

Chapter 4 – When the Eternal Uses the Plural Form

In the previous chapters, we have seen that the words “Echad”, “Elohim”, and “Adonai” do not constitute proof that the Eternal is more than one, rather the opposite.

There are a few texts in the Scriptures where the Eternal uses the plural form when he speaks. We are going to take a closer look at those texts.

In Genesis 1:26, 3:22, and 11:6-7 it is written,

*God said, ‘Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ (WEB)¹⁴*

*The LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of **us**, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he put forth his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.’ (WEB)*

*The LORD said, ‘...Come, let **us** go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ (WEB)*

Now, if the Eternal is one, why does he say, “let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness”, “man has become like one of *us*”, and “let *us* go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech”? If he was by himself, would he not have said, “I shall make man in my image, after my likeness”, and “man has become like me”, and “I shall go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech”?

How is this to be understood?

Throughout the centuries, many diverse theories have been presented trying to explain this phenomenon. While most Christian interpreters consider these texts to be expressions of the triune Godhead, the majority of the Jewish interpreters have claimed that the Eternal is speaking to his divine council of angelic beings that surround his throne. After all, he does present himself in the Scriptures as YHWH Tzevaot, the Eternal of hosts. Furthermore, there are several other passages speaking of heavenly beings surrounding his throne.

In 1 Kings 22:19, it is written,

And he said, Give ear now to the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD seated on his seat of power, with all the army of heaven in their places round him at his right hand and at his left. (BBE)

¹⁴ World English Bible, 1997 revision of the American Standard Version from 1901.

In Psalm 89:6-7, it is written,

For who is there in the heavens in comparison with the Lord? who is like the Lord among the sons of the gods? God is greatly to be feared among the saints, and to be honoured over all those who are about him. (BBE)

In Daniel 7:10, it is written,

A stream of fire was flowing and coming out from before him: a thousand thousands were his servants, and ten thousand times ten thousand were in their places before him: the judge was seated and the books were open. (BBE)

In Revelation 4:4, it is written,

And round about the high seat were four and twenty seats: and on them I saw four and twenty rulers seated, clothed in white robes; and on their heads crowns of gold. (BBE)

In the Babylonian Talmud¹⁵ we read,

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: When the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create man, He [first] created a company of ministering angels and said to them: Is it your desire that we make a man in our image? (The Soncino Talmud, Davka Corporation/Judaica Press)

However, because of the fact that up until this point in verse 26, angels have not yet been mentioned, there are other arguments claiming that the Eternal cannot be speaking to anyone who was not yet introduced in the scenario. On account of this, we can find interpretations in Midrash literature¹⁶ that are expressed like this,

And God said, 'Let us make man' " (Gen 1:26). And with whom did he take counsel? R. Joshua b. Levi said, "With the **works of heaven and earth** he took counsel. . . ." R. Ammi said, "He took counsel with **his own heart**."

The modern Jewish exegetist, Umberto Cassuto¹⁷, says in his commentary on Genesis,

The view that God took counsel with the ministering angels has been regarded by some commentators, both medieval and modern, as the actual meaning of the verse. But against this interpretation it can be contended: (1) that it conflicts with the central thought of the section that God *alone* created the entire world; (2) that the expression *Let us make* is not one of consultation; (3) that if the intention was to tell us that God took counsel, the Bible would have explicitly stated whom He consulted, as we are told in the other passages that are usually cited in support of this theory (1 Kings xxii 19; Isa. vi 2-8;

¹⁵ Was compiled over a period of 100 years and was finished circa year 500 CE.

¹⁶ Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 8, 3, 1. Midrash literature was compiled in different places in Israel, Babylonia, and Italy between the years 700 and 1300 CE, even though much of the material originates from a much earlier date.

¹⁷ *A Commentary of the Book of Genesis* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972).

Job i-ii). . . .

The best explanation, although rejected by the majority of contemporary commentators, is that we have here the plural of exhortation. When a person exhorts himself to do a given task he uses the plural: “Let us go!” “Let us rise up!” “Let us sit!” and the like. Thus we find in ii Sam. xxiv 14: Let us fall [nippela] into the hand of the Lord . . . but into the hand of man let me not fall [eppolah].”

Rabbi Moshé ben Dahán, of the Israelite congregation in Madrid, presents a more kabalistic interpretation in one of his lectures where he claims that the first thing the Eternal created was man’s soul and therefore he was speaking with the human soul in Genesis 1:26. Thus together the Eternal and the human soul would create man.

