



The Trinity: Jewish or Gentile-ish?

By Richard Harvey

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The Lord is One

Hear, O Israel, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai is one. These three are one. How can the three Names be one? Only through the perception of faith; in the vision of the Holy Spirit, in the beholding of the hidden eye alone...So it is with the mystery of the threefold Divine manifestations designated by Adonai Eloheinu Adonai—three modes which yet form one unity. ¹

A Christian quote? Hardly. The above is taken from the Zohar, an ancient book of Jewish mysticism. The Zohar is somewhat esoteric and most contemporary Jews don't study it, but there are other Jewish books that refer to God's plurality as well.

Why then won't Jews discuss these things? Could it be that to do so might lead a person to consider Y'shua (Jesus) as who and what he claimed to be? ² Rabbis denounce the idea that God would come to us in human flesh as utterly pagan and contrary to what Judaism teaches.

What can we actually say that Judaism teaches? Some people see Judaism as a monolith of religion, with all its teachings resting upon the narrow foundation of the Sh'ma. The Sh'ma certainly is a point of unity that all Jews must affirm. But it does not state, imply or even support many of the interpretations and opinions that are labeled "what Judaism teaches." What Judaism teaches is neither static nor monolithic! Phrases such as "Judaism teaches" or "according to our tradition" are relative. They do not mean "this was, is and always will be the one and only Jewish viewpoint."

Ancient sages struggled with several portions of the Hebrew Scriptures and their implications vis-à-vis God's plurality. Deuteronomy 6:4 (the Sh'ma) is but one such passage. Isaiah 6:8 is another: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" However, the first "proof" passage on God as more than one appears in the first chapter of the Hebrew Scriptures: "And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). ³

Rabbis who believed that each word of the Hebrew Scriptures, each letter, is God's revelation had to admit that God spoke to himself and referred to himself in the plural. How can that be, when we know there is only one God?

Much in Genesis 1:26 seems to confirm the idea that there is one God whose oneness is complex. The idea of God's nature being triune (three in one) is mind-boggling. Contemplation of the infinite is always confusing to finite beings. Nevertheless, certain illustrations can help people grapple with the issue of a complex unity. C. S. Lewis, a talented philologist, writer and debater put it this way:

We must remind ourselves that Christian theology does not believe God to be a person. It believes Him to be such that in Him a trinity of persons is consistent with a unity of Deity. In that sense it believes Him to be something very different from a person, just as a cube, in which six squares are consistent with unity of the body, is different from a square. (Flatlanders, attempting to imagine a cube, would either imagine the six squares coinciding, and thus destroy their

¹ Zohar II: 43b (vol. 3, p. 134 in the Soncino Press edition).

² John 10:30.

³ Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia, 1917). All quotations from Hebrew Scriptures are from this translation, unless otherwise stated.



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*distinctness, or else imagine them set out side by side, and thus destroy the unity. Our difficulties about the Trinity are of much the same kind.)*⁴

Christians consider themselves monotheists, while Jewish tradition maintains that believers in a triunity of God reject monotheism. Yet the Hebrew Scriptures do imply some kind of plurality in the Divinity. Why else would Jewish sages offer various alternatives to explain those implications, particularly in Genesis 1:26? Evaluate the following methods our forebears used to deal with the text.

1. Change the text or translate it differently

According to Jewish tradition, scholars who worked on the Septuagint⁵ translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for King Ptolemy were embarrassed by the plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26. They took the liberty of changing the text from "let us" to "let me."⁶ Such "liberty" violates the sacredness of Scripture.

Other rabbinical commentators also took liberties with the text. The medieval rabbi Ibn Ezra described those commentators as "absurd" for attempting to translate the active "let us make" (na'a'seh) into a passive "there is made" (niph'al). These commentators added that the phrase "in our image, after our likeness" was not said by God, but added as a postscript by Moses.⁷

2. The text describes God speaking to creation

Medieval commentators David Kimchi and Moses Maimonides accepted the Talmudic interpretation of Rabbi Joshua b. Levi. Rabbi Levi explained that God was speaking to creation.

AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN, ETC. With whom did He take counsel? R. Joshua b. Levi said: He took counsel with the works of heaven and earth, like a king who had two advisers without whose knowledge he did nothing whatsoever.⁸

Levi knew that the plural implied that God was speaking to someone and concluded that the Lord was seeking advice and approval from other beings.

According to Rabbi Nachmanides, the plural reference denotes God speaking to the earth because "man's body would come from the earth and his spirit (soul) from God."⁹ But the separation of a person into distinct parts owes more to the Greek influence of Aristotle's philosophy than to a careful and accurate reading of the text. The biblical view of humankind indicates that physical, spiritual and psychic aspects are held together in a composite and indivisible unity. Rabbi Abarbanel

⁴ Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, IL, 1989), p. 587.

⁵ A Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures written some two hundred years before Y'shua.

⁶ As stated in "The Image of God in Man," D.J.A. Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* (1968), p. 62, referring to J. Jervell, "Imago Dei...", *Göttingen* (1960), p. 75.

⁷ *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, trans. (New York: Menorah Publishing Co., 1988), p. 43.

