

Toward Trinitarian Thinking in the Hebrew Scriptures

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The fundamental mystery of the Christian faith is belief in the Triune God.¹ As Seventh-day Adventists we confess that God is One but manifested in three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.² When we speak about God, we need to remember that we enter holy ground, and we need to do it with deep humility knowing our limits.³ We

¹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th rev. and enlg. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 82–99; Allan Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisiting the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, InterVarsity Press, 2007); Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2005), 104–121; Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 226–261.

² Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002); Fernando L. Canale, "Doctrine of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (ed. Raoul Dederen; Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 105–159; Richard Rice, *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (2nd ed.; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 58–71; *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2nd ed.; Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 23–33.

³ Before God we are like a small child with an extremely limited understanding. It is said that Augustin was walking at the seashore while thinking about the vastness of God and the mystery of the Trinity. He saw a small boy who was pouring sea water repeatedly into his hole in the sand. "What are you doing?" Augustin asked the boy. "Well, I am trying to pour the ocean into my hole!" he answered. Then Augustin whispered to himself (in another

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are using imperfect human language to describe an infinite God! The transcendent God always surpasses even our finest categories of thinking and logic.⁴ The best attitude in such a situation is a humbleness⁵ to which God invited Moses when he encountered God: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exod 3:5). We need to realize that we know God only because He has made Himself known to us. What we perceive about Him was revealed to us; we are totally dependent upon His self-revelation (Exod 34:6–7; Deut 29:29). Thus, our only correct response to His Word is to carefully listen, eagerly learn, and wholeheartedly obey (Isa 66:2).

The basic confession of faith from the Hebrew Bible which a faithful Jew recites at least twice a day, “*Shema Yisrael, Adonay Elohenu, Adonay echad*” (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” [Deut 6:4]), is a clear proclamation of monotheism in a polytheistic society. This Shema announces God as being one in a very fundamental and unequivocal statement. This oneness of God is stressed several times in the rest of the Old Testament, because He alone is the true God and besides Him there is none.⁶

Does this Old Testament statement allow for a belief in the Trinity or is it excluded by definition?⁷ It is important to note that the New Testament

version of the story, Augustin heard a voice from heaven saying): “You silly man, you try a similar thing, to put an infinite God into the boundaries of your small brain.”

⁴ God surpasses even the best mathematical formulas, like $1+1+1=1$ (illogical one) or $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ (mathematically correct), or graphic designs, like the triangle or the circle with three parts inside, or the unity of two persons in a harmonious marriage. All these analogies cannot express adequately the inner unity and harmony within the three persons of the Godhead.

⁵ W. Gunther Plaut expresses it well: “Such a multiplicity of terms [for God in the Hebrew Bible] is one way in which human language attempted to express the essentially inexpressible nature of the Divine” (W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* [rev. ed.; New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005], 5).

⁶ See Deut 4:35, 39; Neh 9:6; Ps 86:10; Isa 44:6; Zech 14:9.

⁷ About the Trinity in the Old Testament, see Coppedge, 53–75; Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 69–118; Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 2002), 269–277; Grudem, 226–230; Norman R. Gulley, “Trinity in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring): 80–97; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2004), 17–33; Manfred Oeming, “Vestigia

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authors also proclaimed that God is one,⁸ and thus they did not see this announcement as a contradiction to the Trinitarian thinking to which they adhered (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14).⁹

People usually think that the Trinitarian teaching can be found only in the New Testament. A basic question is to see if there is room for Trinitarian thinking in the Old Testament? Do we have any hints, traces, pointers, or allusions in a nutshell for the doctrine of the Trinity in the Hebrew Bible, the Holy Scriptures of Jesus and His apostles? Does the New Testament introduce a completely new concept which is foreign to the Hebrew understanding of God? Is the Old Testament's view of the Godhead compatible with the Trinity?¹⁰ This article will investigate how the Old Testament speaks about the Triune God and Jesus Christ.

Before I go further into the theological study, I want to stress the following pastoral advice. Never engage in a theological debate about the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus with your friends or those who oppose this truth unless you bring them first to an existential knowledge of Jesus Christ and help them to develop a personal relationship with Him. Only after a person accepts Jesus as his/her intimate Savior and Friend and falls in love with Him, who forgives sins and helps in our everyday struggles, will that individual be open to accepting the divinity of Jesus and the biblical teaching on the Trinity.¹¹

Trinitatis? Vorahnungen der Trinität im Alten Testament!" *Glaube und Lernen: Zeitschrift für theologische Urteilsbildung* 17, no. 1 (2002):41–54.

⁸ See Mark 12:29; 1 Cor 8:5–6; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Jas 2:19.

⁹ Additional texts about the Trinity in the New Testament: Matt 3:16–17; John 3:34; 14:16–17; Acts 2:38–39; 5:29–32; 19:5–8; Rom 5:1–5; 8:9–11; 1 Cor 12:3–6; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 4:6; Eph 1:13–14; 2:19–22; 3:1–7, 14–19; 4:4–6; 5:18–20; 1 Thess 1:2–5; 5:18–19; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 1:3–14; Heb 2:3–4; 6:4–6; 9:14; 1 Pet 1:2; 4:14; 1 John 4:2; 4:13–14; 5:5–9; Jude 20–21; Rev 1:4–5; 5:6–7; 14:9–13; 22:16–18. See also texts on the divinity of Jesus, especially John 1:1–3; 8:58; 20:28. On the divinity of the Holy Spirit, see especially Acts 5:3–4, 9.

¹⁰ The word "Trinity" never appears in the Bible, however the concept of the Trinity is present and is progressively revealed. From it one can learn the lesson of how important it is to gradually present this teaching to our friends so that they may step by step become familiar with it and grow into a full understanding of God's truth.

¹¹ Ellen G. White strongly admonishes: "If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the deity of Christ, it is in vain to argue the point with them, for no argument, however conclusive, could convince them. 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them,

Allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament

In the Hebrew language, a general term used to designate God is *Elohim*, a plural form of *El/Eloah*.¹² This plural form was often interpreted as an indication for the Trinity.¹³ However, to state that the plural form of the word *elohim* is evidence for the Triune God is incorrect for the simple reason that this term is used to designate the true living God as well as pagan gods; its meaning depends on the context. “The word *elohim* is unique in its ‘flexibility’—it can be used both in the singular and the plural meaning, as a proper and a common name, as a designation of the God of Israel and of pagan gods.”¹⁴ A good example of these two opposite

because they are spiritually discerned.’ 1 Cor 2:14. None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man’s redemption” (*The Great Controversy* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press 1911], 524).

In order to accept the doctrine on the Trinity, it is necessary to study and responsibly answer at least three crucial issues: (1) Is the doctrine of the Trinity biblical? Is it solidly rooted in the Bible? Is it in contradiction to the Hebrew biblical thinking on monotheism? (2) Who is Jesus Christ? Is He the Savior? Can He forgive sins? Is He eternal? Is He the true and full God in the highest sense? (3) Is the Holy Spirit a mere force and influence, or a person? This article explores only some aspects of the first two issues.

