

Plurality yet Unity in God

In the very first verse of the Bible one is struck with the apparent grammatical incongruity between the second and third words *bara' 'Elohim* (God created). The verb *bara'* (created), is third person singular, indicating the action of an individual. However, the subject noun *'Elohim* (God) has a masculine plural ending *-im*, indicating that the subject is plural. This indicates some aspect of plurality in God in combination with unity of action at a minimum. Other designations for God in the Old Testament also indicate plurality, and occasionally a plural pronoun is used in reference to God. In this article we will explore the notion of plurality, looking at the use of plural designations of God and plural pronouns associated with these designations. We will consider the significance of this plurality in terms of the different revelations or manifestations of God in the Old Testament, particularly in the recurrence of the numbers one and three in association with God. There are even passages in the Old Testament which indicate God in manifestations of two or three working together as one. We conclude that the Old Testament contains the seeds for the New Testament revelation of God as triune.

Plurality in the Designations of God

The use of plural forms in reference to God is not uncommon. In fact, two of God's most common designations in the Old Testament—*'Elohim* (God) and *'Adonāy* (Lord)¹—have plural endings, for example, “It is Jehovah² your God who is the God (*'Elohey*, pl.) of gods and the Lord (*'Adoney*, pl.) of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome” (Deut. 10:17).

Elohim

There are three different Hebrew words that are generally translated “God”: *'El*, *'Eloah*, and *'Elohim*. *'El* occurs 241 times, the majority with some additional title or modifier, for example, *'El Shadday*, or “a God who hides Himself” (Isa. 45:15). *'Eloah* occurs 58 times, especially in the book of Job and in poetry. *'Elohim* is the most common word for God occurring about 2600 times in the Old Testament. It is most likely the plural of *'Eloah*.

'Elohim is used approximately 224 times in its most expected and grammatical use, to refer to gods in the plural.

Referents such as verbs, adjectives, and pronouns are also plural in agreement, for example, *'elohim 'aharim* (other gods) (Exo. 20:3; 23:13; Deut. 5:7; 6:14).

Occasionally the “God of Israel” also takes plural referents. Three times *'Elohim* occurs with plural verbs: “God caused me to wander” (*hit'u*, where *-u* is the plural suffix, Gen. 20:13), “God had revealed Himself” (*niglu*, 35:7), and “God went to redeem” (*halaku*—2 Sam. 7:23; cf. the parallel passage in 1 Chron. 17:21, which has the third person singular *halak*). There is one participle, “there is a God who judges” (*shophetim*, Psa. 58:11), and there are three different adjectives, “what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Jehovah our God is” (*qerobim* (near) Deut. 4:7), “the living God” (*hayyim*, 5:26; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; Jer. 10:10; 23:36; cf. the singular *hay*, 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Isa. 37:4, 17), and “He is a holy God” (*qedoshim*, Josh. 24:19).³ Perhaps there is some significance in these verbs and adjectives being in the plural, although most also occur in the singular elsewhere with “God.”

In 1 Samuel 4:8 non-Israelite Philistines use plural referents for *'Elohim*: “Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck the Egyptians with every kind of plague in the wilderness.” The Septuagint translators also use plural, but the Tanakh (TNK) translation uses singular: “this mighty God...He is the same God who struck the Egyptians.”

However, most of the time when *'Elohim* refers to the God of Israel, it occurs with singular verbs (over 300 times), adjectives, and pronominal referents. This is the so-called singular use of *'Elohim*, which is used to distinguish the God of Israel from the gods of the nations, for example,

They forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who brought (*hamotsi'*—singular verb) them out from the land of Egypt; and they followed after other (plural adjective) gods from among the gods of the peoples who surrounded them; and they worshipped them (plural pronoun) and provoked Jehovah to anger. (Judg. 2:12)

Adonay

'Adon occurs approximately 217 times in the singular and 556 times in the plural, if the form *'Adonāy* which occurs

439 times, is counted. Almost ninety percent of the singular forms occur with the first person singular suffix *'adoniy*, translated “my lord,” “my master,” or “sir.” A few times a divine being, usually an angel (sometimes appearing as a man), is addressed as “my lord” (*'adon* in the singular with the first person singular suffix—Josh. 5:14; Judg. 6:13; Psa. 110:1; Dan. 12:8; 10:16-17, 19; Zech. 1:9; 4:4-5, 13; 6:4). Occasionally God is referred to in the singular as *'Adon* (Lord) mostly in the expressions *Lord of all the earth* (Josh. 3:11, 13; Psa. 97:5; Micah 4:13; Zech. 4:14; 6:5; cf. Psa. 114:7) and the *Lord Jehovah* (Exo. 23:17; 34:23; Isa. 1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33; 19:4).

