

ONE GOD, OR THREE?

By Mark Robinson

The class discussion had taken an interesting twist. I was in a program pursuing a master's degree in Judaic Studies, and the professor was an orthodox Rabbi with an earned doctorate in Semitic languages. He was engaged in an intense debate with a student affiliated with the Hasidic Lubavitch movement. The argument centered on the first words of Genesis 1, "In the beginning God created..." The professor stated that the grammar of this verse demanded that we understand God as a plurality in unity; however, it was not well received by the young Lubavitch student, and for the next 15 minutes he argued with the professor. At one point the student said, "You are giving our enemies ammunition for [belief in] the Trinity." The professor responded that he did not believe in the Trinity but was simply sharing what the grammar demanded we understand concerning this verse.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Lubavitch student agreed with the professor - the grammar indeed demands that we understand God as a plurality in unity. Nevertheless, he facetiously added, "I don't see three anyway; I only see two."

Does the Bible teach that there is one God - or three? If there is only one God, how are we to understand the nature of this God? Does the Christian concept of the Trinity have pagan or biblical origins? These questions can only be answered by a careful consideration of an objective source - the Bible.

Like the Lubavitch student, we are influenced by our traditions and preconceptions, but let's analyze what the Jewish Scriptures teach about the nature of God, put aside all our presuppositions, and allow God to speak to us through His infallible Word.

PLURALITY IN UNITY

Many passages from the Jewish Scriptures teach the same truth that the professor was arguing for in Genesis 1:1 - that the person of God is a plurality in unity. Dozens of other verses in the Jewish Bible provide strong support for this belief through both grammar and content.

The very first verse of the Bible, introduces us to the concept of God as a plurality in unity, which is ascertained in the initial three words of the Hebrew. "*Bereshith bara Elohim...*" ("In the beginning God created"). *Elohim* is a plural word, but the context of the passage determines how it is translated in the Hebrew Scriptures. When it is used to speak of the One true God, it is translated "God," as in Genesis 1:1. When *Elohim* is used to speak of false deities, such as Exodus 20:3, it is translated "gods." The verb in this verse is *bara*. Grammatically, the noun and the verb should agree, but in this instance they do not. *Elohim* is plural, and *bara* is singular. How are we to understand this apparent discrepancy? Are we to translate this "gods"? No, because there is only one God, and in Genesis 1:1 *Elohim* is correctly translated as "God." The only explanation is that God is a plurality in unity, which is the argument the professor used during the discussion of this verse in class.

Genesis 1:26 clearly indicates the concept that God is a plurality in unity through the use of the English language: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." The plural personal pronouns "us" and "our"¹ are used in conjunction with the singular nouns "image" and "likeness," so we would expect this verse to read, "Let us make man in our images, after our likenesses," but such is not the case. The conclusion must be that the speaker, God, is speaking to the same One, in essence, as Himself - God. The use of plural pronouns with singular nouns demands that we understand God as a plurality in unity.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is probably the most familiar verse in the Hebrew Scriptures to Jewish people. Although many of them could not give the Scriptural reference, they are referring to this passage when they say that God is one. This verse is commonly called the "*Sh'ma*."

“Sh'ma, Yisrael, Jehovah Elohenu Jehovah echad.”
(“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One”).

The word for “one” (*echad*), helps us understand the nature of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *echad* is sometimes used in the sense of an absolute one, but at other times in the sense of a compound unity.² For example, in Genesis 1:5 God said, “...And the evening and the morning were the first (*echad*) day.” Two things - evening and morning - make up one day; a compound unity. Genesis 2:24 uses the term *echad* in the same way. In speaking of a man and a woman uniting in marriage, it says, “...and they shall be one flesh.” Two people - man and woman - become one. Ezra 2:64 says, “The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand, three hundred and threescore.” The Hebrew word *echad* is translated “together” in English. In this text, the word *echad* is used as a compound unity of 42,360 people in one congregation.³

There are other Hebrew words which could have been used to better communicate an absolute singularity. *Yachid* is primarily used to mean an *absolute one*. For example, in Genesis 22:2 God commanded Abraham, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac...” This use of *yachid* (only), in adjective form, speaks of Isaac to the exclusion of all others.

