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The Trinity in the Old Testament

The Hebrew Scriptures offer some telling glimpses into the nature of God.

Jiří Moskala

The fundamental mystery of the Christian faith is belief in the Triune God. As Seventh-day Adventists, we confess that God is One but manifested in three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we speak about God, we need to remember that we enter holy ground, and we need to do it with deep humility, knowing our limits. We are using imperfect human language to describe an infinite God. The transcendent God always surpasses even our finest categories of thinking and logic.

The best attitude in such a situation is a humbleness to which God invited Moses when he encountered God: “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand *is* holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).¹ We know God only because He has made Himself known to us. What we perceive about Him was revealed to us; we are totally dependent upon His self-revelation (Ex. 34:6, 7). Thus, our only correct response to His Word is to carefully listen, eagerly learn, and wholeheartedly obey.

The basic confession of faith from the Hebrew Bible, which a faithful Jew recites at least twice a day: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4), clearly proclaims monotheism in a polytheistic society. This Shema announces God as being one in a fundamental and unequivocal statement. This oneness of God is stressed several times in the rest of the Old Testament, because He alone is the true God and besides Him there is none.

Does this Old Testament statement allow for a belief in the Trinity, or is it excluded by definition? It is important to note that the New Testament authors also proclaimed that God is one (Mark 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:5, 6), and thus they did not see this announcement as a contradiction to the Trinitarian thinking to which they adhered.

Some think that the Trinitarian teaching can be found only in the New Testament. But is the Old Testament’s view of the Godhead compatible with the Trinity?

First, however, it should be stated that no one should engage in a theological debate about the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus with those who oppose these truths unless they have an existential knowledge of Jesus Christ and have a personal relationship with Him. Only after a person accepts Jesus as his or her intimate Savior and Friend and falls in love with Him who forgives sins and helps in everyday struggles will that individual be open to accepting the divinity of Jesus *and* the biblical teaching on the Trinity.

Allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament

In the Hebrew language, a general term used to designate God is *Elohim*, a plural form of *El/Eloah*. This plural form was often interpreted as an indication for the Trinity. To state, however, that the plural form of the word *Elohim* is evidence for the Triune God is incorrect for the simple reason that this term is used to designate the true living God as well as pagan gods; its meaning depends on the context. “The word *elohim* is unique in its ‘flexibility’—it can be used both in the singular and the plural meaning, as a proper and a

common name, as a designation of the God of Israel and of pagan gods."²

A good example of these two opposite meanings is encountered in Ruth 1:15, 16: "Look [Ruth], your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods [*Elohim*]; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God [*Elohim*] my God [*Elohim*]." Therefore, one cannot argue from the plural form of *Elohim* for the notion of the Trinity. The term *Elohim* does not refer to three persons or three gods. It is rather a neutral expression; only the context decides the precise meaning of the word.

What is highly significant is that the name *Elohim* is used with a verb in the singular (a grammatical contradiction). For example, "In the beginning God [plural] created [singular] the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The same is true of the 10 expressions of *vayomer Elohim*, meaning "and God [plural] said [singular]" in the first Creation account (Genesis 1). The translation is thus not "gods," but "God," the one true living God. It is also crucial to note that pagan gods are never designated in the Bible by the name of the Lord (*Yahweh*). This name is used exclusively for the God who entered into a covenant relationship with His people.

The "We" of God

God usually speaks about Himself in the "I" formula (Ex. 20:2; Isa. 41:10, 13). However, in four biblical verses He refers to Himself in the category of "We":

- Genesis 1:26: "God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'"

- Genesis 3:22: "The Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.'"

- Genesis 11:7: "'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.'"

- Isaiah 6:8: "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.'"

Three times these specific proclamations are stated in forms of exhortation, i.e., admonitions in the first person plural ("let Us make"; "let Us go down"; "[let Us] confuse") and twice with prepositions ("of Us"; "for Us"). How should these plural divine expressions be understood? Are they in contradiction to biblical monotheism, or do such divine proclamations testify of the triune God? What does this plurality reveal about God of the Hebrew Bible?

Several attempts have been made to explain this divine plural usage, of which there are eight main theories.