Some claim that the Eternal spoke to the snake in Genesis 3:22, when he says, “*Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good (like the Eternal) and evil (like satan).*”

In spite of these different interpretations, the vast majority of Jewish commentators say that in each of these cases the Eternal was speaking with his angels.

In one Midrash¹⁸, we read,

“Behold, the man has become like one of us” (Gen 3:22): R. Pappias interpreted the verse as follows: “Behold, the man has become like one of us’ means, like one of the **ministering angels.**” . . . [5, 2] R. Judah bar Simon said, “[‘Like One of us’ means] like the One of the world: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’ (Deut 6:4).” Rabbis say, “[‘Like One of us’ means] like **Gabriel**: ‘And one man in the midst of them clothed in linen’ (Ezek 9:2). . . .”

Targum Eretz Israel¹⁹ translates the three verses like this,

Genesis 1:26: *The Lord said to the **angels** who ministered before Him, who had been created in the second day of the creation of the world, Let us make man in Our image.*

Genesis 3:22: *The Lord God said to the **angels** who ministered before Him, Behold, Adam is sole [yechidai—unicus, unigenitus] on the earth, as I am sole in the heavens above.*

Genesis 11:7: *The Lord said to the **seventy angels** which stand before Him, Come, we will descend . . .*

The traditional Christian interpretation has been that these verses are clearly alluding to a

¹⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 21, 5, 1-2

¹⁹ According to Encyclopaedia Judaica it was not Jonathan ben Uziel (1st century BCE – 100 CE) who translated the Chumash into Aramaic in this literary work, which in the 12th century CE was called Targum Eretz Israel, and later Targum Yerushalmi as well as the Palestinian Targum. It is not calculated to be older than the 9th or 10th century even though it contains material that is much older. This translation provides us with good insight as to how the five books of Moshe were interpreted during the early Middle Ages.

triune God. Recently, however, Christian Bible scholars have presented an understanding that is more in line with traditional Jewish interpretation even though they support the trinity doctrine. Paul Sumner writes about this in one of his articles,²⁰

...among Christian scholars, there has been a marked shift of opinion toward the traditional Jewish interpretation. The reason for this shift has not been due to ecumenical feelings but to a different approach in reading the text of the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament" in Christian terms).

Most biblical scholars now believe the Bible should be interpreted on its own terms, without imposing later theological beliefs or agendas, whether they are Jewish or Christian.

That is, these verses in Genesis (or any other passages in the Hebrew Bible) must be viewed in light of their own contexts and in light of unbiased explication of the Hebrew language. The desire is to understand what Moses or Isaiah or Jeremiah or the Chronicler understood by what they themselves wrote, in their own times.

In other words, if we are to remain true to the Hebrew language and read the Bible text as it is written and in its proper context, where text explains text, it is less of a stretch to conclude that the Eternal is addressing his heavenly council in these texts where he is speaking in the plural form than that He is speaking out of a plurality of personalities.

Paul Sumner gives some examples of this and quotes Christian theologians,

Bruce Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001).

Gen 1:26. us. See also 3:22; 11:7. Various referents have been suggested for the "us." The traditional Christian interpretation, that it represents a plurality within deity, has some textual support and satisfies Christian theology of the Trinity (John 1:3; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). That God is a plurality is supported by the mention of the Spirit of God in 1:2 and the fact that the image itself is a plurality. This interpretation would explain the shifts in the text between the singular and the plural. The primary difficulty with this view is that the other four uses of the plural pronoun with reference to God (3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8) do not seem to refer to the Trinity. [64]

The explanation that better satisfies all such uses of the plural pronoun is that God is addressing the angels or heavenly court (cf. 1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 29:1-3; 89:5-6; Isa. 6:8; 40:1-6; Dan. 10:12-13; Luke 2:8-14). It seems that in the four occurrences of the pronoun "us" for God, God refers to "us" when human beings are impinging on the heavenly realm and he is deciding their fate. [64]

In **Gen 3:22**, God sees the human beings have grasped * the knowledge of good and evil and have become like divine beings. In Genesis 11 the heavenly court comes down to see what the earth-bound are building to attain the heavenly space. In Isa. 6:8, God is clearly addressing the heavenly court, which the prophet in his vision has entered. It is not surprising that God would address the heavenly court, since angels play a prominent role in Scripture (e.g., Gen. passim; Job 38:7; 1 Tim 3:16), and there is much commerce in Genesis between the angelic realm and human beings. [64-65]

Franz Julius Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, Vol.1 (trans. S. Taylor;

²⁰ <http://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/monotheism/gen-plurals.html>

Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888).