If God had wanted to communicate an absolute one in Deuteronomy 6:4, the better word would have been *yachid*. Instead, He chose the word *echad*. We can conclude from this that, rather than speaking against a plurality in unity, it actually gives further weight to this belief. Thus, this most familiar verse, in concert with dozens of other passages, makes a strong case for the nature of God as a plurality in unity.

Genesis 19:24 confronts readers with an occurrence common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: apparently multiple LORDS (Jehovahs).⁴ A review of the context of Genesis 18 and 19, leading up to this point, is helpful.

Abraham hosted three men (18:2), one of whom was Jehovah (18:1, 13, 22). The other two men were angels (19:1) who eventually went to Sodom and Gomorrah (18:22), leaving Abraham standing with the LORD (Jehovah). The LORD had promised to go down to Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20-21). In chapter 19:17-25, we have the record of the removal of Lot and some of his family from Sodom and Gomorrah. In verses 17 and 18 Lot speaks to “them.” This would be the angels, and possibly Jehovah. In verses 21 - 25, there is only one individual speaking to Lot who is clearly the LORD. He has left Abraham and is now in the presence of Lot. Genesis 19:24 says, “...the LORD rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven.” The LORD (Jehovah) on earth, in the presence of Lot, rained down fire and brimstone from the LORD (Jehovah) in heaven. Clearly, two Jehovahs are mentioned in this verse, so how can we reconcile this passage with the teaching that there is just one God? The only possible way is to understand that God is a plurality in unity.

Psalms 110:1 presents the same dilemma as the passage in Genesis 19. David, the writer of this passage, was the king of Israel. As king, he was the highest human authority in Israel. The only authority over him was God. David wrote, “The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.” The first “LORD” is *Jehovah*; the second “Lord” is *Adonai*, which means *master*. David was saying, “God (LORD) said unto my God (Lord).” As in Genesis 19:24, the problem is to reconcile this teaching of two Gods with the biblical truth of only one God. Again, the only way to do this is to understand that God is a plurality in unity within the Godhead.

THE TRI-UNITY OF GOD

If a plurality in unity can plainly be seen in Scripture, the next question must be, "How many entities make up this plurality?" Several passages in the Jewish Bible address this issue. We will examine two such passages from the Book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 48:12-16 is probably the clearest teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures that the plurality in unity is three, or a Tri-unity. In verse 12 the speaker says, "I am he; I am the first, I also am the last." Who are the first and the last? Isaiah 44:6 identifies Him as "the LORD" (Jehovah). This verse can also be used in the same way as in some of the previously mentioned passages. It speaks of "the LORD, the King of Israel, and his redeemer, the LORD of hosts" - two LORDS (Jehovahs) in one verse. To reconcile this with a belief in one God is to embrace the concept of a plurality in unity.

The speaker in Isaiah 48:13-15 is the same speaker as in Isaiah 48:12. In the first part of verse 16 He says, "Come ye near unto me, hear ye this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I." The second part of verse 16 says, "and now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit, hath sent me." The "me" in this passage is the One who has been speaking throughout, whom we have identified as Jehovah God. Verse 17 identifies Him as "the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

There are two distinct Jehovahs presented in these verses: the "LORD God" and the "me" (the "LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel"). Including the Spirit, mentioned in verse 16, three persons of the Godhead are named. Again, to reconcile this passage with the truth of one God, we must believe in a plurality in unity, which this passage defines as three in one.

Isaiah 63:7-10 again presents the concept of three persons making up the plurality in unity. Verses 7-8a mention the "LORD" and describe His loving-kindnesses and concern for His children. This is the same as the Father of the New Testament. In verses 8b-9, He is referred to as the "Savior" and "the angel of his presence," which speaks of the Son of the New Testament. In verse 10 the Holy Spirit is mentioned, and clearly identified as a personality.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Romans 1:20 says, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." According to this verse, two things are clearly seen in God's creation of the world: His eternal power and Himself (the Godhead), even though both are invisible. His power can be seen in the expanse of the universe and the strength of the sun, as well as the atoms that make up all created things.

How do we see the Tri-unity of God in the creation of the world? Genesis 1:1 explains that "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth..." Our universe is essentially triune, consisting of three distinct, but interrelated, principles: time (beginning), space (heaven), and matter (earth). Everything in creation fits into one of these three categories.