⁸ *Genesis Rabbah VIII.3* (Soncino Midrash Rabbah, p. 56).

⁹ Referred to in *Soncino Chumash* (Soncino Press: London, 1956), p. 6.



explained that God was capable of making all the lesser works of creation but needed assistance when it came to human beings. That position denies God's omnipotence.

3. God is addressing the angels around his throne

Rashi explains that God chose to demonstrate humility by consulting his inferiors:

The meekness of the Holy One, blessed be He, they [the rabbis] learned from here: because man is in the likeness of the angels and they might envy him, therefore he took counsel with them...Although they did not assist Him in forming him [the man] and although this use of the plural may give the heretics an occasion to rebel [i.e., to argue in favor of their own views], yet the verse does not refrain from teaching proper conduct and the virtue of humbleness, namely, that the greater should consult, and take permission from the smaller; for had it been written, "I shall make man," we could not, then, have learned that He spoke to His judicial council but to Himself.¹⁰

According to Rashi, if God had used the singular ("I" and "my") we could not have known he was addressing the angels. True—we would never have guessed that God was addressing angels, since there is no mention of angels in the text. But even with the plural, there is still no mention of angels in the text!

The text does not support the concept of God consulting angels in creation, and Rashi's argument became a source of confusion and disagreement among various rabbis.

4. God was speaking to the souls of the righteous unborn

One Jewish tradition states that the souls of the righteous existed before God created the world (and were present at Mount Sinai for the receiving of the law). Those who believe this tradition link Genesis 1:26 with the phrase "there they dwelt with the king in his work" from 1 Chronicles 4:23.¹¹

R. Joshua of Siknin said in Rabbi Levi's name: "[W]ith the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, sat the souls of the righteous with whom He took counsel before the creation of the world."¹²

A later commentator rebutted the suggestion that God had partners in creation. He insisted that since no other beings are mentioned in the passage, it is not valid to invent them; in fact, it is best to maintain the solitude of God in creation: "Why was man created last? So that the heretics might not say there was a companion [i.e., Jesus] with Him in the work."

¹⁰ Pentateuch with the commentary of Rashi, Silberman edition, Jerusalem 5733, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ Genesis Rabbah, VIII.7, p. 59.

¹² Tosephta on Sanhedrin 8:7.



5. God was keeping his own counsel

Some Jewish scholars believe that the mystery of Genesis 1:26 can be solved grammatically. They suggest a "plural of deliberation," whereby the plural expresses God's pondering within himself, concentrating his thoughts and meditating over his decision.

Rabbi Ammi said: "He took counsel with His own heart. It may be compared to a king who had a palace built by an architect, but when he saw it, it did not please him: with whom is he to be indignant? Surely with the architect! Similarly, 'And it grieved Him at His heart.'" (Genesis 6:6)¹³

Several passages in Scripture describe a person deliberating by "consulting" some part of himself. In Psalm 42:6, the psalmist addresses his soul: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why moanest thou within me?" Yet unlike Genesis 1:26, the psalmist uses the words "O my soul," and it is clear that he is deliberating within himself.

6. The royal "we"—plural of majesty

Just as Queen Victoria referred to herself in the plural ("We are not amused"), some say that God, as a majestic being, referred to himself the same way. This is a popular contemporary explanation. It does not raise the question of other beings. It rules out the possibility of God having a plural nature. It seems to be based on good linguistic evidence and analysis.

The Hertz Commentary on Genesis sees this explanation as one of two possibilities and points out that the first person plural is used for royalty in the Book of Ezra.¹⁴ "The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me" (Ezra 4:18) is the sole example of a "plural of majesty" construction in Scripture. It also happens to be one of the few portions of Scripture in Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew.

It would be poor scholarship to build a case for a grammatical construction in Hebrew on the grounds of this Aramaic text. Even so, the Ezra passage does not necessarily contain a singular royal subject linked to a plural verb-form. If the plural of majesty were a regular Hebrew idiom, why is the singular "me" in the same line?

Rabbinical commentators and linguists recognize that the Hebrew language provides no real basis for such an explanation.¹⁵ Ibn Ezra quotes the Gaon...who suggests that the plural of Genesis 1:26 is

¹³ Genesis Rabbah, VIII.3, p. 57.

¹⁴ J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), p. 11. Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (A. E. Cowley, ed., Oxford, 1976) says on the "plural of majesty": "Jewish grammarians call such plurals...plur. virium or virtutum; later grammarians call them plur. excellentiae, magnitudinis, or plur. maiestaticus. This last name may have been suggested by the "we" used by kings when speaking of themselves (cf. already 1 Macc.10:19, 11:31); and the plural used by God in Genesis 1:26, and 11:7, Isaiah 6:8 has been incorrectly explained in this way...It is best explained as a plural of self-deliberation. The use of the plural as a form of respectful address is quite foreign to Hebrew," p. 398.

¹⁵ Ibid., Soncino Chumash, p. 6.



the plural of majesty. He refuted that view in favor of God having consulted the angels.¹⁶ However, we have already mentioned the difficulties of using angels to solve the mystery.