Of the number of times *'adon* occurs as a plural form, only about eleven are true plurals. Most of the cases of the plural of *'adon* are the “singular use” of a plural form. It occurs most commonly in the form *'Adonāy*, used solely in reference to God and which has been interpreted as a plural form. It is formed by the noun *'Adon* (lord) with the plural first person suffix *-āy* (a pausal form with a long *ā* vowel, distinct from the singular suffix form *-iy* (my lord) and the first person plural suffix *-ay* (my lords) which only occurs in Genesis 19:2, referring to an actual plural “my lords”). It seems that the Masoretes, who vocalized the consonants *'dny*, understood it as a plural. This concurs with the fact that most of the forms of *'adon* are plural, apart from *'adoniy*, which the Masoretes marked as a singular form, perhaps to distinguish *'adoniy* from *'Adonāy*, which was reserved to designate God as Lord.⁴ In addition, there are thirteen other occurrences of a plural form of *'adon* referring to God (e.g., Psa. 8:1, 9; 147:5).

Plurality in Other Designations Associated with God

There are at least six other designations for God that sometimes occur in plural forms: Creator, Maker, One who stretched out the heavens, Husband, Holy One, and Most High. Once, God is referred to with a plural participle with a pronominal suffix as Creator: “Remember also your Creator (lit., Creators, pl.) in the days of your youth” (Eccl. 12:1). This is in comparison to at least eleven times in the Old Testament in which a singular participle of *bara'* (to create) occurs with God as the subject. God is referred to using the plural participle of the verb *natah* (to stretch out) in Isaiah 42:5. Four times God is referred to as a Maker, also using plural participles of *'asah* (to make) with pronominal suffixes (Job 35:10; Psa. 149:2; Isa. 22:11; 54:5). In Isaiah 54:5 “your Husband,” *bo'alayik*, is another plural designation, a plural participle, literally “your Husbands.” This is the only occurrence of a participle of this verb to refer to God. Perhaps there is a plural form *'ozrāy* (my Helper, lit., “Helpers”) in Psalm 118:7, in a reference to Jehovah. However, some versions treat it as a plural “among them that help me” (Darby, see also KJV and Young’s Literal Translation). Three times the adjective *qadosh* (holy) occurs as a plural *qedoshim*, but is understood

by many to refer to God as the Holy One (Prov. 9:10; 30:3; Hosea 11:12; cf. Josh. 24:19). Four times in Daniel 7 the adjective *'Elyon* (the Most High) occurs in plural, *'Elyonin* in Aramaic, in the expression “the saints of the Most High.” The equivalent term in Hebrew is always singular. All of these examples associate plurality with God. There is some consistency in using plural forms of the verbs *create* and *make*, as in Genesis 1:1 *'Elohim* (with the plural *-im* ending) created, and in verse 26 God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” This latter instance we will explore in the next section.

Plurality in Pronominal References

In addition to these examples of plurality in God’s names and designations, first person plural referents referring to God are used seven times in four separate verses. These pronouns occur at four significant events in the Bible: the creation of humanity, the fall of humanity, the rebellion of humanity against God, and the commissioning of Isaiah. They are also associated with four different names or designations for God: *'Elohim*, *Jehovah* *'Elohim*, *Jehovah*, and *'Adonāy*.

In Genesis 1:26 three instances of first person plural pronouns, *Us* and *Our*, are used when *'Elohim* says, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” The fact that the first person plural pronoun is repeated three times indicates that the plural pronominal reference is not accidental. However, in the following verse the narrator uses third person singular forms four times in his further exposition on the verse: “And God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

In Genesis 3:22, after the fall of mankind, Jehovah *'Elohim* says, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil.” In Genesis 11:7 Jehovah says, “Come, let Us go down and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Twice the verbs of exhortation are first person plural. The first imperative *habah* (come) is, however, singular, although it seems to function as a frozen imperatival form. It is quite striking that in verses 3 and 4, where humanity collectively agrees to rebel against God and build the city and tower of Babel, there is the same structure in each verse, *habah* followed by two first person plural verbs of exhortation.

Finally, Isaiah states, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord (*'Adonāy*), saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for Us? And I said, Here am I; send me” (Isa. 6:8). In this verse both the first person singular and plural occur together in close juncture.