A very fruitful approach in dialoguing with those who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity is to speak first about God’s uniqueness and His goodness in order that they may be attracted to the beauty of His character. After establishing this common ground, one can continue with explaining the work of the Spirit of God. Being under the influence of the Holy Spirit will open the heart and mind of people to understand the Word of God and accept Jesus as their personal Savior. Once the person experiences forgiveness of sins and rejoices in the assurance of salvation coming from Jesus, who died for our sins, then he/she is ready to see His elevated authority, exceptional qualities, and divine status. This paves the way for embracing the biblical (not philosophical) doctrine of the Trinity. People need to be lead from the relational experience to the deeper biblical knowledge, thus growing in the Lord.

¹² The term *elohim* is used 2,603 times in the Hebrew Bible according to Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishing House, 1993), 69–74. Several names or titles are used in the Hebrew Scripture for God, like *Yahweh* (“LORD”), *El* (“God”), *Elohim* (“God”), *Elyon* (“Most High”), *El Elyon* (“God Most High”), *Adonay* (“Lord”), *Shadday* (“Almighty”), *El Shadday* (“God Almighty”), etc.

Another title as a grammatical plural for the living God (besides *Elohim*) is *Adonay* (“Lord”). This term is used only for the true God and never designates pagan gods. He is the Lord of His household. See, for examples, Gen 18:30; Exod 34:23; Deut 10:17; Josh 3:11, 13; Pss 35:23; 45:11; 114:7; 135:5; Isa 6:1; Dan 1:2; Mal 1:6.

¹³ Berkhof 1079:85–86; Coppedge 2007:71–72.

¹⁴ Dmitri Slivniak, “Our God(s) Is One: Biblical *Elohim* and the Indeterminacy of Meaning,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19 (2005): 4.

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meanings is encountered in Ruth 1:15–16: “‘Look,’ said Naomi [to Ruth], ‘your sister-in-law [Orpah] is going back to her people and her gods [*Elohim*]. Go back with her.’ But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God [*Elohim*] my God [*Elohim*].’”¹⁵ Therefore, one cannot argue from the plural form of *Elohim* for the notion of the Trinity. The term *Elohim* does not refer to three persons or three gods. It is rather a neutral expression; only the context decides what the precise meaning of the word is.

What is highly significant is that the name *Elohim* is used with a verb in the singular (a grammatical contradiction). For example, “In the beginning God [plural] created [singular] the heaven and the earth” (Gen 1:1).¹⁶ The same is true about the ten expressions of *vayomer Elohim* meaning “and God [plural] said [singular]” in the first Creation account (Gen 1). The translation is thus not “gods,” but “God,” the one true living God. It is also crucial to note that pagan gods are never designated in the Bible by the name of the Lord (*Yahweh*). This name is used exclusively for the God who entered into a covenant relationship with His people!

The “We” of God

God usually speaks about Himself in the “I” formula (e.g., Exod 20:2; Isa 41:10, 13). However, five times (in four biblical verses), He refers to Himself in the category of “We”:

1. Gen 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make [*na’aseh*] man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”

2. Gen 3:22: “And the LORD God said, ‘The man has now become [was] like one of us [*ke’achad mimmenu*], knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’”

¹⁵ See also 1 Kgs 18:24; Isa 37:15, 19.

¹⁶ For exceptions to this rule when the plural verb is used with *Elohim*, see Gen 20:13; 35:7; Ps 58:11. God is called “Creator” (singular) in Isa 40:28; but in Eccl 12:1 for the expression of “Creator,” the plural form of *bara’* is used. God is designated as “Maker” in the plural form of *asah* in Job 35:10; Ps 149:2; Isa 54:5. Plural adjectives that describe God as holy are in Josh 24:19 and Prov 9:10; 30:3.

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3. and 4. Gen 11:7: “Come, let us go down [*nerdah*] and confuse [*venabelah*] their language so they will not understand each other.”

5. Isa 6:8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us [*umi yelech lanu*]?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

Three times these specific proclamations are stated in cohortative forms, i.e., admonitions in the first person plural (“let us make”; “let us go down”; “let us confuse”) and twice with prepositions (“of us”; “for us”). How should we understand these plural divine expressions? Are they in contradiction to biblical monotheism, or do such divine proclamations testify about the triune God? What does this plurality reveal about God of the Hebrew Bible?

There have been several attempts to explain this divine plural usage. In the history of the interpretation of this phenomenon, one can find eight main theories (an exhaustive list of different theories is not provided here).¹⁷

Plural Interpretation Theories

1. Mythological Reminiscence Explanation

Some scholars argue that these plural expressions are reminiscence of a pagan origin, i.e., one god is addressing another god (or a pantheon of gods), because the first faith in a transcendent power was polytheistic, and this expression was used in the polytheistic society. So one god addresses another (or many) in planning to create humans. Gabler already in 1795 proposed the theory that in Gen 1:26 we have the “remnants of Semitic polytheism.”¹⁸ Also Gunkel is a proponent of such an interpretation: “God turns here to other *elohim*-beings and includes himself with them in the ‘we’. . . . The concept originates in polytheism, but is no longer

¹⁷ For a detailed description of different theories, see D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968):62–69; Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of ‘Let us’ in Gn 1:26,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975): 58–66; Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 50–52; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, Hamilton, 1990), 132–134; P. D. Miller, Jr., *Studies in Structure and Theme* (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1978), 9–26; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 27–29.

¹⁸ Johann P. Gabler, *Neuer Versuch über die mosaische Schöpfungsgeschichte* (Altdorf, Germany: Aldorf University, 1795).

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polytheistic per se since it regards the one God (Yahweh) as the Lord, the sole determiner, but the other elohim as greatly inferior, indeed his servants.”¹⁹

It is true that in the mythological accounts of creation, gods talk among themselves when they create humans, like in Enuma Elish or in the Atrahasis creation epic. But the Bible and the book of Genesis in particular contain strong anti-mythological elements, therefore it would be very difficult to imagine that we have here some traces of mythological material. In addition, there is no room in biblical teaching for a progressive thinking from polytheism to monotheism.

2. The Divine Plural Is a Reference to Christ

This view is attested to very early in the Christian church—in the Epistle of Barnabas and in Justin Martyr. The First Council of Sirmium in AD 351 not only affirmed that the *faciamus* (“let us”) of Gen 1:26 was addressed by the Father to the Son as a distinct person, but they also excommunicated those who denied it! Christians later traditionally embraced this interpretation and thus divine plurals became references to the Trinity.

This is not a tenable interpretation for the simple reason that the text itself does not state who spoke to whom. This theory imposes one’s own view on the biblical text, putting the New Testament idea into the reading of this expression! Why limit God’s conversation to only two divine persons?

3. The Father Communicates with the Holy Spirit

Clines argues that the context of Genesis 1 points to the fact that the Father speaks to the Holy Spirit.²⁰ The explicit reference to the Spirit of God in Gen 1:2 shows that the Spirit creates which means that He is the Co-Creator with the Father (see also Ps 104:30).