Plural Interpretation Theories

1. *Mythological Reminiscence*. Some scholars argue that these plural expressions are reminiscent of a pagan origin, i.e., one god is addressing another god (or a pantheon of gods), because the first faith in a transcendent power was polytheistic, and this expression was used in the polytheistic society. So one god

addresses another (or many) in planning to create humans.

Johann Gabler proposed the theory that Genesis 1:26 contains the “remnants of Semitic polytheism.”³ And Hermann Gunkel is a proponent of such an interpretation: “God turns here to other elohim-beings and includes himself with them in the ‘we’. . . . The concept originates in polytheism, but is no longer polytheistic per se since it regards the one God (Yahweh) as the Lord, the sole determiner, but the other elohim as greatly inferior, indeed his servants.”⁴

It is true that in the mythological accounts of creation, gods talk among themselves when they create humans, as in *Enuma Elish* or in the *Atrahasis* creation epic. But the Bible and the Book of Genesis in particular contain strong anti-mythological elements. It would therefore be very difficult to imagine that there are traces here of mythological material. In addition, there is no room in biblical teaching for a progressive thinking from polytheism to monotheism.

2. *A Reference to Christ*. This view is attested to very early in the Christian Church—in the Epistle of Barnabas and in Justin Martyr. The First Council of Sirmium in A.D. 351 not only affirmed that the “‘Let Us’” of Genesis 1:26 was addressed by the Father to the Son as a distinct person, but they also excommunicated those who denied it. Christians later traditionally embraced this interpretation, and thus divine plurals became references to the Trinity. This is not a tenable interpretation for the simple reason that the text itself does not state who spoke to whom. This theory imposes a specific view on the biblical text, putting the New Testament idea into the reading of this expression. Why limit God’s conversation to only two divine persons?

3. *The Father’s Communication With the Holy Spirit*. D. J. A. Clines argues that the context of Genesis 1 points to the fact that the Father speaks to the Holy Spirit.⁵ The explicit reference to the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 shows that the Spirit creates, which means that He is the Co-Creator with the Father (see also Psalm 104:30).

This is a very attractive explanation. One wonders, however, if we need to limit God’s “We” only to the interaction between the Father and the Holy Spirit, because it is evident on the basis of intertextuality that Jesus Christ is the Creator, too (John 1:1-3 echoes Genesis 1:1-3).

4. *God Addressing Earthly Elements*. Some Jewish scholars in the past, such as Joseph Kimchi and Maimonides, suggested that God speaks to the earth. However, the serious question remains: Why would the earth be a partner to God in Creation? God creates Adam from the ground, using it, but He did not elevate the earthly materials with the power to create.

5. *Plural of Majesty*. This interpretation is recent, and it is proposed in correspondence to the medieval speeches of European kings, because they spoke about themselves in plural forms: “We, the king of England,” “We, the king of France,” or the queen of England said: “We are not amused.” According to this interpretation, God is speaking in a solemn way about Himself like a king in the plural form. Some scholars argue that the plural of majesty exists in the Bible, as in Ezra 4:18: “‘The letter that you [Rehum and Shimshai] sent to us [King Artaxerxes and his government] has been plainly read before me’” (ESV).

In the biblical records, there is no evidence that any Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Judean, or other ancient ruler would speak in this way. In other words, this rhetorical interpretation cannot be imposed on these divine “We” texts, because there is no indication that such a rhetorical style was used in biblical times.

6. *God’s Address to His Heavenly Court*. According to this theory, God speaks to His angels or officials in heaven and then He creates humans. This interpretation is very popular. John N. Oswalt argues that “it is

possible, in the light of 1 Kings 22:19, that who will go for us [in Isa. 6:8] is an address to the heavenly host, either visibly present or implied.”⁶ Nahum Sarna states that “the extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host” and maintains that “this is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized.”⁷

It is true that sometimes God addresses His heavenly court (Job 1:6–9; 1 Kings 22:19–22; Dan. 4:14). It is highly improbable, however, that this would be the case in our texts under investigation (see the rhetorical question in Isaiah 40:41). Such an interpretation of Genesis 1:26 fails on two grounds:

A. Exegetical-syntactical argument: A close parallelism between Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 1:27 does not leave space for someone other than God Himself for creating humans in His image. In Genesis 1:26, God states His intention to create humans: “Let Us make man . . . ,” and in Genesis 1:27, the result of His creation initiative is described: Humans were created in His image. They were not created in the image of God and other heavenly beings (i.e., His court). The biblical text is explicit: “God created man in His [not Their] own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). The parallelism of those verses states plainly that “His image” is “God’s image uniquely.” Humans were created solely in the image of God and not in the image of God and His angels/court. (See also Genesis 5:1–3.)