Another striking matter related to these verses is that God is related to mankind corporately or collectively. After

God says, "Let Us make man in Our image," He goes on to say, "let them (pl.) have dominion." Similarly, in Genesis 3 *the man has become like one of Us* refers to Adam and Eve and all of their descendants as corporate mankind impacted by the fall. In Genesis 11 God employs plural pronouns, using the same plural structures as those proposing the collective rebellion of mankind in order to thwart it. Finally, in the commissioning of Isaiah, a plural pronoun is used when God is looking for someone to be sent to the people of Israel to represent Him after their apostasy when they are distracted to worship the gods of the other nations. Isaiah is the first of the major prophets to be called. Through the prophesying of these prophets prior to, during, and after the exile, Israel becomes monotheistic not only in beliefs but also in practice.⁵

The Significance of Plurality in God

There is debate among scholars as to the reason for and the significance of plural referents to God. Plural forms function in different ways in Hebrew. Plural forms are used to indicate more than one countable noun or sometimes more than two, since Hebrew has a dual form, which is, however, mostly used for dual body parts. Plural forms also are used to indicate the composition of a collective noun (harvested wheat grains compared to wheat as a substance) or to indicate extension, where the whole is considered by extension to consist of many smaller parts, like water.

Water...can be conceived in terms of individual rain drops, or it can be envisaged in the form of the mass of the ocean. Yet in both cases it is equally water. So here we have in a natural phenomenon an instance of...‘diversity in unity’. Water is both singular and plural at the same time. Water is distinctly one particular entity, and so is unique...But at the same time water may be observed in movement in a plurality of ways. (Knight 66-67)

Abstract nouns are frequently plural, either to indicate qualities (knowledge, compassion), states (youth, old age), or actions (consecration, salvation). As a subset of either extension or abstraction, some consider that there are honorific plurals or plurals of excellence or majesty. Some consider God’s plurality a matter of intensity or majesty, “summing up the essential characteristics and intensifying the original idea, i.e., Godhead” (Parke-Taylor 5). Some consider the first person plural referents to God as plurals of majesty, examples of the royal “we,” but this is probably anachronistic and does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament with kings.

Some trace plurality in God to polytheism or the belief in many gods. These gods then became a unified godhead subsumed under the one name of YHWH. Some scholars consider that there was a development in Israel’s history from polytheism (belief in many gods) to henotheism

(allegiance to one among many gods) or monolatry (selection of only one among many gods for worship) to monotheism (belief in only one God with all others considered false gods or not gods). Abraham did come from a polytheistic background, and it was not until post-exilic times that monotheism was fully embedded into the psyche of the people. However, it is doubtful that polytheism can account for all of the plural forms in the Old Testament and their continued use.⁶ Others consider the use of plural pronouns as part of “an address to the spirits or angels who stand around the Deity and constitute His council,” an explanation attributed to Philo (Keil and Delitzsch 62; see also 1 Kings 22:19). However, Keil points out verses that contradict the view that the spirits or angels took part in the creation of mankind, including Genesis 2:7 and 22, Isaiah 40:13ff, and especially 44:24.

Another reason for plurality could be what Cross calls the “plural of manifestations” (254). This refers to the multiple manifestations of a god, perhaps represented by various sites of worship. This is one way of understanding the plural forms of other gods also found in the singular, for example, *Ba’alim* for *Ba’al* and *Asherot* for *Asherah* and perhaps also the singular use of plural forms. Certainly there are a number of different manifestations or revelations of God in the Bible.

A number of these explanations have some merit. God is more complex than other beings, and there is some element of abstractness and mystery in Him. Polytheism may explain the origin of plural forms, but it is doubtful that polytheism can explain their continued use. God also manifested Himself on numerous occasions and primarily in three particular ways. An exploration of this latter matter, that is, the revelations or manifestations of God, will be helpful in understanding the significance of plurality in relation to God.

Revelations or Manifestations of God

In the New Testament there is ample testimony to the existence of God as a tri-unity. However, the Old Testament also strongly suggests and prepares for this New Testament revelation. On the one hand, God is revealed as the one and unique God; on the other hand, there are three distinct revelations or manifestations of God in the Old Testament.

Revealed or Manifested as One

The unity of God is one of the key concepts revealed in the Bible and one understood by all three of the monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Monotheism, or the belief in one God, distinguishes Israel’s God from the pantheons of gods of the nations that surrounded her in the ancient world.

As mentioned above, there is a history of pre-Israelite polytheism. This can be seen in Joshua's exhortation: "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve, either the gods from across the River, whom your fathers served, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah" (Josh. 24:15). At certain stages in her history, Israel practiced polytheism, as both the archaeological record and biblical accounts witness, for example,

They forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who brought them out from the land of Egypt; and they followed after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who surrounded them; and they worshipped them and provoked Jehovah to anger. (Judg. 2:12; see also 2 Kings 22:17)

These polytheistic tendencies continued throughout the history of Israel up to the exile when monotheism became the norm.