This is a very attractive explanation. However, one wonders if we need to limit God’s “We” only to the interaction between the Father and the Holy Spirit, because it is evident on the basis of intertextuality that Jesus Christ is the Creator too (John 1:1–3 echoes Gen 1:1–3; Col 1:16).

¹⁹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 112.

²⁰ Clines, 68–69.

4. *God Is Addressing Earthly Elements*

Some Jewish scholars in the past like Joseph Kimchi and Maimonides suggested that God speaks to the earth.²¹ However, the serious question remains: Why would the earth be a partner to God in creation? God creates Adam from the ground, using it, but He did not elevate the earthly materials with the power to create.

5. *Plural of Majesty (Pluralis Majestaticus)*

This interpretation is young, and it is proposed in correspondence to the medieval speeches of European kings, because they spoke about themselves in plural forms: “We, the king of England,” “we, the king of France,” or the queen of England said: “We are not amused!” According to this interpretation, God is speaking in a solemn way about Himself like a king in the plural form. The proponents of this interpretations were, for example, C. F. Keil, August Dillman, Samuel R. Driver, and E. A. Speiser.²² Some scholars argue that the plural of majesty exists in the Bible, like in Ezra 4:18 (“The letter you [Rehum and Shimshai] sent us [to King Artaxerxes] has been read and translated in my presence”), however, it may well be that this “sent us” refers not only to the king but also to his government.

In the biblical records, there is no evidence that any Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Judean, or other ancient ruler would speak in this way! In other words, this rhetorical interpretation cannot be imposed on these divine “We” texts, because there is no indication that such a rhetorical style was used in biblical times.

6. *God Addresses His Heavenly Court*

According to this theory, God speaks to His angels or officials in heaven and then He creates humans. This interpretation is very popular

²¹ See, Plaut, 21; Johann P. Lange, *Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1869), 173.

²² C. F. Keil, *The Pentateuch* (Commentary on the Old Testament 1; 2d printing; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 38; August Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1897), 79; Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen, 1943), 14; and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible 1; New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), 75. Speiser also alludes that this grammatical plural of “let us” is only a stylistic feature: “Here God refers to himself, which may account for the more formal construction in the plural” (7). However, as we demonstrate further, these plural expressions of the divine “Us” occur in particular contexts and are deliberately used by biblical authors for making their important theological points.

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(expressed already by Philo of Alexandria) and widely accepted among scholars today—Christian or Jewish, like Gerhard von Rad, John Oswalt, Meredith Kline, Nahum Sarna, Brevard S. Childs, Bruce K. Waltke, John H. Walton, W. Sibley Towner, and Walter Brueggemann.²³ Oswalt argues that “it is possible, in the light of 1 Kings 22:19, that who will go for us [in Isa 6:8] is an address to the heavenly host, either visibly present or implied.”²⁴ Sarna states that “the extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host” and maintains that “this is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized.”²⁵ Childs argues for a “divine court. God is consulting his entourage.”²⁶ Brueggemann uses the expression of “the plural of government” or “government of Yahweh.”²⁷

It is true that sometimes God addresses His heavenly court (see Job 1:6–9; 2:1; 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Dan 4:14; 10:12–13), however, it is highly improbable that this would be the case in our texts under investigation (see the rhetorical question in Isa 40:41). Such an interpretation of Gen 1:26 fails on two grounds:

A. Exegetical-Syntactical Argument

A close parallelism between Gen 1:26 and Gen 1:27 does not leave space for someone other than God Himself for creating humans in His image. In Gen 1:26, God states His intention to create humans: “Let us make man . . . ,” and in Gen 1:27 the result of His creation initiative is

²³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 58; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 43; Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 64–65; John H. Walton, *Genesis* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 128–130; W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 25; and Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

²⁴ Oswalt, 185.

²⁵ Sarna, 12.

²⁶ Childs, 56.

²⁷ Brueggemann, 60.

described: humans were created to His image. They were not created in the image of God and other heavenly beings (i.e., His court). The biblical text is explicit: “So God created man in his [not their] own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). It is plainly stated by parallelism of those verses that “His image” is “God’s image uniquely!” Humans were created solely in the image of God and not in the image of God and His angels/court (compare with Gen 5:1–3).

B. Theological Argument

The biblical message consistently points to God as the only Creator. Besides Him there is no one in the entire Universe who could be designated as co-creator with Him! Thus, “let us” does not refer to angels or His heavenly court as being His co-creators! The biblical texts are unanimous and consistent: God alone is the Creator; only He created Adam and Eve in His image! The same truth about the God Creator is attested to in the New Testament (John 1:1–3; Col 1:16).

7. Plural of Self-Deliberation (Plural of Exhortation)

According to this view, God speaks to Himself (understood as being one person), and He encourages Himself to perform as we sometimes encourage ourselves before a difficult task by saying: “Let’s do it.” Umberto Cassuto, John D. Currid, P. Joüon, Claus Westermann, and Wilhelm Gesenius are among the defenders of this type of interpretation.²⁸ Cassuto, for example, suggests that it is a plural of exhortation or self-encouragement.²⁹

This interpretation is highly uncertain because of the lack of clear biblical parallels.³⁰ It seems that this hypothesis creates God in our image,

²⁸ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961); John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis. Vol. 1. Genesis 1:1–25:18* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2003), 85; P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l’Hebreu biblique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1947), paragraph 114c; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 145; and Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (repr. 2d Engl. ed.; New York: Clarendon Press, 1910), 398.

²⁹ Cassuto, 55.

³⁰ Those who argue for this position point to 2 Sam 24:14: “David said to Gad, ‘I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.’” However, it is not certain that David speaks here only for himself. They also use Songs 1:9–11: “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh. Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings, your neck with

needing to encourage Himself as we humans need to exhort ourselves! According to scholars, the plural of self-deliberation is not found about God in the biblical material. I agree with Clines who argues that “the rarity of parallelism gives us little confidence in the correctness of this view.”³¹ God is not a solitary Being who speaks aloud to Himself in order to exhort Himself.

8. Plural of Fullness—Plurality within the Godhead

In this interpretation, God speaks or communicates within the Godhead. He is in dialogue within the different persons of the divinity. The term “plural of fullness” was coined by Derek Kidner³² and many scholars followed his lead, like Stanley J. Grenz, Gerhard F. Hasel, Jan Heller, and Kenneth A. Mathews.³³ C. John Collins goes beyond this understanding and actually explains Gen 1:26: “It is a ‘we’ of self-address (which can open the way for plurality of persons in the Godhead).”³⁴

The term “plural of fullness” is not very clear, even though the concept is substantial. It is obvious that the meaning of these plural divine expressions must be interpreted by the immediate context, and in this way to clarify their meaning, and also suggest a new terminology.

Determination of the “We” of God by the Context

What does the context provide for the understanding of the divine “Us”?

First Passage (Gen 1:26)

God the Creator deliberately presents Himself as “We” and not as “I” when He creates humans.

strings of jewels. We will make you earrings of gold, studded with silver.” Here again, the lover does not speak only for himself, because the craftsmen should also be included.

³¹ Clines, 68.

³² Kidner, 52.