B. Theological argument: The biblical message consistently points to God as the only Creator. Besides Him there is no one in the entire Universe who could be designated as co-creator with Him. Thus, “let Us” does not refer to angels or His heavenly court as being His Co-creators. The biblical texts are unanimous and consistent: God alone is the Creator; only He created Adam and Eve in His image. The same truth about the God Creator is attested to in the New Testament (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16).

7. *Plural of Self-Deliberation (Plural of Exhortation)*. According to this view, God speaks to Himself (understood as being one person), and He encourages Himself to perform as we sometimes encourage ourselves before a difficult task by saying: “Let’s do it.” Umberto Cassuto, for example, suggests that it is a plural of exhortation or self-encouragement.⁸

This interpretation is highly uncertain because of the lack of clear biblical parallels. It seems that this hypothesis creates God in our image, needing to encourage Himself as we humans need to exhort ourselves. According to scholars, the plural of self-deliberation is not found about God in the biblical material. D. J. A. Clines argues that “the rarity of parallelism gives us little confidence in the correctness of this view.”⁹ God is not a solitary Being who speaks aloud to Himself in order to exhort Himself.

8. *Plural of Fullness—Plurality Within the Godhead*. In this interpretation, God speaks or communicates within the Godhead. He is in dialogue within the different Persons of the divinity. The term “plural of fullness” was coined by Derek Kidner,¹⁰ and many scholars have followed his lead. C. John Collins goes beyond this understanding and actually explains Genesis 1:26: “It is a ‘we’ of self-address (which can open the way for plurality of persons in the Godhead).”¹¹

The term “plural of fullness” is not very clear, even though the concept is substantial. It is obvious that the meaning of these plural divine expressions must be interpreted by the immediate context, and in this way to clarify their meaning, and also suggest a new terminology.

Determination of the “We” of God by the Context

What does the context provide for the understanding of the divine “Us”?

Genesis 1:26

God the Creator deliberately presents Himself as “We” and not as “I” when He creates humans. The divine “We” forms people in His image; it means that this divine “We” makes humans as “we” also (as husband and wife), that is, not as isolated individuals, but persons in relationship to Him and to one another. Thus, God creates humans into a close fellowship. God is plural, and when He creates humanity into His image, He makes them in plural—that is, He creates persons into fellowship.

From the very beginning, God wants to be known not by His “I” but by “We” in His relationship to humanity. This is why He also creates “we” (humans as male and female). Humans created into His image must also be a plurality as He is We. And as there is a unity within God Himself, so the two human persons, distinct and different, should become intimately one. Thus, the whole human being is “We” and not “I.” This is only on condition that they live in close personal fellowship. To do so, they need to stay in relationship with the One who created them out of love. Thus, when God creates, He creates into fellowship, creates humans as “we.” On the background of this immediate context of Genesis 1:26, the plural of the divine “We” is a plural of fellowship or plural of community within the Godhead. This conclusion is confirmed by three additional passages.

Genesis 3:22

The immediate context of Genesis 3:22 is the fall into sin, a reverse or de-creation of creation. The human “we” is broken by sin, degraded. When the “we” of humanity is depraved (not only with one individual but also corporately), then God again speaks in plural, and confronts “we.”

Humans were created in dependency upon God, in fellowship with Him, and when this intimate relationship was broken, meaningful life disappeared. When “we” is dysfunctional, then fellowship and integrity are destroyed. The first couple wanted to be like God, to decide for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what was good and evil. Only the grace of God’s We could bring healing to humanity.

The literal translation of Genesis 3:22 is: “Behold, the man was [not “has become”] like one of us knowing good and evil.” The meaning is “was like” and not necessarily “become like.” The first couple wanted to be like God, which meant deciding for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what was good and evil. Today we are totally dependent upon God’s revelation to know what is good and evil.