Monotheism can be seen in texts that deny other gods, using language such as, there is no other besides Him or apart from Him (Deut. 4:35; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 7:22; Isa. 43:11; 44:8; 45:5-6, 21; Hosea 13:4; cf. Ps. 18:31), "there is no one else" (Deut. 4:39; 1 Kings 8:60; Joel 2:27; Isa. 45:5-6, 14, 18, 22; 46:9), and "You alone are God" (Psa. 72:18; 86:10; 2 Kings 19:15, 19; Isa. 37:16, 20).

A few verses also state that there is only one God, for example, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why are we treacherous, each one to his brother, thus profaning the covenant of our fathers?" (Mal. 2:10). Zechariah 14:9 is also a strong testimony to the oneness, or uniqueness, of Jehovah as the one God not only of Israel but even of the whole earth: "Jehovah will be King over all the earth; and in that day Jehovah will be the one God and His name the one name," or "there shall be one LORD with one name" (TNK).

One of the most important verses concerning the oneness of God is Deuteronomy 6:4, the so-called *shema'*, named after the first word of the verse: "Hear, O Israel, Jehovah is our God; Jehovah is one." It has been alternatively translated, "The Lord our God is one Lord" (LXX-Brenton) and "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (TNK). Block argues for a translation that takes this as a cry of allegiance to Yahweh as the unique God: "Yahweh our God! Yahweh alone!" or "Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone!" He points out that this meaning fits better in the context of Deuteronomy (211).

Revealed or Manifested as Three

The other significant number associated with God is the number three, especially related to three different mani-

festations of God in the Old Testament. Elohim is manifested as the invisible God, the Creator. He is also manifested in a visible form as a man, either as the Angel of God or the Angel of Jehovah or as a man of God. He is also manifested as the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Jehovah. These three manifestations of God in the Old Testament prefigure the manifestation of God in the New Testament as the Father, the Son (with humanity), and the Spirit. We could say that there are three aspects of God in the Old Testament—the transcendent and invisible aspect of God, the physical and immanent (existing or inherent within the world) aspect of God, and the invisible yet immanent and realizable aspect of God.

As the Invisible God, the Father: One of the revelations of God is as the unseeable, or invisible, God. In the Old Testament the matter of God being invisible is mostly assumed or implied, without being stated explicitly.⁷ He is a God who hides Himself (Isa. 45:15) or who hides His face (8:17; Psa. 44:23-24). Very few verses actually indicate the impossibility of seeing God. Exodus 33:20 states, "He said, You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me and live."⁸ This notion of not seeing God or of seeing God and not living occurs in other passages, for example, "Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, for, he said, I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been preserved" (Gen. 32:30); "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Exo. 3:6); "Gideon saw that He was the Angel of Jehovah. And Gideon said, Alas, O Lord Jehovah! For I have seen the Angel of Jehovah face to face" (Judg. 6:22); and "Manoah said to his wife, We will surely die, for we have seen God" (13:22). When Isaiah sees the Lord on His throne, he says, "Woe is me, for I am finished! / For I am a man of unclean lips, / And in the midst of a people of unclean lips I dwell; / Yet my eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts" (Isa. 6:5, 1). The apostle John responds in a similar way when he sees the vision of Christ as the Son of Man in the midst of the lampstands: "He had in His right hand seven stars; and out of His mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword; and His face shone as the sun shines in its power. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead" (Rev. 1:16-17).⁹ Job's response to seeing God is in a similar vein: "I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, / But now my eye has seen You; / Therefore I abhor [or reject] myself, and I repent / In dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Deuteronomy 4:12 states that the children of Israel did not see any form (*temunah*) when Jehovah spoke to them at Horeb from the midst of the fire, only a voice (repeated in verse 15). This notion of the invisibility of God is more clearly and explicitly presented in the New Testament. God is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17; Col. 1:15), the One "who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen nor can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). Moses is spoken of as one who saw "the unseen One" (Heb. 11:27). The notion of the invisibility of God is tempered by seemingly contradictory

statements which indicate that God can be and was seen, such as those mentioned above and in other passages, including Exodus 6:3 and Isaiah 64:4. We could say that God in His eternal essence is invisible Spirit (cf. John 4:24). However, this essentially invisible God appeared again and again, sometimes manifesting Himself in bodily form (Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 32:30; 35:9; 48:3; Exo. 3:16; 4:5; 6:2-3; 24:9-11; 33:11, 23; Num. 12:7-8; 14:14; Deut. 5:4; 34:10; Judg. 13:22; 1 Kings 22:19; Job 42:5-6; Psa. 63:2; Isa. 6:1, 5; Ezek. 20:35; Amos 7:7-8; 9:1).