7. There are different aspects within God's being

Some rabbis acknowledge different aspects within God's nature. There is no consensus as to what these aspects are or how to distinguish one from another. For example, the Zohar describes God as being both male and female.¹⁷

8. The Word: wisdom or messenger of God

Another way to explain Genesis 1:26 is to use the Memra, or "Word" of God. The Targum Neofiti (an early Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew text) translates verse 27: "And the Memra of the Lord created the man in his (own) likeness."¹⁸

The Targum Onkelos on Deuteronomy 33:27 translates the Hebrew "underneath are the everlasting arms" as "And by His 'Memra' was the world created."

Like the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31, the Word is often personified and assigned divine attributes, implying divine status.¹⁹ Memra is used to describe God Himself, especially when he is revealing himself to human beings. Rabbinical thought also links the Memra to the Messiah. The New Covenant portion of the Bible reveals a similar understanding of the role of the Word in creation.

The Book of Genesis records that God's dynamic act of creation was through his spoken word: "And God said, Let there be light...", etc.²⁰ The New Covenant Gospel of John begins this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.²¹

Jewish believers in Jesus believe in the Word of creation in Genesis. Therefore he is not only the Messiah, but God in human form.

Why the Rabbis Won't Regard the Plurality of God with Credibility

Some rabbis agreed that the Genesis 1:26 passage gives weight to the case for God's plurality. Their position has not shaped the current position or practice of Jewish religious leaders:

¹⁶ Zohar 22a-b (vol. 1, pp. 91-93 in the Soncino Press edition).

¹⁷ Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis, Martin McNamara, tr. (The Aramaic Bible, vol. 1A; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 55.

¹⁸ Compare Colossians 1:5, Hebrews 1:3, Revelation 3:14 with Proverbs 30:2-6. By His Memra was the world created corresponds to John 1:10.

¹⁹ Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26.

²⁰ John 1:1-4.

²¹ Genesis Rabbah, VIII.8, p. 59.



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Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said in Rabbi Jonathan's name:

*When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, AND GOD SAID; LET US MAKE MAN, etc., he said: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why dost Thou furnish an excuse to heretics?' (for maintaining a plurality of deity). 'Write,' replied He; 'whoever wishes to err may err.'*²²

Some rabbis believe that to take the Scriptures at face value is to err. And yes, some out of concern to protect those who are deemed susceptible to such error, have set aside normative interpretations of the Scriptures. Rashi provided a clear example of this with the "suffering servant" passages of Isaiah 52 and 53.

The contemporary interpretation of Israel as the suffering servant was held by few of the early Jewish authorities. Nearly all believed it pointed to an individual and personal Messiah who would suffer and die for Israel's sin. But Rashi popularized the "national view" in the Middle Ages to refute the obvious messianic interpretation. Neither grammar, context nor logic supports this view, yet it is considered superior to the previously held (Jewish) view.

Similarly, in discussion of the Genesis 1 passage, various cases are presented in order to refute Jewish belief in Y'shua. Rabbis understood that a passage wherein God speaks and acts in the plural is significant evidence of diversity within his nature. They also knew that the New Covenant describes Y'shua as the eternal Word of God, the instrument of creation and the fullness of God in human form. They realized that people might make a connection between the two and designed their interpretations for the sake of countering "the heretics."²³

Rabbi Simlai said:

*Wherever you find a point supporting the heretics, you find the refutation at its side. They [the heretics] asked him again: 'What is meant by, AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN?' 'Read what follows,' replied he: 'not, "And gods created [Hebrew: wa-yibre'u—the plural of the verb] man" is written here, but "And God created [Hebrew: wa-yibra—in the singular]"' (Genesis 1:27). When they [the heretics] went out his disciples said to him: 'Them you have dismissed with a mere makeshift, but how will you answer us?'*²⁴

Rabbi Simlai dealt with Jewish believers in Jesus by sidestepping the question. His own disciples recognized that he had done so and expressed the need for a more satisfying reply.

Some of the ancients admitted that certain Scriptures seemed to pose a threat to their understanding of God. They sought ways to direct others away from disturbing conclusions, and, in the case of Rashi, they openly explained that they made choices based on the need to refute Christians.

²² Hebrew minim literally "sectarians" but generally assumed to be a reference to Jewish Christians. See R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, (London, 1903), p. 361ff.

²³ *Genesis Rabbah*, VIII.9, p. 60.

²⁴ *Glossary of Names*



A Warning and a Challenge

Reverence for the text prevented the ancient rabbis from ignoring or altering the text. Nevertheless, for all their creative solutions to the mystery of this passage, they could not agree on an answer that would satisfy them all.

Today, however, Jewish thinkers are in danger of simply excising from Scripture and from history clues that the rabbis were hard pressed to explain. Such clues point to ideas most Jewish people wish to avoid.

How many contemporary rabbis will say that some of their interpretations and translations are strongly weighted to help people avoid "unacceptable" beliefs? How many would admit that their answers to these complex issues might direct people away from the Bible?

Sherlock Holmes once observed that when you have eliminated all possible explanations, the only remaining solution is the truth, no matter how impossible it seems.

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