This illustration can be taken a step further: Time is a triune concept. It is a single entity consisting of three distinctions - past, present, and future. Each of these distinctions can stand alone, and each is time; yet, to fully understand the concept of time, we must understand it as a triune concept. Time is one, revealed in three separate, but interrelated, ways.

The concept of space is also fully realized only when we understand it as triune - height, width, and depth. Each of these elements standing alone is space, but a complete understanding of space demands an understanding of its triune nature.

Finally, matter is triune - made up of energy, motion, and phenomena. Although each element is independent of the others, they are interrelated. Again, as with time and space, to fully understand the concept of matter, we must see these three distinct, but interrelated, parts of which it is

composed. In the same way, God is One existing in three persons - not three gods, but One God - who is fully understood and revealed as a Tri-unity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

THE MESSIAH IS GOD

Another issue must be considered in light of the truths already examined. How does the Messiah fit into the biblical teaching that God is a triune being? A number of passages from the Jewish Bible taught the Jewish people of the Old Testament that the Messiah would be God.

Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but also teaches that the Messiah is eternal. In other words, the One born in Bethlehem would be God in the flesh. Speaking of the Messiah, this passage says, "...whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Psalm 90:2 states that only Jehovah is "from everlasting." Therefore, the one to be born in Bethlehem would be Jehovah (God).

Isaiah 9:6 says, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given," thus identifying the Messiah as being born, and at the same time, being a Son who is given. This verse also calls Him "The mighty God." Clearly, Isaiah was teaching that the child to be born would be God.

Jeremiah 23:5-6 also declares that the Messiah would be God: "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." The King Messiah would be called the LORD (Jehovah). Obviously, He would be God because He would be called Jehovah.

THE SON OF GOD

The three persons of the Tri-unity in the New Testament are referred to as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The concept of God having a Son should not be foreign to the Jewish people because it is taught in the Jewish Bible.

Proverbs 30:4 asks the following questions: "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?" The One who has gathered the wind in his fists and established all the ends of the earth is obviously God. And his Son's name? Only one person has uniquely claimed to be the Son of God and fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. His name is Jesus.

Psalm 2:12 commands us to "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him." This verse is very instructive, especially in light of the admonition given in Jeremiah 17:5 and 7. Verse 5 states, "Thus saith the LORD, Cursed be the man that trusteth in man." Verse 7 states, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD (Jehovah)."

Because God has instructed us to put our trust in the Son (Psalm 2:12), that Son must be God. Worship directed to anyone but God is condemned by the same Bible that instructs us to worship (kiss) the Son. Therefore, the Son must be Jehovah, the God of Israel. The biblical teaching is clear: the Messiah is God (one of the three persons of the Tri-unity). He left heaven and came to earth as a man to be our Redeemer - to die and rise from the grave - to provide forgiveness for our sins.

A FINAL THOUGHT

It is difficult to put aside preconceptions and consider something entirely different from what we have been taught. This is especially true when it comes to religious issues; however, we should believe God before men and traditions. Will you give further consideration to what the Bible - God's Word - says about the Tri-unity and related subjects, such as Jesus' claims to be the Messiah and God? It is vitally important to do so. The biblical evidence is clear that Jesus is the Messiah, as well as God.

God desires to have a personal relationship with you through the Messiah, and we would like to help you know Him. Please write or call us if you have any questions about the triune nature of God, or if you would like additional material about the God of Israel, and Jesus the Messiah.

ENDNOTES

1. Some other uses of plural personal pronouns referring to God are Genesis 3:22, 11:7; and Isaiah 6:8.
2. Dr. David Cooper argues that the fundamental idea of *echad* is that of a compound unity and that it came to be used to express an absolute one in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, he says, the context determines our understanding of this word, (*The God of Israel, Messianic Series No. 1*, David Cooper, pp. 20-32).
3. Some other instances of *echad* speaking of a compound unity are found in Numbers 13:23 ("one cluster"); Jeremiah 32:38-39 ("one heart & one way"); and Ezekiel 37:17 ("one stick").
4. Some other passages in which this concept can be found are Psalms 45:6-7; Zechariah 2:8-9; and Malachi 3:1.