Occasionally God is referred to as Father in the Old Testament, for example, “Is He [Jehovah] not your Father who bought you? / Was it not He who made you and established you?” (Deut. 32:6); “He will call upon Me, saying, You are My Father, / My God and the rock of My salvation” (Psa. 89:26); and “For You are our Father, / Since Abraham does not know us, / And Israel does not acknowledge us. / You, Jehovah, are our Father; / Our Redeemer from eternity is Your name” (Isa. 63:16). The invisibility of the Father is also indicated in the New Testament: “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except Him who is from God, He has seen the Father” (John 6:46), and “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (1:18; 1 John 4:12).¹⁰

Two additional references to God as Father occur. The first is in 2 Samuel 7:14: “I will be his Father, and he will be My son” in the promise to David regarding his son, and the second is in Isaiah 9:6: “For a child is born to us, / A Son is given to us; / And the government / Is upon His shoulder; / And His name will be called / Wonderful Counselor, / Mighty God, / Eternal Father, / Prince of Peace,” in which the Son is named Mighty God and Eternal Father.

As a Man, Angel, and Son: Many times God (as *'Elohim*, Jehovah, or *'El Shadday*) appears to people in the Old Testament. Sometimes the manner and form He appears in is not specified, although the verb *appear* in Hebrew implies that some form or image is seen, for example, “Jehovah appeared to Abram and said” (Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9; Exo. 6:3; Num. 14:14; Deut. 31:15; 1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1; Dan. 7:9), or “Then Jehovah came and stood by and called as at the other times, Samuel! Samuel! And Samuel said, Speak, for Your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:10).

Numbers 12:6-8 distinguishes three different manners, or ways, of appearing: “If there is a prophet among you, / I, Jehovah, will make Myself known to him in a vision; / I will speak with him in a dream,” whereas with Moses He speaks “face to face, even openly, and not in riddles; / And he beholds the form (*temunah*) of Jehovah.”¹¹

Jehovah’s preferred or usual manifestation seems to be in

human form, either as a man or as an angel or messenger, perhaps confirmed by 1 Kings 19:11-12, in which He appears as a gentle, quiet voice rather than as wind, earthquake, or fire. Even theophanies, that is, manifestations of God, employing natural phenomena such as fire (Exo. 3:2—4:5), or thunder and lightning, cloud and smoke (19:16-18), are frequently associated with a human form (24:10-11). Jehovah appears to Abraham as a man with two other men (Gen. 18:1-33), as a man wrestling with Jacob (32:24-30), to Joshua as a man, the Captain of Jehovah (Josh. 5:14), as a man to Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:6), as a man upon the throne (Ezek. 1:26-28), and as a man of fire (8:1-3). In Ezekiel 40 through 48 the man who shows Ezekiel the temple and its surroundings speaks as Jehovah, saying, “This is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet...and I will dwell in their midst forever” (43:7, 9). In Daniel 8 through 12 one of the three men/angels who interact with Daniel, a man clothed in linen, has characteristics of God, such as, His “loins were girded with the fine gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, His face like the appearance of lightning, His eyes like torches of fire, His arms and His feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of His words like the sound of a multitude” (10:5-6). Zechariah also sees men with characteristics of God (1:8; 2:1). One verse even states that Jehovah is a man (*'ish*) of war (Exo. 15:3). He is also likened to a man in a number of other places (Psa. 78:65; Isa. 42:13; Jer. 14:9; Mal. 3:17).¹²

God appears as an Angel or is at least identified as an Angel in many of the cases when the Angel of God or Angel of Jehovah appears. For example, the Angel of Jehovah in Genesis 16:7 is referred to as Jehovah and as God in verse 13. The Angel of God in 21:17 is identified as God in verse 19. Abraham considers the Angel of Jehovah as Jehovah (22:11, 14). Other verses include 31:11 and 13; Exodus 3:2, 4, and 6; Numbers 22:35 and 38; 23:5, 16, and 24:13; Judges 2:1-5 and 6:12, 14, and 22; 13:3, 6, 10-11, and 22-23. In Zechariah 3:6, when the Angel of Jehovah speaks, it is Jehovah Himself speaking (v. 7).¹³

There are also a number of physical human features ascribed to God. While these may be considered as metaphors for abstract concepts, they at least support the impression that God appears in human form. At least four times God is referred to as having a Son with divinity implied, twice in Psalm 2: “I will recount the decree of Jehovah; / He said to Me: You are My Son; / Today I have begotten You” (v. 7), and “Kiss the Son (*Bar*) / Lest He be angry and you perish from the way; / For His anger may suddenly be kindled. / Blessed are all those who take refuge in Him” (v. 12). See also Proverbs 30:4 and Daniel 7:13.¹⁴