³³ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 266–288; Hasel, 65–66; Jan Heller, “Učinme cloveka . . . (sv. Trojice) – (Gn 1,26),” in *Obtížné oddíly knih Mojžíšových* (ed. Jan Heller and Martin Prudký; Kostelní Vydří, Czech Republic: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2006), 15–16; and Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (The New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 162.

³⁴ C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006), 59.

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The divine “We” forms people in His image; it means that this divine “We” makes humans as “we” also (as husband and wife), that is, not as isolated individuals, but persons in relationship to Him and to each other. Thus, God creates humans into a close fellowship. God is plural and when He creates humanity into His image, He makes them in plural, that is, He creates persons into fellowship.

From the very beginning, God wants to be known not by His “I” but “We” in His relationship to humanity. This is why He also creates “we” (humans as male and female). Humans created into His image must also be a plurality as He is We; and as there is a unity within God Himself, so the two human persons, distinct and different, should become intimately one. Thus, the whole human being is “WE” and not “I”! This is only on condition that they live in close personal fellowship. To do so, they need to stay in relationship with Him who created them out of love. Thus, when God creates, He creates into fellowship, creates humans as “we.” On the background of this immediate context of Gen 1:26, I want to propose that the plural of the divine “We” is a plural of fellowship or plural of community within the Godhead. This conclusion is confirmed by three additional passages.

Second Passage (Gen 3:22)

The immediate context of Gen 3:22 is the fall into sin, a reverse or de-creation of creation. The human’s “we” is broken; they became sinners, degraded, and their “we” is wrecked. When the “we” of humanity is depraved (not only with one individual but also corporatively), then God again speaks in plural, and confronts “we.”

Humans were created in dependency upon God, in fellowship with Him, and when this intimate relationship was broken, then meaningful life disappeared. When “we” is dysfunctional, then fellowship and integrity are ruined. The first couple wanted to be like God, to decide for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what was good and evil. Only the grace of God’s We could bring healing to humanity.

The literal translation of this text (Gen 3:22) is: “Behold, the man was [not “has become”] like one of us knowing good and evil.” The meaning of the *hayah ke* is “was like” and not necessarily “become like.” The first couple wanted to be like God, which meant deciding for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what

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was good and evil. Today we are totally dependant upon God's revelation in order to know what is good and evil.

Third Passage (Gen 11:4–7)

God's speech in Gen 11:7, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other," is a direct reaction to the arrogant speech and proud attitude of the human's "let us." The Babylonians stated: "Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens" (Gen 11:4). When humans rebel and build their "we" against God, He reveals His We!

The passage of Gen 11:1–9 is written in a chiasmic literary structure to help us to discern the whole pattern:

- A—vv. 1–2 Narrative: humanity's one language and their settling
- B—vv. 3–4 Speech of people: "Let us reach heaven."
- C—v. 5 Narrative: JUDGMENT—God's investigation
- B'—vv. 6–7 Divine speech: "Let us go down."
- A'—vv. 8–9 Narrative: many languages and scattering of the people

Part A parallels A', B matches with B', and at the climax of the whole structure (C) lies a message of God's judgment. The thematic correspondence matches well with different literary genres used in this passage; there is an alteration between narratives and speeches. For the purpose of our study, it is important to stress that v. 7 corresponds to v. 4. Humanity's antigodly behavior "Let us build a city and reach heaven" is in direct opposition to God's "Let us"! God directly answers to humanity's rebellious "we" with His "We": "Come, let us go down and confuse their language" (Gen 11:7).

When humans build their "we" against God, He reveals Himself to them in His WE. God's "WE" stands in contrast to humanity's rebellious "we." In this biblical text, as well as in the previous one, these plural forms of divine addresses point to "the fate of humanity."³⁵ Humans need to submit to We and live in close fellowship with Him in order to live an integral, harmonious, and happy life with each other.

³⁵ Sarna, 12.

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Fourth Passage (Isa 6:8)

In the vision of the holiness of God, Isaiah is convinced of his sinfulness. After divine cleansing, God asks: “Whom shall I send? And Isaiah responds: “Here I am, send me.” The prophet is sent with a special divine commission of calling a sinful people to repentance. In v. 8, God speaks for the first time. Only after purification is Isaiah ready to meet directly with God and learn God’s purpose for him. “Only when his sin, seen in all its massive and objective reality, is removed can Isaiah hear the voice of God.”³⁶

In this setting, the divine plural statement refers to God Himself because of the strength of the Hebrew parallelism in the verse: (A) “Whom shall I send?” (B) “Who will go for us?” The “I” in the first question corresponds to the “us” in the second one. Thus the match leads to the apparent conclusion that it is God Himself who speaks here for Himself, and He is not doing it for Himself and additional heavenly beings, His court, His lords or advisers. Isaiah will be on God’s mission for His cause. The stress is on the divine commission. God sends and gives a message, and the prophet should go for Him. He is not a speaker for the heavenly court but for God Himself! He is accountable to Him! Isaiah is sent to people—to plurality. It is noteworthy that even though J. Alec Motyer argues in Isa 6:8 for a “plural of consultation,” he adds that the New Testament “relates this passage both to the Lord Jesus (John 12:41) and to the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), finding here that which will accommodate the full revelation of the triune God.”³⁷

Our fresh investigation of the divine plural expressions in these four passages under scrutiny leads to a surprising conclusion. God speaks about Himself as “We,” and this expression points to **a plural of fellowship or community within the Godhead**. This plurality is a “plurality of Persons.”³⁸ God communicates within Himself; He is in a dialogue within the Godhead.

³⁶ Childs, 56.

³⁷ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 78.

³⁸ Max Hatton, *Understanding the Trinity* (Alma Park Grantham, England: Autumn House, 2001), 26.

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Edward J. Young speaks about the “plurality of persons in the Speaker,”³⁹ Gerhard F. Hasel about “an intra-divine deliberation,”⁴⁰ and Allen P. Ross about “a potential plural, expressing the wealth of potentials in the divine being. . . . These plurals do not explicitly refer to the trinity of the Godhead but do allow for that doctrine’s development through the process of progressive revelation.”⁴¹

The “We” expressions of God do not contradict biblical monotheism, but point to the Trinitarian thinking rooted in the Old Testament even though they do not yet proclaim the Trinity plainly. It is crucial to observe that the New Testament is not presenting something which is entirely new or foreign to Hebrew thinking!

In view of the majesty and otherness of our God, we are not able to “explain” God, His Being, and it would be foolishness even to try. God reveals the essentials about Himself so that we can know Him and grow into His fullness (John 17:3; Eph 4:13). We should fellowship with Him and bow down in admiration before Him and His revelation (Isa 66:2)! This will enable us to cultivate meaningful relationships and fellowship with others. God is the foundation of society, because He is We, He is Plurality, and from Him flow all the blessings.

The Meaning of *Echad* (“One”) in Deut 6:5

We need to ask a very important question: Is the *Shema* of Deut 6:5 in contradiction to our conclusion so far? In the Hebrew language there are two words for expressing the idea of one: *echad* and *yachid*. The term *echad* is used in the *Shema*. There are at least three nuances of meanings for the word *echad* in relationship to Deut 6:5.⁴² The Lord is ONE means that:

³⁹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 254.