Genesis 11:4-7

God’s speech in Genesis 11:7, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech,” is a direct reaction to the arrogant speech and proud attitude of the humans’ “let us.” The Babylonians stated: “Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens” (vs. 4).

When humans build their “we” against God, He reveals Himself to them in His We. God’s “We” stands in contrast to humanity’s rebellious “we.” In this biblical text, as well as in Genesis 3:22, these plural forms of divine addresses point to “the fate of humanity.”¹² Humans need to submit to We and live in close fellowship

with Him in order to live an integral, harmonious, and happy life with one another.

Isaiah 6:8

In the vision of the holiness of God, Isaiah is convinced of his sinfulness. After divine cleansing, God asks: "Whom shall I send?" And Isaiah responds: "Here I am, send me." The prophet is sent with a special divine commission of calling a sinful people to repentance. In verse 8, God speaks for the first time. Only after purification is Isaiah ready to meet directly with God and learn God's purpose for him. "Only when his sin, seen in all its massive and objective reality, is removed can Isaiah hear the voice of God."¹³

In this setting, the divine plural statement refers to God Himself because of the strength of the Hebrew parallelism in the verse: (A) "Whom shall I send?" (B) "Who will go for us?" The "I" in the first question corresponds to the "us" in the second. Thus the match leads to the apparent conclusion that it is God Himself who speaks here for Himself, and He is not doing it for Himself and additional heavenly beings, His court, His lords or advisers.

Isaiah will be on God's mission for His cause. The stress is on the divine commission. God sends and gives a message, and the prophet should go for Him. He is not a speaker for the heavenly court but for God Himself. He is accountable to Him. Isaiah is sent to people—to plurality. It is noteworthy that even though J. Alec Motyer argues in Isaiah 6:8 for a "plural of consultation," he adds that the New Testament "relates this passage both to the Lord Jesus (John 12:41) and to the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), finding here that which will accommodate the full revelation of the triune God."¹⁴

Close study of the divine plural expressions in these four passages leads to a surprising conclusion. God speaks about Himself as "We," and this expression points to a plural of fellowship or community within the Godhead. This plurality is a "plurality of Persons."¹⁵ God communicates within Himself; He is in a dialogue within the Godhead.

The "We" expressions of God do not contradict biblical monotheism, but point to the Trinitarian thinking rooted in the Old Testament even though they do not yet proclaim the Trinity plainly. It is crucial to observe that the New Testament is not presenting something entirely new or foreign to Hebrew thinking.

The Meaning of ("One") in Deuteronomy 6:5

Is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:5 in contradiction to our conclusion so far? In the Hebrew language, there are two words for expressing the idea of one: *echad* and *yachid*. The term *echad* is used in the *Shema*. There are at least three nuances of meanings for the word *echad* in relationship to Deuteronomy 6:5.

The Lord is One means that:

- *The Lord is unique.* He is utterly holy; it means He is different from anyone else. One can speak about the otherness of God, because as a holy Being, He is the Other One. Thus, one is not a numerical value but a description of the quality.

- *The Lord is exclusive.* God alone is worthy of our praise, because He is faithful. He is the God of all gods. It does not mean a hierarchy within a pantheon of gods with the Lord as the Most High God as would be suggested by the historical background of polytheistic culture, but rather He is exclusive in His position because other gods are nothing—they have no life, they cannot hear, see, intervene, or act (Isa. 44:6-20). Our God, the Lord, is real. No one can be compared to Him (Deut. 4:39; Isa. 45:18).

- *The Lord is unity.* This means God is oneness. The word *echad* indicates also the invisible and indivisible unity of the Lord. It is interesting that in the *Shema*, the two names for God are used: *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. Both terms contain a different message in their meaning. *Elohim* points to a mighty, powerful God ('*el*' = "powerful," "mighty"), universal, distant God, God of all humanity, God Creator, transcendent God who creates by His word.