As the Spirit: Another manifestation of God is as the Spirit. The Spirit (of God or of Jehovah) is involved in

creation (Psa. 104:30; Job 26:13), in brooding to bring forth life in restoration of the created earth (Gen. 1:2; cf. Isa. 32:14-15), in the making of man (Job 33:4), as the source of intelligent life (Gen. 2:7; Job 27:3; 32:8), and in striving with man after the fall (Gen. 6:3). The Spirit comes upon Moses and the elders (Num. 11:17, 25-26) and the builders of the tabernacle (Exo. 31:2-4), is in Joshua (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9); and is upon the judges: Othniel (Judg. 3:10), Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14); upon kings: Saul (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6), David (16:13; 2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Chron. 28:12), and the sprout from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1-2; 42:1; 48:16; 61:1); upon and in the prophets: Balaam (Num. 24:2), Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16), Azariah the son of Oded (2 Chron. 15:1), Jahaziel (20:14), Zechariah the son of Jehoiada (24:20), Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2; 3:24; 11:5, 24; 37:1), Daniel (Dan. 4—5), and Micah (Micah 3:8); upon all flesh (Joel 2:28); and upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zech. 12:10). While the word *Spirit* (*ruah*) can also be translated “wind” or “breath,” there are numerous cases where the Spirit is identified with and equivalent to God or Jehovah (2 Sam. 23:2-4; Ezek. 11:5; Psa. 139:7-8).

The Number Three: In addition to these three main revelations or manifestations of God, there are also a number of places where the number three is associated with God. They do not necessarily confirm but at least concur with the threefoldness of God. For example, when Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on His throne, the six-winged seraphim repeat the word *holy* three times, one calling to the other, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Jehovah of hosts; / The whole earth is filled with His glory” (Isa. 6:3; cf. Rev. 4:8). The blessing in Numbers 6:24-26 is threefold: “Jehovah bless you and keep you; Jehovah make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; Jehovah lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” *'Elohim* is mentioned as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob a number of times (Exo. 3:6, 15; 4:5; Matt. 22:32; cf. 1 Chron. 29:18; 2 Chron. 30:6; Acts 3:13; and 7:32 where the word *God* is not repeated three times). Daniel repeats *'Adonāy* three times in his prayer: “O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! Do not delay, for Your own sake, O my God; for Your city and Your people are called by Your own name” (Dan. 9:19).

A few times the name of Jehovah is designated three times in a verse, especially in tricolons in poetry, for example, “Jehovah opens the eyes of the blind; / Jehovah raises up those who are bowed down; / Jehovah loves the righteous” (Psa. 146:8); “For Jehovah is our Judge, / Jehovah is our Lawmaker, / Jehovah is our King; He will save us” (Isa. 33:22); and “Jehovah is a jealous God and One who avenges; / Jehovah avenges and is full of wrath; / Jehovah takes vengeance on His adversaries, / And

reserves wrath for His enemies” (Nahum 1:2), where in Hebrew the expression “One who avenges” (*noqem*) is repeated three times before Jehovah.¹⁵

Working Together as One: In addition to the examples cited above of the different manifestations of God in which God is identified as a “hypostatic manifestation” which appears “to be distinct from God one minute and in fact *be* God the next” (Evans 550), there are a number of places in the Old Testament where there seem to be some kind of interaction and distinction among the Godhead working together as one.

In several places two divine titles are employed; a few times the second title is either *Son* or *Spirit*. In Genesis 19:24 Jehovah is mentioned twice. This verse has been taken by some to indicate plurality among the Godhead. In Proverbs 30:4, after speaking of the knowledge of the Holy One in verse 3, the writer goes on to say with a rhetorical reference to God and His Son,

Who has ascended into heaven and descended? / Who has gathered the wind in His fists? / Who has wrapped up the waters in His garment? / Who has established all the ends of the earth? / What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know?

In Isaiah 9:6 a Son is given who is called Mighty God and Eternal Father. Daniel 7:13-14 says,

One like a Son of Man was coming; / And He came to the Ancient of Days, / And they brought Him near before Him. / And to Him was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, / That all the peoples, nations, and languages might serve Him. / His dominion is an eternal dominion, which will not pass away; / And His kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.

The kingdom of this One like a human being, who is distinct from the Ancient of Days, replaces all the earthly kingdoms that preceded it and shares the same characteristics as God's kingdom. A similar notion is expressed in Psalm 110:1: “Jehovah declares to my Lord, / Sit at My right hand / Until I make Your enemies / Your footstool.” David's Lord sits down at Jehovah's right hand (Matt. 22:44-45; cf. Psa. 2:6-8; 8:6).