⁴⁰ Hasel, 65.

⁴¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 12.

⁴² For the meaning of *echad*, I am indebted to Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 69–84, and Dwight A. Pryor, “One God & Lord,” *Mishkan* 39 (2003): 50–60.

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1. The Lord Is Unique

He is utterly holy; it means He is different from anyone else. One can speak about the otherness of God, because as a holy Being, He is the Other One. Thus, one is not a numerical value but a description of the quality!

2. The Lord Is Exclusive

God alone is worthy of our praise, because He is faithful. He is the God of all gods. It does not mean a hierarchy within a pantheon of gods with the Lord as the Most High God as would be suggested by the historical background of the polytheistic society, but rather His is exclusive in His position, because other gods are nothing—they have no life, they cannot hear, see, intervene, or act (Isa 44:6–20). Our God, the Lord is real. No one can be compared to Him (Deut 4:39; Isa 45:18).

3. The Lord Is Unity

It means God is oneness. The word *echad* indicates also the invisible and indivisible unity of the Lord. It is interesting that in the *Shema* the two names for God are used: *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. Both terms contain a different message in their meaning. *Elohim* points to a mighty, powerful God (*el* = “powerful,” “mighty”), universal, distant God, God of all humanity, God Creator, transcendent God who creates by His word (in the first biblical Creation account this phrase is used ten times: “And God said”—Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29; see also Pss 33:6, 9; 148:5; Isa 55:11; Heb 11:3). *Yahweh*, on the other hand, is an imminent, near, intimate God, God of the covenant, God of His people who enter into a covenantal relationship with Him. *Yahweh* is a personal God who creates persons by His personal, close involvement.⁴³ These two names are an inner indicator for the different aspects of God’s involvement with humans.

This term *echad* does not speak about the singularness or solicitude of God! He is one but not single or isolated. Here is the reference of plurality within the oneness of God. This term is better translated as “unity.” This can be observed from other texts which employ this word *echad*. For example, in marriage there is a close unity of two individuals (husband and wife): “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one [*echad*] flesh” (Gen 2:24). This

⁴³ For a detailed description of the theological usage of these two names of God, see Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis: Eight Lectures* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983), 15–41.

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oneness is not about numbers but closeness of relationship, expressing a close unity! Other texts to consider are Gen 11:1, 6; 34:16; Exod 24:3; Num 13:23; Ezra 2:64; Jer 32:38–39; Ezek 11:19; 37:17, 19, 22 which speak about different people or nations becoming one, that is, united (compare with Ps 133:1).

On the other hand, the term *yachid* (as masc., 9 times, and fem., 3 times; “only,” “only one,” “lonely,” “solitary,” “single,” “precious life”) occurs all together twelve times in the Old Testament (Gen 22:2, 12, 16; Judg 11:34; Pss 22:20; 25:16; 35:17; 68:6; Prov 4:3; Jer 6:26; Amos 8:10; and Zech 12:10) and expresses the idea of one in the sense of singleness, solicitude, and exclusivity.

Our God is not *yachid*, “one,” in the sense of a solitary or lonely Being. There is a fellowship of love and unselfishness within the Godhead, a unity within a community of persons.

Someone Coming from God Is God

God promised that a special child would be born of a virgin (i.e., by supernatural intervention), and this child would be God. It meant that someone was coming from God and even though He was called “son,” He was “God.” “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isa 7:14; compare with Matt 1:18–23). “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6).

The Angel of the Lord Passages

The Old Testament presents striking narratives of a being who is called the “Angel of the Lord” or sometimes simply the “Angel,” but acts and speaks like God and is identified as God. These manifestations provide a profound riddle, because the “Angel of the Lord” is both referred to as God and also distinguished from God who resides in heaven. There are a good number of biblical passages with this theme of the “Angel of the Lord”: Gen 16:7–14; 21:17; 22:11–18; 31:3–13; 48:15–16; Exod 3:2–7; 14:19; 23:20–23; Num 22:22–35; Judg 2:1–5; 6:11–24; 13:3–23; 1 Kgs 19:5–7; 2 Kgs 1:3–4; 1 Chr 21: 13–30; Zech 3:1–2. Consider the following:

1. The phrase *mal’ach YHWH* (the “Angel” or “Messenger of the Lord”) is used for the first time in the story about Hagar and Ishmael (Gen

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16:7–14). Hagar recognizes that this Angel of the Lord is God, the Living One, who speaks to her (v. 13). The Angel of the Lord promises Hagar: “I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count” (v. 10; reaffirmed in 17:20 and fulfilled in 25:13–16) which is similar to the statement God made to Abraham (Gen 13:16; 22:17). In this context for the first time, the Lord gives a name to a child—Ishmael (v. 11).

2. In Genesis 22 the Angel of the Lord speaks to Abraham and is identified as the Lord (compare vv. 12b and 16b). He speaks twice (vv. 11–12; 15–18), and God (*Elohim*) is mentioned five times (vv. 1, 3, 8, 9, 12). It is *Yahweh* who saves Abraham from sacrificing his son by providing the ram “as a burnt offering instead of his son” (v. 13), and blesses him. Three times the key phrase “the Lord will provide” occurs: in v. 8 it is *Elohim* who “will provide a lamb,” in v. 14 it is mentioned twice that it is *Yahweh* who will provide it.

3. The Angel of God plainly declares to Jacob that He is God: “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me” (Gen 31:13a). Twenty years earlier in Bethel the Lord appeared to Jacob in a dream assuring him that he was not alone and blessed him, and Jacob made a vow to be faithful to Him (Gen 28:10–22).

4. When Jacob blessed Joseph, he equated the Angel with the Lord: “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys” (Gen 48:15–16a).

5. “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up” (Exod 3:2). When Moses came closer to investigate what was going on, the Lord God commanded him “from within the bush” to take off his sandals, because he was in His very presence (3:5). “At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God” (3:6b). The Lord then commissioned Moses to his special mission to lead His people from Egypt (Exod 3:7–4:17), and God miraculously liberated them (Exod 5–15; see also Exod 23:20–23; Acts 7:35–36).

6. In the period of the judges, there are several episodes which deal with the Angel of the Lord. These narratives in chaps. 2, 6, and 13 demonstrate that the Angel of the Lord was the Lord of the Exodus: “The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, ‘I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers’” (Judg 2:1). Similarly in the story of Judges 6–7 about

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Gideon's splendid victory over the Midianites, the Angel of the Lord and the Lord are terms describing the same reality (see 6:11, 14, 16, 20–25). The same is true in Judges 13 in the narrative about the birth of Samson (see especially vv. 3, 6, 13, 19–23) when Manoah, after encountering the Angel of the Lord who also appears in the story in the form of a man, exclaimed: "We have seen God" (13:22).

