

POWER
in the NAME

— Introduction to Section 1 —

Unity and Plurality: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

One particular aspect of God that is absolutely unique to the Bible’s revelation of God—it is not found in any other book or religion—is the combination of unity and plurality within God’s nature. This unique aspect is revealed in His name , a name we will study in more detail in chapter 1. Significantly, this name occurs in the first verse of the Bible. In Genesis 1:1, we find these words:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

In the original Hebrew, there is a kind of clash of grammar in this verse. The noun “God”, *Elohim*, is plural, yet the verb that follows, “created”, is singular. So, we have a plural noun followed by a singular verb. This paradox contains the seeds of truth that are unfolded throughout the rest of Scripture.

There is a somewhat similar paradox in the famous verse in Deuteronomy that the Jewish people call the *Shema*, which is more or less a doctrinal statement of the faith of Israel:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!
(Deuteronomy 6:4)

Interestingly, it takes only four words to say “*The Lord is our God, the Lord is one*” in Hebrew. Still more interesting, of those four words, three are plural in form. The only word

that is singular is the word for “one.” So, again, we find this paradox of unity and plurality combined in the revelation of God.

Two Words for “One”

One way to understand unity and plurality is to realize that there are two different Hebrew words for “one”. One word is *yachid* and the other is *echad*.

Yachid: Alone and Unique

The word *yachid* means “that which is absolutely alone and unique.” For instance, in Genesis 22:2, the Lord said to Abraham, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love...” This verse uses the word —only, *yachid*, because Abraham and Sarah had only one son born of their own bodies.

Another example is in Psalm 25:16, where the psalmist wrote, “I am lonely and afflicted”. The word “lonely” is *yachid*, meaning “entirely on my own”.

Echad: A Union of a Number of Elements

On the other hand, the other word for —one, *echad*, denotes a union of a number of elements. This meaning is very clear in many passages of the Old Testament. For instance, in Genesis 2, Scripture outlines the nature of marriage and the union of Adam and Eve:

For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

The word “one”, *echad*, expresses that the two are being united to become one. So, *echad* describes or denotes the union of more than one to form a unity.

In Numbers 13, the Scripture says this of the Israelite spies who went in to see the Promised Land:

Then they came to the valley of Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes. (Numbers 13:23)

The word “single” in Hebrew is *echad*. It was one cluster, but it was made up of many grapes.

We find this word used again in a remarkable statement in the book of Judges, when there was civil war among the tribes of Israel:

Thus all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united as one man. (Judges 20:11)

The word “one” here is *echad*. There were many thousands of men; nevertheless, they formed a unity.

In one of the prophet Ezekiel’s visions, the Lord told him to take two sticks and to name them for the two leading tribes of Israel.

And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, “For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions”; then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.” Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. (Ezekiel 37:16–17)

Again, the word “one” is *echad*, yet we see specifically that there were originally two sticks. In being united, they formed a unity, which is described by the word “one.”

Unity That Is a Union

I believe these examples help us to understand the kind of unity that is represented by the word *Elohim*. It is a unity that is a union—a perfect union—but contains more than oneness: plurality.

Let us review two passages in the Bible where this understanding is clear. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve had sinned and forfeited their right to live in the garden of Eden, we read,

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:22)

In reading the whole of Genesis 3, it is clear that having the knowledge of good and evil was a distinctive characteristic of God. In *the New American Standard Bible*, the word "Us" in verse 22 is capitalized. In other words, it applies to God. There is both unity and plurality within the very nature of God.

Another interesting example is in Isaiah's description of his vision of the Lord:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

God was speaking, and He used both the singular ("I") and the plural ("Us"). He said, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"*

The Three in One

All through the Bible, there is this fascinating paradox: God is one; yet, within the oneness of God, there is more than one. The full truth of this paradox of the unity and the plurality of God is brought to light and into open revelation in the New Testament.

Let us look at the most distinctive of many such passages, the final commission of Jesus to His disciples as recorded at the end of Matthew’s gospel:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

Actually, the Greek says, “Baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” We are to be baptized into the name of God. That act signifies taking up our places in God, losing our personal lives in God.