There are a few verses where Jehovah and His Spirit are mentioned. Ezekiel 37:1 says, “The hand of Jehovah came upon me, and He brought me out in the Spirit of Jehovah and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones.” Zechariah 7:12 says that the children of Israel “set their hearts like adamant so as not to hear the instruction and the words which Jehovah of hosts sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from Jehovah of hosts.”

In at least three verses three are mentioned. In Isaiah 48:13-16 Jehovah speaks as one loved by Jehovah and sent by Jehovah and His Spirit:

Indeed, My hand laid the foundations of the earth, / And My right hand spread out the heavens; / When I call to them, / They stand together. / Assemble yourselves, all of you, and hear! / Who among them has declared these things? / Jehovah loves him; he will do His pleasure / On Babylon, and His arm will be upon the Chaldeans. / I, even I, have spoken; indeed, I have called him; / I have brought him, and his way will prosper. / Draw near to Me and listen to this: / From the beginning I have not spoken in secret; / From the time it took place, I was there. / And now the Lord Jehovah has sent me and His Spirit.

In Isaiah 61:1 there are three—the Spirit of the Lord Jehovah, Jehovah, and the anointed One:

The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon Me, / Because Jehovah has anointed Me / To bring good news to the afflicted; / He has sent Me to bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives, / And the opening of the eyes to those who are bound. (cf. 11:1-2; 42:1)

In Isaiah 63:8-10 there are three—Jehovah the Savior and Redeemer of the children of Israel, the Angel of His presence, and Jehovah's Spirit of holiness who is grieved:

Surely, they are My people, / Children who will not deal falsely; / So He became their Savior. / In all their affliction He was afflicted, / And the Angel of His presence saved them; / In His love and in His mercy / He redeemed them, / And He bore them up and carried them / All the days of old. / But they rebelled and grieved / His Spirit of holiness; / Therefore He turned to become their enemy; / He fought against them.

All these verses show some interaction by at least two or three of the manifestations of God, either Jehovah God and His Spirit, or some interaction utilizing the same name.

Conclusion

The plurality in the designations for God, in pronominal referents, and in the revelations or manifestations of God, while not definitive in proving the triunity of God, at least prefigure and prepare the way for the New Testament revelation of the Triune God, where there are three who are distinct yet not separate and who work together as one.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹In 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 Paul draws attention to these two designations, *God* and *Lord*, at the same time stressing oneness, when he deals with idols: "There are many gods and many lords, yet to

us there is one God, the Father, out from whom are all things, and we are unto Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we are through Him." Thomas also refers to the resurrected Christ as my "Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

The use of the plural forms *'elohim* and *'adonim* are not restricted to the God of Israel but also occur with other singular designees in the Old Testament (e.g., for a god in 1 Samuel 5:7 and Judges 11:24; for a master in Exodus 21:8) and even in non-biblical literature such as the Amarna Letters. This cautions us against relying upon plural forms such as these as a sole and definitive proof of the Trinity, but the use of plural forms in relation to the God of Israel can at least be viewed as not being inconsistent with the New Testament revelation of the Trinity.

²The designations *'Elohim* and *'Adonāy* are frequently associated with God's most common name YHWH—*Jehovah* or *Yahweh*, which is combined with these designations in compound names such as *Jehovah 'Elohim* (679 times), *'Elohim Jehovah* (3 times), *Jehovah 'Adonāy* (8 times), and *'Adonāy Jehovah* (307 times), cf. *'Adonāy 'Elohim* (6 times). In this article we use the traditional English spelling, "Jehovah," for the name of God with the four consonants YHWH (the Tetragrammaton or four letters). Modern scholars tend to prefer to indicate the pronunciation "Yahweh." One Jewish tradition is to pronounce the name YHWH as "*'Adonāy*" Lord (cf. the Septuagint, which mostly translates YHWH as *kurios* (Lord), and the Masoretic scribes, who put the vowels of *'Adonāy* with the consonants YHWH, which led to the reading "Jehovah"). The name *Jehovah* is singular (although it has been argued that its meaning encapsulates three time frames: He will be, He is, and He was). It is interesting that in the New Testament there is the singular word *name* associated with the Trinity in Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the application of which in the book of Acts was the disciples' baptizing people into the name of Jesus (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

³Interestingly, the Septuagint translates all of these forms in the singular. Some commentators have tried to account for these plural forms. In Genesis 20:13 Abraham accommodates "himself to the polytheistic standpoint of the Philistine king" (Keil and Delitzsch 240). In Genesis 35:7 "the verb here is plural, and perhaps not without reason, as it was a vision of God accompanied by the holy angels" (Alford 155).

