 63 presents the Lord, the Angel of His Presence, and the Holy Spirit as distinct personalities (vs. 9, 10). In addition to other passages (e.g., Gen 6:3; 2 Sam 23:2, 3; Isa 48:16; Ezek 11:5, 24; Mic 2:7), Isaiah 63:10 reveals that the Spirit of God has personal characteristics.⁶⁶ As such, the Spirit is said to have been “grieved” by Israel in the wilderness (v. 10; cf. Ps 106:33).⁶⁷ The personal characteristics notwithstanding, the Old Testament does not explicitly imply that the Spirit was understood as one of three divine persons as is the case in the New Testament.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

While some scholars would deny any foreshadowing of the Godhead or Trinity in the Old Testament, evidence from the text seems to suggest otherwise. The Old Testament particularly emphasizes monotheism. *Yahweh*/God is the only true God. Not only are singular verbs and pronouns used for God, but many direct statements serve to highlight the oneness of God. But the oneness of God as consistently expressed in the Old Testament does not preclude a plurality of persons within the one God; it only precludes the recognition and worship of demonic and/or human-made gods as was current in the surrounding cultures. So we find that in the passages where the oneness of God is asserted, the contrast is consistently between the God of Israel on the one hand and the gods of the Canaanites on the other.

Although the Old Testament stresses monotheism, it nevertheless envisages a plurality in God. There are indications that God exists as more than *one* divine person. First, the biblical text uses plural names, verbs, and pronouns for the one God in contexts that suggest plurality of divine persons. Second, several passages explicitly present at least two divine persons who are clearly distinguishable from each other (e.g., *Yahweh* vs. Angel of *Yahweh* and *Yahweh* vs. His Servant/God-son, the Messiah). In the book of Isaiah, the general concept of plurality in God elsewhere in the Old Testament becomes a plural-

⁶⁶ The personal characteristics of the Spirit can also be gleaned from the verbs used to describe the Spirit's action. The Spirit is said to “be” (e.g., Num 24:2; Judg 3:10), to “clothe” (e.g., Judg 6:34, ESV), to “come mightily” (e.g., Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam 11:6; 16:13), or to “fall” upon persons (e.g., Ezek 11:5).

⁶⁷ In Nehemiah 9:20 God is said to have given His “good Spirit” to cause Israel to be prudent during the wilderness trek (cf. Ps 106:33). This implies not only that the Angel of *Yahweh* was with Israel during the Exodus, but also that the Spirit was also moving with Israel. It is appropriate, therefore, that personal characteristics are accorded the Spirit as in Isaiah 63.

ity of three persons within the one God. Intriguingly, while Isaiah consistently stresses the oneness of the God of Israel, he nevertheless individualizes *Yahweh*, the Angel/Servant, and the Holy Spirit as three distinct, divine personalities who are indivisible in their nature and purpose for humanity. Finally, the New Testament revelation of the titles of the three persons of the Godhead as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appears implicit in the Old Testament as it presents God as Father, His Angel/Servant/Messiah, and His Holy Spirit. We can thus conclude that the Old Testament conception of God as existing in a plurality of persons foreshadows the New Testament concept of the Godhead.

From the references to divine persons in the Old Testament, we can speak, softly though, of functional differences between these divine persons in their mission to humanity. *Elohim/Yahweh* appears to be the highest point of reference. He sends the Angel/Servant of *Yahweh* as a father would send a son on a mission. He also gives the Spirit to the Servant for His mission. Thus, the Angel/Servant and the Spirit accomplish the task of *Elohim/Yahweh*, who is Himself keenly involved in the mission of redemption. And the Angel/Servant, who is also *Yahweh* and God, makes references to the authority of *Elohim/Yahweh*. In these functions, *Elohim/Yahweh* comes first, followed by the Angel/Servant who is the primary emissary and agent for the redemption of God's people, and then the Spirit who is said to accompany and empower the ministry of the Angel/Servant. The Holy Spirit—whose work is closely associated with that of the Servant Messiah—is not explicitly revealed as a divine person until the revelation of the Messiah in the New Testament.⁶⁸ Thus understood, the Old Testament picture of plurality within God prepares for the explicit revelation of the Messiah and the Holy Spirit as God, and fits perfectly with the New Testament portrayal of the Trinity as a relationship of three equal, divine persons with different functions in the plan of salvation.

⁶⁸ Cf. Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:4–38.



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