The fullness of God consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we see this, we understand why, right from the beginning of the Bible, in the very first verse of the Old Testament, the word for God is plural in form. The truth brought out in the New Testament is not new—it is merely an unfolding and a fulfillment of what was already present, by implication, in the Old Testament.

Let’s look at two additional examples from the Old Testament. In Proverbs 30:4, the writer said,

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! (Proverbs 30:4 NIV)

Anyone who is familiar with the revelation of Scripture will understand that the “*who*” being referred to here is God Himself. No one but God has done those things. Yet it says, “*What is his name, and the name of his son?*” This verse is part of the Old Testament’s revelation of the plurality of God—in this instance, revealing the truth of, and the relationship between, God the Father and God the Son.

Then, in Isaiah 48:12–13, we read,

Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last. Surely My hand founded the earth, and My right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand together.

Again, the whole revelation of Scripture would agree that the person who says these words is no less than God Himself—the first and the last, the Creator and the sustainer of heaven and earth. Then, He says,

Come near to Me, listen to this: from the first I have not spoken in secret, from the time it took place, I was there. And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit.
(Isaiah 48:16)

The King James Version says, “*The Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me.*” Here, a divine Person is speaking, and yet He says that God, and His Spirit, “*has sent Me.*” Whichever way you look at it, the fulfillment is found in the New Testament: God the Father sent Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Both proceeded from God. And all three are God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So, we see that in *Elohim*, there is a perfect unity that is more than one. God is essentially one, and essentially more than one. That is the mystery of the nature of God—this unique blending of unity and plurality.

Elohim

The First Great Hebrew Name of God

The primary name for God in Old Testament Hebrew is *Elohim*, the name we looked at in the introduction in relation to the unity and plurality of God. Let's return to Genesis 1:1, where we find these words:

In the beginning God [Elohim] created the heavens and the earth.

Thereafter, the same name, *Elohim*, occurs about 2,500 times in the Old Testament. The Bible is a God-centered book for God-hungry humanity. Somewhere deep inside every human being, there is a hunger to know the truth about God. The Bible is the only book that can truly satisfy this hunger. That is the reason for its continuing appeal to the human race. It remains the unchallenged best seller among all books ever written.

The True God

We have seen that one very important fact about the word *Elohim* is that it is plural in form. The ending *im* is the normal plural ending in Hebrew. Just as we put an "s" at the end of many singular nouns in English to make them plural, so in Hebrew they put *im* on the end of masculine nouns to make them plural.

Interestingly, there is a singular form of that word, *Eloah*,

which occurs more than fifty times in the Bible, mainly in the book of Job. The book of Job is quite possibly the oldest book in the Bible, so this indicates that *Eloah* is an older form of the word that gradually went out of use.

Another fascinating fact about Elohim is that even though it is plural in form, it is usually followed by a singular verb. In the Hebrew language, as in many other languages, verbs have both singular and plural forms. As we noted earlier, in Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning God created...*,” the noun “*God*” is plural, while the verb “*created*” is in the singular form.

Though the verb that follows *Elohim* is normally singular in the Bible, there are some very interesting places where it is followed by a plural verb. One of the most interesting is in Genesis 20:13, where Abraham said, “*God [Elohim] caused me to wander from my father’s house.*” The verb phrase used there, “*caused me to wander,*” is plural. There is no question that Abraham was talking about the true God who appeared to him and prompted him to leave.

Significantly, when Abraham made this statement, he was talking to a Gentile king. It occurs to me that perhaps he may have adapted his language a little bit to correspond to the mind-set of the king. As we have seen, there is an interesting balance between the singular and the plural that starts right away as soon as the name of God is mentioned in the Bible.

Eternal Power and Divine Nature

Let’s talk a little more about the form *Elohim*. Both *Eloah* and *Elohim* (singular and plural forms) are derived from an earlier word, *El*, meaning “*power.*” It is used, for instance, with that meaning in Genesis 31. Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, have had a disagreement, and Laban says to Jacob, “*It is in my power to do you harm*” (verse 29). This statement may be translated more literally, “*It is in the power of my hand to do you harm.*” The word “*power*” is *el*, the same word that is used for God.

The basic connotation or association of those three words—*El*, *Eloah*, *Elohim*—stems from the one root form *el*.