7. The Angel of the Lord passage in Zechariah 3 reveals the extraordinary position of that being: He rebukes Satan, commands others to obey him, removes iniquity, orders that new garments be put on Joshua, forgives sins, and commissions Joshua, the high priest (3:1–2, 4–6). These actions are prerogatives of God, yet this Angel is distinct from God Himself. This points to the plurality within God, to two divine distinct persons.

Thus, on the basis of the close reading of the above biblical texts in their immediate context and larger theological framework, one can conclude that this "Angel of the Lord" is a divine being, the pre-incarnate Christ appearing as God's Messenger.⁴⁴ It is significant that Zech 12:8 equates God and the Angel of the Lord. These appearances in the form of the Angel of the Lord were preparatory to Jesus' incarnation, they were Christophanies. The Apostle Paul stresses that it was Christ who led Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land, thus he identifies who is the Angel of the Lord: "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:3–4).

Theophanies

A theophany is God's temporal appearing in bodily form long before Jesus's incarnation. This spacial manifestation is mentioned several times

⁴⁴ How can we identify the Angel of the Lord as God? (1) He speaks in the first person singular with "I" formulas as if he himself were God when bringing a message (Gen 16:10; 22:16–17; 31:13; Exod 3:6; Judg 6:14). (2) The biblical text uses in parallel terms the "angel of the Lord" and the "Lord" or "God," and thus identifies them as one Being (Gen 22:11, 15; 31:3, 11, 13; Exod 3:2, 4, 7; Judg 2:1–2; 6:11, 14, 22; 13:3, 13, 22; Zech 3:1–2). (3) He describes himself as holy (Exod 3:2, 5). (4) He carries out God's judgment (2 Sam 24:16; 2 Kgs 19:35). (5) God's Name is in Him (Exod 23:20–23). (6) He takes on a human appearance as in cases of theophany, God's pre-incarnate appearances (Josh 5:13–15; Judg 13:6, 10, 21).

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in the Hebrew Scriptures where God comes down and presents Himself in the form of a man in whom we recognize the pre-incarnate Christ, because in the context this Man is identified as God. These theophanies are actually Christophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures.

1. According to Genesis 18, three men visited Abraham (18:1–2), and he showed them his generous hospitality. Later in the story, two of them departed to Sodom (18:16, 22), and they are identified as angels or messengers (19:1, 15) but also as men (19:5, 10, 12). The Man who stayed and communicated with Abraham is identified as the Lord (18:10, 14, 17, 20, 22, 33) and the Judge of all the earth (18:25). Abraham is further dialoguing with God and asking for His mercy over Sodom to spare their lives if only ten righteous can be found there (18:23–32). The Lord graciously granted his prayer (18:32).

2. According to Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with a Man (v. 14) who is later identified as God (v. 30). Jacob realized that he was encountering a heavenly divine being, because he asks this Man to bless him. God then changes his name and blesses him (vv. 28–29). Jacob explains why he named that place “Peniel” (“The Face of God”): “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (v. 30; see also Hos 12:3–5).

3. Josh 5:13–15 tells the story about Joshua meeting a Man who is the “commander of the army of the Lord.” Joshua worshiped him and was not reproached for it. This Man commanded Joshua to do exactly the same thing that God had asked Moses to do according to Exod 3:2–6: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” Joshua is thus a new Moses and is commissioned to conquer the Promised Land.

4. Dan 10:5 describes Daniel’s vision in which he saw a “Man in linen.” The comparison of Dan 10:5–6 with Josh 5:13–15, Ezek 1:26–28, Dan 8:11; 12:6–7, and Rev 1:13–17 leads to the conclusion that this Man in linen is a divine being, the divine Warrior-Priest, the pre-incarnate Christ.⁴⁵

The Son of God

The expression “Son of God” in Dan 3:25 is pointing to a supernatural being: “‘Look!’ he answered, ‘I see four men loose, walking in the midst

⁴⁵ See Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 159–160.

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of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God” (NKJV). King Nebuchadnezzar saw the pre-incarnate Christ who was walking with the three Hebrew friends in the fiery furnace and protecting them. As a pagan ruler, he most probably said: “... but the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods [or a divine son, or the son of gods; *bar elahim* in Aramaic],” that is, a divine being. This was from Nebuchadnezzar’s religious perspective. However, from our Christian perspective, we recognize that person as Christ, the true Son of God. He literally fulfilled God’s promise to be with His people in order to deliver them: “When you will walk through the fire, you shall not be burnt, nor shall the flame scorch you” (Isa 43:1). We need to remember that Daniel and his three friends were in contact with Nebuchadnezzar before that event, and they could have given him good insights into their faith (see Dan 1–2). Daniel 3 also described the same being as the angel/messenger (v. 28).⁴⁶

The Servant of the Lord

In the book of Isaiah, there are at least four songs of the Servant of the Lord, ‘*ebed YHWH*’ (Isa 41:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), so-called songs of the Suffering Servant which culminate with the fifth song about the anointing of the Messiah (Isa 61:1–3). All these songs point to the Messiah Jesus Christ (see especially Acts 8:30–39). In the inaugurating sermon of His public ministry, Jesus Christ read the first verses from Isaiah 61 and then boldly proclaimed that this prophetic statement had just been fulfilled in front of their eyes (Luke 4:16–21).

The phrase “the Servant of the Lord” describing the mission of Jesus is gradually opening the magnificent, salvific, and substitutionary role of this Servant on our behalf by explaining what He did and accomplished for us (see especially Isaiah 53).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For a detailed discussion on the title “Son of God” in the context of Dan 3:25, see unpublished study of Denroy Black, “A Study of the Term *bar elahin* in the Context of Daniel 3:24-28, the Old Testament, and Ancient Near Eastern Literature” (Andrews University, 2010).

⁴⁷ For further study, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 155–185; and Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham, eds., *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of the Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 105–165.

Davidic King

The Messianic personage portrayed as a royal heir to the throne of David, so-called Davidic King, is vividly depicted in Isa 11:1–16, Ezek 34:23–24; and 37:24–26.⁴⁸ His primary mission would be to establish justice as a just king. This King would be their true Shepherd.

The Davidic King, the Messiah, will establish an eternal kingdom of peace and justice. He proceeds from the kingdom of grace to the kingdom of glory. It is interesting to note that in the time of Jesus the figure of the Davidic king was the most popular notion about the Messiah: they expected a political ruler who would overthrow the Romans and expel them from their land. This false expectation of a political Messiah led leaders to reject Jesus Christ when he came as the Suffering Servant.

The Word of God

In the Hebrew Bible the Word of God is creative, active, and powerfully accomplishes the unexpected. It is explicitly stated that God was creating by His Word: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6). The Old Testament speaks of the “Spirit of God” and the “Word of the Lord” in connection with the Creation of life (Gen 1:1–3). “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps 33:6). God’s creative Word always accomplishes its purpose: “So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11; see also Jer 23:29).

Jesus Christ is presented in John 1:1–3, 14 as the Word of God in two capacities—as the Creator and as the Word incarnate: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” According to 1 Sam 15:26, Saul by refusing to obey the Word of God actually refused to obey God.