In the first biblical Creation account this phrase is used 10 times: "And God said." *Yahweh*, on the other hand, is an imminent, near, intimate God, God of the covenant, God of His people who enter into a covenantal relationship with Him. *Yahweh* is a personal God who creates persons by His personal, close involvement. These two names are an inner indicator for the different aspects of God's involvement with humans.

The term *echad* does not speak about the singularity or solitude of God. He is one but not single or isolated. Here is the reference of plurality within the oneness of God. This term is better translated as *unity*. This can be observed from other texts that employ this word *echad*.

For example, in marriage there is a close unity of two individuals (husband and wife): "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one [*echad*] flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This oneness is not about numbers but about closeness of relationship, expressing a close unity. Other texts (e.g., Gen. 11:1, 6; Ex. 24:3; Ezra 2:64) speak about different people or nations becoming one, that is, united.

On the other hand, the term *yachid* ("only," "only one," "lonely," "solitary," "single," "precious life") occurs all together 12 times in the Old Testament and expresses the idea of one in the sense of singleness, solitude, and exclusivity. Our God is not *yachid*, "one," in the sense of a solitary or lonely Being. There is a fellowship of love and unselfishness within the Godhead, a unity within a community of persons.

Allusions to the Plurality of Persons within the Godhead

There are Old Testament texts that attest to the plurality of persons in God Himself (multi-personal God). Internal indicators point to this reality. Two clusters of such Old Testament passages can be gathered: The first list refers to two divine persons, and the second points to three divine persons.

Texts that allude to two divine Persons:

- "Then the Lord [pre-incarnate Jesus who talked to Abraham] rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord [the Heavenly Father] out of the heavens" (Gen. 19:24). It is possible (hints lie in the narrative itself) to interpret this verse as an allusion to two different divine persons called *YHWH*, the Lord—one being in heaven, and the second one dialoguing with Abraham. This conclusion can be reached on two premises: (1) Genesis 18–19 is seen as a literary unit dealing with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and (2) The Lord who visited Abraham together with two other angels (Genesis 18–19) and spoke with Abraham in chapter 18 is still down on earth in chapter 19. In this way the last part of Genesis 14:24 makes sense. God who is "down" sends fire from heaven, literally "from the Lord out of heaven." Thus, God's judgment upon the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah comes as a result of close cooperation between the Lord on earth and the Lord in heaven.

- Projecting future events related to the Exodus and the conquering of the Promised Land, God

proclaims: "My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off" (Ex. 23:23).

- "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (Ps. 45:6, 7). According to Hebrews 1:8, 9, the text is applied to Jesus Christ as the King who was anointed by the heavenly Father for a specific mission.

- David is speaking prophetically: "The Lord [*Yahweh*, the Heavenly Father] said to my [David's] Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps. 110:1). This royal Psalm is a direct Messianic poem taken as such by the early church, and is most frequently quoted in the New Testament in application to Jesus Christ (see Matthew 22:43-45; Acts 2:34-36; 7:55, 56; Hebrews 1:13; 5:6-10) who is presented as the King, Priest, and Judge.

- The personified/hypostatized Wisdom is rejoicing in creating activities with the Lord as Co-Creators: "Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men" (Prov. 8:30, 31).

- After God is described as the Creator, the text then mentions a surprising, puzzling, and unexplainable question about His Son: "Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know" (Prov. 30:4).

- The Prophet Daniel in his vision of the heavenly pre-advent judgment mentions two separate heavenly divine beings—the "Ancient of Days" and the "Son of Man." The Ancient of Days, the Heavenly Father, presides over the judgment, but the prominence of the Son of Man is stressed by associating Him with the clouds as One "coming with the clouds of heaven," clouds being a symbol used in conjunction with the appearance of Deity; giving Him full authority and worshiping Him. Thus, two divine beings are presented in Daniel 7:13, 14: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed." The most beloved title Jesus used for Himself and identified with was the Messianic title "Son of Man" taken from Daniel 7.

- The Lord, the Heavenly Father, promises to save His people by the Lord, Savior Jesus Christ who is their God: "Yet I will have mercy on the house of Judah, will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword or battle, by horses or horsemen" (Hosea 1:7).

