

Is the Trinity in Genesis?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Most Christians believe in the church doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one essence consisting of three co-equal and co-eternal Persons: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Many cite three passages in the book of Genesis as their primary Old Testament (OT) support for the Trinity: Genesis 1.26; 3.22; 11.7. And they often refer to them when asserting that Jesus preexisted. These texts are as follows:

1.26 “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’”

3.22 “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become as one of Us, knowing good and evil’”

11.7 “And the LORD said,... ‘Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language’”

In all three instances God is the speaker, whom Christians view as God the Father. But none of these narratives identify the “Us.” Many Trinitarians have claimed the “Us” are the other two members of the Trinity: the preexistent Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The four primary interpretations of the words “us” and “our” in Genesis 1.26 are as follows: (1) most Jews have interpreted them as God’s communication to a special group of angels who gather around God’s heavenly throne and constitute his royal court or council; (2) post-Nicene church fathers understood God the Father to be speaking to the other two members of the Trinity; (3) many commentators have regarded these words as a plural of majesty, which allows for Trinitarian belief but does not necessitate it; (4) God’s addresses himself. How one interprets this text usually determines how one treats the others, so that all three passages are interpreted the same.

The “Us” in Genesis 1.26 cannot be the supposed other two members of the Trinity because it says God made man in his image. If God is a Trinity of Persons, then man, being made in God’s image, would have to be tri-personal as well. Since man is a uni-personal being, God must be a uni-personal being. The closest man ever comes to being tri-personal is schizophrenia, a mental disorder which does not reflect God.

The word translated “God” in the Hebrew Bible is *elohim*, the plural of *eloah*. *Elohim* is often shortened to the proper name *El*. *Elohim* occurs about 2,570 times in the OT, either as a common noun or as a divine name. Most past Trinitarians insisted that *elohim*, being plural, indicates that God subsists as a plurality of persons.

Jewish and many contemporary Christian scholars disagree. They contend the plural word *elohim* merely indicates intensity, expressing the dignity or greatness of God. Jack B. Scott says most scholars insist that this “plural ending is usually described as a plural of majesty and not intended as a true plural when used of God. This is seen in the fact that the noun *elohim* is consistently used with singular verb forms and with adjectives and pronouns in the singular.” Then he cites antiquities authority William F. Albright, who claims that this plural of majesty was used commonly in the ancient Near East to express the “totality of manifestations of a deity.” Trinitarian F.F. Bruce says *elohim* is “a plural denoting God as including within Himself all the powers of deity.”

Besides, how could the most frequent word for God (except YHWH) in the Hebrew Bible accommodate a Gentile notion that God is three persons? That contradicts strict monotheism. And it seems presumptuous of Gentiles to tell Jews what Hebrew words mean. Few church fathers knew Hebrew, and their theology suffered from it.

Scripture attests that the Most High God meets regularly with a court of angelic advisors. The psalmist tells of “the assembly of the holy ones,” describing Yahweh as “a God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all those who are around Him” (Ps 89.5, 7). Job twice says of some angels, “the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD” to give an account of their activities (Job 1.6; 2.1). This hierarchy of delegated responsibility is like human government.

Since God regularly appoints angels to accomplish his will, perhaps he also involved them in creation. The Jewish Talmud states concerning God, “the Holy One, blessed be he, does nothing without consulting his heavenly court.” And the famed Sir Isaac Newton explained, “God does nothing by himself which he can do by another.”

Donald Gowan similarly remarks concerning Genesis 1.26 and 3.22:

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.... 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 the 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.

So, those to whom God spoke the words “us” and “our”—in Genesis 1.26, 3.22, and 11.2—probably were a special class of angels. Perhaps they were members of his royal council or “the seven spirits of God,” that is, “the seven angels who stand before God” (Revelation 1.4; 8.2), who probably are seven archangels. Regardless, the book of Genesis has no substantial evidence that they were two members of a supposed Trinity. Trinitarian Murray Harris states, “It would be inappropriate for *elohim* [God] or *yhwh* [Yahweh] ever to refer to the Trinity in the OT when in the NT *theos* regularly refers to the Father alone and apparently never to the Trinity.”

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ*, I devote 14 pages to this question. In doing so, I cite 32 scholars and their works as well as various ancient writings.