Wisdom of God

Wisdom is described in Proverbs as having God’s prerogatives and in chap. 8 is a hypostasis of divine Wisdom with an independent existence.

⁴⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 7–12.

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Wisdom “was appointed from eternity” (v. 23) for a specific work as mediator and communicator between the godhead and creation; existed before “the world began” (v. 23), “before the mountains were settled in place” (v. 25); was there when the Lord “set the heavens in place” (v. 27); and was the master craftsman, that is, the Co-Creator with the Lord always beside and with Him rejoicing together in creative work (vv. 30–31). Wisdom seems to enjoy the divine status and personifies Jesus Christ.⁴⁹

God’s Presence

God’s Presence (lit. “the Face of God”) is personified in several biblical passages. God assured Moses that His Presence (*panay*) would go with him and God’s people. Then Moses responded: “If your Presence [*paneycha*] does not go with us, do not send us up from here” (Exod 33:14–15). Knight correctly explains: “Here God’s face is clearly an alter ego of God, equated with the Name, and wholly equivalent to the Angel of the Covenant of Exod 23.20, in whom anyway the Name of God is to be found (23.21).”⁵⁰ In Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the people how the Lord led them and the exodus occurred: “Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence [*bepanayw*] and his great strength” (4:37).

The strongest text in this regard is Isa 63:9: “In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence [unique expression appearing only here in the Old Testament; *mal’ach panayw*, lit. “the angel of His face”] saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” The face of God is His Presence. “The Messenger of God’s Presence” was the Savior of Israel as was the Lord Himself (Isa 63:8).

Michael

The Bible mentions Michael (his name means “Who is like God?”) in five passages:

1. In Dan 10:13, Michael is presented as one of the chief princes.

⁴⁹ For details, see Edgar, 85–102; Grudem, 229–230; and especially Richard M. Davidson, “Proverb 8 and the Place of Christ in the Trinity,” *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 33–54.

⁵⁰ G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Olover and Boyd, 1953), 29.

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2. In Dan 10:21, Michael is the only one who is able to help Gabriel in his battle over the minds of the Persian leaders. He is also portrayed as the Prince of God's people.

3. Dan 12:1 depicts Michael as the One who stands for His people, i.e., he is their intercessor, protector, and help in the time of trouble. He is pictured as the great Prince.

4. According to Jude 1:9, Michael has authority to resurrect Moses and is characterized as an archangel.

5. In Rev 12:7, Michael is the leader of the heavenly army and defeats Satan and his fallen angels. His victory is described in a colorful manner.

When the above texts are connected with 1 Thess 4:16–18 and John 5:26–29, it becomes evident that Michael's voice is the voice of the archangel, and this is the voice of Jesus at the resurrection day. On the basis of his role, authority, position, and mission one may conclude that Michael is Christ.

Allusions to the Plurality of Persons within the Godhead

There are Old Testament texts which attest to the plurality of persons in God Himself (multi-personal God). Internal indicators point to this reality. Two clusters of such Old Testament passages can be gathered: the first list refers to two divine persons, and the second one points to three divine persons.

Texts which Allude to Two Divine Persons

1. Gen 19:24

“Then the LORD [pre-incarnate Jesus who talked to Abraham] rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens [the Heavenly Father].” It is possible (hints lie in the narrative itself) to interpret this verse as an allusion to two different divine persons called *YHWH*, the LORD—one being in heaven, and the second one dialoguing with Abraham. This conclusion can be reached on two premises: (1) Genesis 18–19 is seen as a literary unit dealing with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and (2) The Lord who visited Abraham together with two other angels (Gen 18:1–2, 10, 13, 16–23, 33; 19:1, 18–19) and spoke with Abraham in chap. 18 is still down on earth in chap. 19. In this way the last part of our text under investigation makes sense. God who is “down” sends fire from heaven, literally “from the Lord out of heaven.” Thus, God's judgment upon the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah comes as

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a result of close cooperation between the Lord on earth and the Lord in heaven.

2. *Exod 23:23*

Projecting future events related to the exodus and the conquering of the Promised Land, God proclaims: “My angel [the angel of the Lord] will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I [the Lord] will wipe them out.”

3. *Ps 45:6–7*

“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.” According to Heb 1:8–9 the text is applied to Jesus Christ as the King who was anointed by the Heavenly Father for a specific mission.

4. *Ps 110:1*

David is speaking prophetically: “The LORD [*Yahweh*, the Heavenly Father] says to my [David’s] Lord [*Adonay*, Jesus Christ]: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” This royal Psalm is a direct Messianic poem taken as such by the early church, and is most frequently quoted in the New Testament in application to Jesus Christ (see Matt 22:43–45; Mark 12:36–37; Luke 20:42–44; Acts 2:34–36; 7:55–56; Rom 8:34; Heb 1:13; 5:6–10; 7:11–28; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2) who is presented as the King, Priest, and Judge.

5. *Prov 8:30–31*

The personified/hypostatized Wisdom is rejoicing in creating activities with the Lord as Co-Creators: “Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.”

6. *Prov 30:4*

After God is described as the Creator, the text then mentions a surprising, puzzling, and unexplainable question about His Son: “Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands? Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and the name of his son? Tell me if you know!”

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7. *Dan 7:13–14*

The Prophet Daniel in his vision of the heavenly pre-advent judgment mentions two separate heavenly divine beings—the “Ancient of Days” and the “Son of Man.” The Ancient of Days, the Heavenly Father, presides over the judgment, but the prominence of the Son of Man is stressed by associating Him with the clouds as One “coming with the clouds of heaven”; clouds being a symbol used in conjunction with the appearance of deity;⁵¹ giving Him full authority and worshiping Him. Thus, two divine beings are presented in Daniel chap. 7: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” The most beloved title Jesus used for Himself and identified with was the Messianic title “Son of Man” taken from Daniel 7.

8. *Hos 1:7*

The Lord, the Heavenly Father, promises to save His people by the Lord, Savior Jesus Christ who is their God: “Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God.”

9. *Zech 3:2*

Yahweh is referring to Yahweh: “And the LORD [Jesus Christ] said unto Satan, ‘The LORD [the Heavenly Father] rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?’” The Lord Jesus Christ who speaks with Satan points to the Lord, the heavenly Father who will rebuke Satan, because he accuses Joshua, the high priest for his sins. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus Christ forgives, cleanses, and provides clean garments for Joshua.

10. *Zech 10:12*

“I will strengthen them in the LORD and in his name they will walk,” declares the LORD.” It might be that the Lord speaks about Himself strengthening His people in order to walk in His name. However, God’s

⁵¹ Richard M. Davidson, “Cloud, Cloud of the Lord,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 102–103.

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statement can point to the future and thus refer to another Lord, namely, the Messiah—Jesus Christ.