- *Yahweh* is referring to *Yahweh*: "And the Lord [Jesus Christ] said to Satan, 'The Lord [the heavenly Father] rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?'" The Lord Jesus Christ who speaks with Satan points to the Lord, the heavenly Father who will rebuke Satan, because he accuses Joshua, the high priest, for his sins. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus Christ forgives, cleanses, and provides clean garments for Joshua.

- "I will strengthen them in the Lord, and they shall walk up and down in His name," says the Lord" (Zech. 10:12. It might be that the Lord speaks about Himself strengthening His people in order to walk in His name. However, God's statement can point to the future and thus refer to another Lord, namely, the Messiah

—Jesus Christ.

• “Behold, I send My messenger [John the Baptist], and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant [the Messiah, Jesus Christ], in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

Texts that suggest three divine Persons:

• In light of John 1:1-3, one can discover hints for the Trinity in Genesis 1:1-3. God (*Elohim*), the Spirit of God (*ruach Elohim*), and the Word of God (*vayomer Elohim*; “and God said”—this significant phrase occurs ten times in the first Creation account, thus pointing to God’s Word) appear together in the Genesis text. In the early verses of the Gospel According to John, Jesus Christ is directly named as the Word and the Creator. In this way, all three Persons of the Godhead are alluded to in the Genesis Creation account.

• This Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11:1, 2 announces the coming of the Rod from the stem of Jesse, having in view the Davidic King Jesus Christ, then it mentions also the Spirit and the Lord. “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:1, 2).

• Isaiah 42:1 speaks about the Servant of the Lord (*ebed Yahweh*). On the basis of his role and mission as well as intertextuality, one can safely conclude that this figure is the Messiah. His task is enormous, which can be accomplished only by God, namely, He was appointed to be the Savior for the whole world. “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One *in whom* My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1).

• One of the strongest and most explicit texts about the Trinity in the Hebrew Bible is “Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me” (Isa. 48:16).

• “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa. 61:1, 2 (NKJV)). Jesus Christ used this text in His first sermon when He began His public ministry and stated that this prediction was now fulfilled (see Luke 4:16-21).

• Isaiah 63:8-10 brings all three Persons of the Trinity together. The text asserts the personality of the Holy Spirit who is “vexed” or “grieved” by disobedience (see also Psalm 106:33; Ephesians 4:30). This Hebrew verb is always used in conjunction with persons, never with power or inanimate things. “He [the Lord] said, ‘Surely they are My people, Children who will not lie.’ 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 pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” (Isa. 63:8-10).

• The Prophet Haggai in 520 B.C., while encouraging God’s people after their return from Babylonian exile to rebuild the new temple, predicted that the Desire of all nations, the Messiah would visit this sanctuary. The Lord Almighty, His Spirit, and the Desire of all nations are projected to be together in this second temple in Jerusalem. This will be a cosmic event: “I am with you,” says the Lord of hosts. ‘According

to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear! For thus says the Lord of hosts: "Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory," says the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:4-7).

And there are many other hints and implications in the Old Testament in addition to those already discussed in this study (the "We" of God; and the textual allusions to two or three divine persons in the Godhead) that suggest to the careful reader the plurality of God's nature. These other references are addressed more fully in an article in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* and argued from different angles: someone coming from God is designated as God (Isa. 7:14; 9:6); special appearances of the pre-incarnate Jesus (as in Genesis 18 and 19; 32:14-30; Joshua 5:13-15; Dan. 10:5, 6); and appearances of the specific figures (besides the Lord, the heavenly Father) like the Angel of the Lord (identified as God, for example, in Gen. 22:11-18; 31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-7; 23:20, 21; Judges 2:1; 6:11-24; 13:3-23; Zech. 3:1-8), Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Rev. 12:7), the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), the Son of God (Dan. 3:25), the wisdom of God (Prov. 8:1-14; and God's presence (Ex. 33:12-15; Isa. 63:8, 9).¹⁶

The Unity and Complexity of God

Even though the Old Testament divine expressions of "We" do not testify directly about the Trinity, they hint to a unity and complexity within the being of God. This plurality within Deity is well attested and developed in the New Testament. The biblical monotheistic belief does not think about God in terms of His solitude or His singleness but presents Him as "We," or in fellowship within the Godhead. God created humanity in His image; He made humans in fellowship with one another, particularly husband and wife in a close intimate relationship, because He is fellowship, He is in relationship within Himself. This divine plural of fellowship suggests plurality of persons and points to the unity in His nature.