Gen 1:26. *Let us make man in our image.* . . . such a plural cannot be shown in Holy Scripture where God is speaking of Himself. Where it seems to be found, we have to admit that God the Father is comprising Himself either with the Son and the Spirit or with the celestial spirits. Scripture itself confirms the latter, for from the beginning to end it testifies that God communicates to the spirits who surround Him what He purposes to do upon earth, 1 Kings xxii. 19-22; Job i; Dan. vii. 10; Luke ii 9 sqq.; Rev iv. sq., with Ps. lxxxix. 8 and Dan. iv. 14. . . [98]

It is in this communicative sense that **na'aseh** ["let us"] is intended. Just as Jahveh comprises Himself with the true Israel, Isa. xli. 21 sq., so does He with the seraphim, Isa. vi. 8, and here, as also iii. 22 and xi. 7 with the heavenly spirits in general. . . . [98]

Elohim no more concedes thereby a share in the creation itself to the Bene Haelohim than He does in sending (Isa. vi. 8); but He does give them an interest therein as to their knowledge and will. The communicative speaker ever remains, in relation to those whom he thus comprises with Himself, the Higher. But He imparts to them and gives them an interest in the matter at hand. It is in accordance with this that we must understand "in our image and in our likeness" as including the angels. According to Scripture, the angels form together with God one family, and man, being made in God's image, is for this very reason made also in the image of angels (**brachu ti par' angelous** according to Ps. vii. 6, LXX [=Ps 8:6 Heb]), though this is not directly stated. [99]

Gen 3:22. *Behold, the man has become as one of us.* The plural is communicative, God comprises Himself, as, i. 26, xi. 7, with the **benei elohim** [sons of God, divine beings] as, Isa. vi. 8, with the seraphim; here indeed there follows immediately, ver. 24. the mention of other such * heavenly beings. [171-72]

Gen 11:7. *Come on, we will go down* . . . Judicial resolve, ver. 7 . . . Jahveh comprising the angels with Himself, as at iii. 22 and i. 26, but here as ministers of His penal justice. [351]

A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (edited by S. D. F. Salmond; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904).

In contrast to man, angels belong to the class of Elohim. . . . It might be an interesting question how the same name *Elohim* came to designate God and this class of beings. Perhaps we should be satisfied with the general explanation, that the name, meaning 'powers,' is applied from the standpoint of men to all that is above man, to the region lying above him. Though the same name is given, the two are never confounded in Scripture. . . . (293, 294)

These Elohim, or sons of Elohim, form the council of Jehovah. They surround Him, and minister to Him. He and they are Elohim. And it is from this point of view that some explain the use of the plural in such passages as "Let us make man" (Gen i.26); "Let us go down and there confound their languages" (Gen xi.7). (295)

Patrick Miller, *Genesis 1-11: Studies in Structure and Theme* (JSOTSup 8; Sheffield, UK: Univ. of Sheffield, 1978).

...the monotheistic character of Israel's faith never precluded the notion of Yahweh having a coterie or surrounded by a court of semi-divine beings whom he addresses, commands, and with whom he holds conversation. [18]

As for **Gen. 1:26-28** . . . the divine decree is given in verse 26: "Let us make *adam* in our

image, according to *our* likeness.” Then verse 28 reports: “So God created *adam* in his image; in the image of *elohim*, he create him.” The point of the passage in this context is that *adam* is being made like *elohim*, i.e., the human like the divine. “Man” is being made *elohim*-like. In other words he is to be created in the image and likeness of the divine ones. The creatures of the earth are in some fashion, therefore, like the inhabitants of heaven. [14]

If, then, the first person plural forms of **Gen. 1:26** do refer to the heavenly court, the theologically significant fact is that the passage establishes a clear connection between the human world and the divine world in the creation of *adam*. Or to put it another way, when the narrative speaks of a close relationship between divine world and human world and suggests that the human partakes of the divine in some fashion or does so potentially, then it refers not just to the deity but to the divine world, the divine beings. . . . [20]

Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11* (Int’l Theol. Comm., F. C. Holmgren and G. A. F Knight, eds.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1988).