11. Mal 3:1

“See, I will send my messenger [John the Baptist], who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant [the Messiah, Jesus Christ], whom you desire, will come,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

Texts which Hint at Three Divine Persons

1. Gen 1:1–3

In light of John 1:1–3 where Gen 1:1–3 is alluded to, one can discover hints for the Trinity in this passage. God (*Elohim*), the Spirit of God (*ruach Elohim*), and the Word of God (*vayomer Elohim*; “and God said”—this significant phrase occurs ten times in the first Creation account, thus pointing to God’s Word) appear together in the Genesis text. In the Prologue to the Gospel according to John, Jesus Christ is directly named as the Word and the Creator. In this way all three Persons of the Godhead are alluded to in the Genesis Creation account.

2. Isa 11:1–2

This Messianic prophecy announces the coming of the Shoot from the stem of Jesse having in view the Davidic King Jesus Christ, then it mentions also the Spirit and the Lord. “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”

3. Isa 42:1

This and the following text (Isa 48:16) speak about the Servant of the Lord (*ebed Yahweh*). On the basis of his role and mission as well as intertextuality, one can safely conclude that this figure is the Messiah. His task is enormous which can be accomplish only by God, namely, He was appointed to be the Savior for the whole world!⁵² “Here is my servant

⁵² Isa 49:6 records what the Lord says about the mission of His Servant: “It is a too small [light] thing for you to be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved [remnant] of Israel. I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles [nations] to be [not only to ‘proclaim’ or ‘announce’ but ‘be’!] my salvation to the ends of the earth” (translation mine). Consider also His salvific atoning death for humanity according to Isaiah

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[Jesus Christ], whom I [the Lord, the Heavenly Father] uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit [the Holy Spirit] on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”

4. Isa 48:16

One of the strongest and most explicit texts about the Trinity in the Hebrew Bible is “Come near me and listen to this: ‘From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there.’ And now the Sovereign LORD [the Heavenly Father] has sent me [the Servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ], with his Spirit [the Holy Spirit].”

5. Isa 61:1–2

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me [the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord] to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.” Jesus Christ used this text in His first sermon when He began His public ministry and stated that this prediction was now fulfilled (see Luke 4:16–21).

6. Isa 63:8–10

This passage brings all three Persons of the Trinity together. The text asserts the personality of the Holy Spirit who is “vexed” or “grieved” by disobedience (see also Ps 106:33; Eph 4:30). This Hebrew verb is always used in conjunction with persons, never with power or inanimate things. “He [the Lord] said, ‘Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me’; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence [Jesus Christ] saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.”

7. Hag 2:4b–7

The Prophet Haggai in 520 BC, while encouraging God’s people after their return from Babylonian exile to rebuild the new Temple, predicted that the Desire of all nations, the Messiah would visit this sanctuary. The Lord Almighty, His Spirit, and the Desired of all nations are projected to be together in this Second Temple in Jerusalem. This will be a cosmic

53. No wonder that the early church recognized that this role of the Suffering Servant was fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:30–35).

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event: “‘For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’ This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations [Jesus Christ] will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

Conclusion

This fresh investigation of the Old Testament Trinitarian thinking leads to a stunning conclusion. Even though the divine expressions of “We” do not testify directly about the Trinity, they hint to a unity and complexity within the being of God. This plurality within deity is well attested and developed in the New Testament (see especially Matt 28:19; John 1:3; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2). The biblical monotheistic belief does not think about God in terms of His solitude or His singleness but presents Him as “We,” or in fellowship within the Godhead. God created humanity in His image; He made humans in fellowship with each other, particularly husband and wife in a close intimate relationship, because He is fellowship, He is in relationship within Himself. This divine plural of fellowship suggests plurality of persons and points to the unity in His nature. This intra-divine fellowship of one God within plurality is a unique characteristic of our God. God is in communication within Himself and with His creation. We can built a personal relationship with this God of relationships and interactions.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not yet fully developed in the Old Testament, but one can find impressive expressions pointing to Trinitarian thinking. We discovered that the Old Testament uses a whole plethora of terms for describing the second person of the Godhead. The biblical designation of God as “We” means believing in a personal, close, unselfish God of love, a God of relationships. The New Testament Trinitarian orientation is already rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Old Testament anticipates what is later plainly exposed in the New Testament teaching on this subject.⁵³ The Old Testament presents implicitly, gradually, and progressively evidences for the existence of the Trinity.

⁵³ So the old dictum: “The New is hidden in the Old, and the Old [Testament] is revealed in the New [Testament]” has proven to be confirmed.

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The biblical paradox affirms that God simultaneously exists in singular and plural. It leads to the conclusion that He is one but in different persons. God is not single nor married; He is in fellowship within Himself; He is community.⁵⁴ The community of God is the source and basis of all other communities within His creation. The community of God's "We" leads to the "we" of humanity and to the togetherness of all creation, even in the cosmic sense. God's unity ties all of God's creation together to form a rich diversity.

The expression "let us" is not a statement which speaks directly about the Trinity, but it does not contradict the Trinitarian teaching. It is not a declaration about numbers (numerals), but about uniqueness, the quality of our God. Within the background of the Hebrew monotheism and divine plural speeches, it becomes clear that these expressions leave room for the doctrine of the Trinity, because *echad* not only affirms the oneness and uniqueness of God, but also points to the unity within a plurality of fellowship.

It is true that the term "Trinity" is not a biblical term, but this term very well expresses in one catch word the important aspect of the biblical teaching about the Godhead. There are many other theological words which do not appear in the Bible, and we rightly use them, like incarnation, theophany, theocracy, eschatology, inspiration, etc., because these terms well capture the biblical meaning of the point. The "plural of fellowship" in the light of its context leads to the recognition of different persons (not necessarily three) within the Godhead in interaction. However, this plural is an indirect witness about the "heavenly trio."⁵⁵

The God *Yahweh* is plurality and always in relationship, first of all in relationship within the Godhead and in interaction with His creation. The love relationship within the Godhead is the basis for all other interactions and relationships. Our God longs for meaningful relationships with His creatures, because of His love He created them in multiple relationships to His image after His pattern (Gen 1:26–27). As God is not a solitary person

⁵⁴ M. J. Lagrange aptly states, "If he uses the plural, this supposes that there is in him a fullness of being so that he can deliberate with himself" ("Hexameron," *Revue Biblique* 5 [1896]: 387).

⁵⁵ The expression was used by Ellen G. White: "There are three living persons of the heavenly trio" (Special Testimonies, Series B, no. 7, 1905:63, in *Evangelism*, [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946], 615).

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so humans are not created for isolation but for social life in marriage and community.

We need to be careful, extremely careful, in our attempts to explain God so as not to create Him in our image! Humans were created in His image, and not vice versa. In view of the uniqueness and otherness of our God, it becomes clear that we cannot grasp the full picture of our Lord, as He is above our comprehension of His nature. We are limited in our understanding and capacities. We can only stand in awe before Him and admire Him. We can only ask for a wonder, for a glimpse to see Him and to worship Him, and to serve our awesome God who surpasses our concepts of understanding and logic (Exod 33:18, 19; 34:6, 7). He is always above all things and our expressions to grasp the reality of life. Instead of trying to explain the details regarding Him, let us relate to Him personally who is One and plurality of fellowship at the same time. Our goal should be to gratefully and faithfully follow God and interact with others whom He has put beside us as part of His marvelous creation.

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