This intra-divine fellowship of one God within plurality is a unique characteristic of our God. God is in communication within Himself and with His creation. We can build a personal relationship with this God of relationships and interactions.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not yet fully developed in the Old Testament, but there are impressive expressions pointing to Trinitarian thinking. The Old Testament uses a plethora of terms for describing the second person of the Godhead. The biblical designation of God as "We" means believing in a personal, close, unselfish God of love, a God of relationships.

And there are many other hints and implications in the Old Testament in addition to those already discussed in this study (the "We" of God; and the textual allusions to two or three Divine Persons in the Godhead) that suggest to the careful reader the plurality of God's nature. These other references are explored more fully in "Toward the Trinitarian Thinking in the Hebrew Scriptures": Someone coming from God is designated as God (Isa. 7:14; 9:6); special appearances of the pre-incarnate Jesus (as in Genesis 18 and 19; Daniel 10:5, 6); and appearances of the specific figures (besides the Lord, the Heavenly Father) like the Angel of the Lord (identified as God, for example, in Genesis 22:11-18; Exodus 23:20, 21; Judges 13:3-23), Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Rev. 12:7), the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-9; 52:13-53:12), the Son of God (Dan. 3:25), the Wisdom of God (Prov. 8:22-31); and God's Presence (Ex. 33:12-15; Isa. 63:8, 9).¹⁷

The New Testament Trinitarian orientation is already rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Old Testament anticipates what is later plainly exposed in the New Testament teaching on this subject. The Old Testament presents implicitly, gradually, and progressively evidences for the existence of the Trinity.

The biblical paradox affirms that God simultaneously exists in singular and plural. It leads to the conclusion that He is one but in different persons. God is neither single nor married; He is in fellowship within Himself; He is community. The community of God is the source and basis of all other communities within His creation. The community of God's "We" leads to the "we" of humanity and to the togetherness of all creation, even in the cosmic sense. God's unity ties all of God's creation together to form a rich diversity.

The expression "'Let Us'" is not a statement that speaks directly about the Trinity, but it does not contradict the Trinitarian teaching. It is not a declaration about numbers, but about uniqueness, the quality of our God. Within the background of the Hebrew monotheism and divine plural speeches, it becomes clear that these expressions leave room for the doctrine of the Trinity, because *echad* not only affirms the oneness and uniqueness of God, but also points to the unity within a plurality of fellowship.

It is true that *Trinity* is not a biblical term, but this term very well expresses the important aspect of the biblical teaching about the Godhead. There are many other theological words that do not appear in the Bible, but we rightly use *incarnation*, *theophany*, *theocracy*, *eschatology*, *inspiration*, etc., because they capture well the biblical meaning of the point. The "plural of fellowship" in the light of its context leads to the recognition of different persons (not necessarily three) within the Godhead in interaction. However, this plural is an indirect witness about the "heavenly trio," an expression used by Ellen G. White.

The God *Yahweh* is plurality and always in relationship, first of all in relationship within the Godhead and in interaction with His creation. The love relationship within the Godhead is the basis for all other interactions and relationships. Our God longs for meaningful relationships with His creatures; because of His love He created them in multiple relationships to His image after His pattern (Gen. 1:26, 27). As God is not a solitary person, so humans are not created for isolation but for social life in marriage and community.

We need to be careful, extremely careful, in attempts to explain God so as not to create Him in our image. Humans were created in His image, and not vice versa. In view of the uniqueness and otherness of our God, it becomes clear that we cannot grasp the full picture of our Lord, as He is above our comprehension of His nature. We are limited in our understanding and capacities. We can only stand in awe before Him and admire Him. We can only ask for a wonder, for a glimpse to see Him and to worship Him, and to serve our awesome God who surpasses our concepts of understanding and logic. He is always above all things and our expressions to grasp the reality of life.

Instead of trying to explain the details regarding Him, let us relate to Him personally who is One and plurality of fellowship at the same time. Our goal should be to gratefully and faithfully follow God and interact with others whom He has put beside us as part of His marvelous creation.

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