“Let *us* make... in our image after (or ‘according to’) *our* likeness”: the divine plural also occurs in Gen. 3:22 ‘the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.’ There is no support in the OT for most of the proposed explanations: the royal ‘we,’ the deliberative ‘we,’ the plural of fullness, or an indication of a plurality of persons in the Godhead. Although it can be claimed that each supplied a good interpretation of 1:26, none of these explanations makes much sense in 3:22, which speaks of ‘one of us.’

The only theory that uses the language of the OT itself is that which claims God is here addressing the heavenly court, as in Isa. 6:8. That God was believed to consult with spiritual creatures in heaven is revealed by the scenes described in 1 Kgs. 22:19-22 and Job 1:6-2:6. Hence the consultative ‘we’ has support from other texts, and it fits both Gen. 1:26-27 and 3:22, on the assumption that Israel believed there were creatures in the heavenly realm (‘the host of heaven,’ 1 Kgs. 22:19) whose identity had something in common both with God and with human beings. The familiar objection that angels could not have participated in creation is a theological judgment about what is * possible in heaven. [27-28]

Here we present one final example taken from the New International Version Study Bible, written by conservative Christian scholars,

God speaks as the Creator-King, announcing His crowning work to the members of His heavenly court.²¹

As we saw earlier, we can find examples in Isaiah 6 of how the context of the passage explains the reason for why the Eternal is speaking in plural form. In verses 1-8 it is written,

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the

²¹ NIV Study Bible – Gen 1:26 entry.

LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin forgiven. And 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.(ASV)

In verse 8, the Eternal says, “Whom shall **I** send, and who will go for **us**?” Here we note two things. The first thing is that there are several persons involved in the context of this passage. First, it mentions the Eternal who sits on his exalted throne surrounded by heavenly beings called seraphim. These angels serve him both by praising him with their lips and worshipping him covering themselves with their wings and by cleansing the lips of the prophet with burning coal and giving him a message of redemption. There is an intimate cooperation between the Eternal and his ministering spirits who surround him as he sits on the throne.

The second thing we see is that the prophet calls the Eternal YHWH Tzvaot, the Eternal of Hosts. This is a title that expresses the Eternal’s direct connection with the billions of ministering angels who stand around his throne and carry out his will as soon as they hear the sound of his command, see Psalm 103:20.

So, the context teaches us that there is a corporate heavenly council that makes decisions and acts (compare with Daniel 4:17, 24). It is in this kind of environment that the Eternal is saying, “Whom shall **I** (the Most High) send, and who will go for **us** (the assembly of the heavenly council)?”

One last passage where the Eternal is speaking in plural form is found in Isaiah 41:21-24, where it is written against the false gods,

*Put forward your cause, says the LORD; let your strong argument come out, says the King of Jacob. Let the future be made clear to **us**: give **us** news of the past things, so that **we** may give thought to them; or of the things to come, so that **we** may see if they are true. Give **us** word of what will be after this, so that **we** may be certain that you are gods: yes, do good or do evil, so that **we** may all see it and be surprised. But you are nothing, and your work is of no value: foolish is he who takes you for his gods. (BBE)*

In this context, it is not difficult to see that the Eternal is including his servants, who sit on thrones around him, in the heavenly court in order to judge the rest of creation. The idols did not have the ability to prophesy truth concerning what would happen in the future. It is only the Eternal who has the knowledge of what will happen in the future, for he exists in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Only if he shares of this

knowledge with his servants can they know anything precise concerning the future. Therefore, it is out of the question that the Eternal would be surprised at the fulfillment of precise prophecies. Only angels and other created beings among the servants of the Eternal would be surprised. This could also include humans. The text is speaking of those who can be surprised at the fulfillment of a prophecy, which would obviously exclude the Omniscient One.

This passage can therefore not be interpreted as a triune God being surprised at the knowledge of the idols concerning the future. It ought instead to be interpreted, as in the cases of the previous texts that we looked at, from the context of the Eternal King who is surrounded by ministering spirits with whom he is in constant communication and who carry out his commands and do his will.

In conclusion we can say that in the texts where the Eternal speaks in plural form there is no proof to support the thought that he should be a plurality of personalities, but rather that he is speaking with and delegating assignments to his heavenly servants who stand around him ready to carry out his commands.

*Give praise to the LORD, you his angels, who are great in strength,
doing his orders, and waiting for his voice.
Give praise to the LORD, all you his armies;
and you his servants who do his pleasure.
Give praise to the LORD, all his works, in all places under his rule:
give praise to the LORD, O my soul.
(Psalm 103:20-22 BBE)*