⁴Since in the majority of cases *'Adonāy* is not translated "my Lord," *-āy* has been considered as a "substantival affirmative denoting emphasis by reinforcing the root and...means 'Lord par excellence, Lord of all'" (Waltke and O'Connor 124). However, it may have begun as a first person plural form that became frozen as a title for God. It is quite striking in a context when the plural forms of *'adon* occur and a first person possessive suffix is needed, and the writer or speaker uses the first person singular form *'adoniy*. See 2 Kings 18:27, Isaiah 36:12, Genesis 39:8, and Exodus 21:5 where pronominal plural *your/his masters* and first person singular *my master* forms of *'Adon* occur in the same verse but refer to a singular referent,

thus keeping the vocalization *'Adonāy* reserved for God.

⁵In the New Testament some of the crucial places where the Triune God is revealed are also related closely to corporate mankind. In the great commission (Matt. 28:19), ministering Christ in the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 15:16, 30), in John 17 relating to the oneness of the believers, and Paul's blessing of the believers in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

⁶Traditionally Abraham is considered the first of the monotheists (his forefathers were polytheists). Others suggest that Moses introduced monotheism to the Israelites (perhaps under the influence of the Egyptian experiment in monotheism under the pharaoh Akhenaton). Scholars holding the view of the late appearance of monotheism would argue that the patriarchs and Moses were henotheists, but perhaps they are trying to draw an artificial distinction based on modern views of monotheism.

⁷Barr points out that the Old Testament does not say that God is invisible, but that it is fatal for a human being to see Him (34).

⁸In Exodus 33:18 Moses wanted to see God's glory, but he was not able to see the face of Jehovah, only His back (v. 23). This seems to contradict verse 11, which says that Moses saw Him face to face. Perhaps verses 18 through 20 refer to a glorious manifestation of God's face, similar to the face of Jesus shining as the sun on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2) or John's vision of the Son of Man in Revelation 1:16, where His face shone like the sun. Looking at the "unveiled sight of the brilliancy of the glory of God" is like looking directly at the brightness of the sun, which causes "our bodily eye [to be] dazzled, and its power of vision is destroyed" (Keil and Delitzsch 237). In contrast, God's face in Exodus 33:11 is observed, not in the mode of His "essential glory, but only in such a mode as human weakness could bear" (234). This can be also compared to the shining of Moses' face, which the children of Israel were not able to bear (34:29-35).

⁹In addition, what Hagar says in Genesis 16:13 can be translated, "Am I indeed still able to see here after my seeing [of God]?" Thus, she calls the well where God appeared to her Beer-lahai-roi, which has been interpreted as "the well of living sight," i.e., "the well where one can see [God] and yet live" (see New American Bible note on verse 14).

¹⁰God's designation *Father* is associated mostly with the creation, making, and forming of humanity (Mal. 2:10; Isa. 64:8), and with redemption (63:16). This can also be compared with God the Spirit's involvement in creation. These verbs of creating, making, and redeeming all occur with plural forms in reference to God.

¹¹That Moses beheld the form (*temunah*) of Jehovah but the children of Israel did not (Deut. 4:12) could be due to the potential for the children of Israel to reproduce that form into some kind of image or idol. However, because of Moses' special relationship with God, He could reveal Himself to Moses without the possibility that Moses would do such a thing. Moses knew Jehovah's ways whereas the children of Israel did not (Psa. 103:7; cf. 95:10).

¹²Two verses state that God is not a man that He should lie or repent (*'ish*—Num. 23:19; *'adam*—1 Sam. 15:29), which implies that He is not a fallen human being prone to lying and making mistakes that need to be repented of.

¹³Not every occurrence of an angel of God or angel of Jehovah refers to Jehovah. Sometimes it refers to another angel, some of whom are even named, such as Gabriel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26) or Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). The same is true of the title *man of God*, which mostly refers to someone other than God.

¹⁴In addition to these manifestations, there is also the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8. Personified wisdom was prior to and involved in creation (vv. 22-31). Wisdom was "set up from eternity, / From the beginning, before the earth was" (v. 23). Wisdom "was brought forth" prior to creation (vv. 24-25). Wisdom was with and beside Jehovah in creation, "as a master workman; / And I was daily His delight, / Rejoicing always before Him" (v. 30). This is similar to the function of the Word in John 1:1-3. In addition, Christ is called "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24).

¹⁵The number two also occurs quite frequently with the names or designations of God. There is repetition in the address of God (Psa. 22:1), and repetition of one of the names or designations of God occurs in bicolons in poetic lines. However, the twofold repetition of names also occurs when individuals are addressed, for example, when Moses and Samuel were called by God (Exo. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:10).

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