

THE MEANING OF "LET US" IN GN 1:26

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The plural "let us" in the phrase "let us make man" in Gn 1:26 has a long history of interpretation, reaching into pre-Christian times. What does the plural "us" in this enigmatic phrase indicate? Should it be changed to the singular or does it indeed have a plural meaning? If it has a plural meaning, is its intention to express an address between gods, or between God and heavenly beings, or between God and earth or earthly elements? Is it a plural of majesty, a plural of deliberation, or a plural of fullness? These suggestions and their supporting arguments will receive critical consideration with an attempt to evaluate their cogency.

Jewish scholars produced for King Ptolemy the "corrected" version of the sacred Scriptures with the rendering "let me" in the singular.¹ Christian exegetes have left a rich history of interpretation.² Justin Martyr found in the plural a reference to Christ.³ Later Irenaeus includes in the plural the Son and the Holy Spirit⁴ and a similar trinitarian explanation of the expression is found in Theophilus of Antioch.⁵ Tertullian includes in the plural the activity of the incarnate Word, i.e. Christ.⁶ In short, in the Early Church the predominant interpretation understood the plural as expressing the trinity or triunity of God.

The First Council of Sirmium (A.D. 351) affirmed that Gn 1:26 was addressed by the Father to the Son as a distinct Person and

¹ J. Jervell, *Imago Dei* (Göttingen, 1960), p. 75.

² H. H. Somers, "The Riddle of a Plural (Gen 1:26): Its History in Tradition," *Folia* 9 (1955): 63-101; R. Mcl. Wilson, "The Early History of the Exegesis of Gen 1:26," *Studia Patristica* 1 (1957): 420-437.

³ G. F. Armstrong, *Die Genesis in der alten Kirche* (Göttingen, 1962), p. 39.

⁴ Armstrong, *Genesis*, p. 69.

⁵ Wilson, *Studia Patristica* 1 (1957): 431-432.

⁶ Armstrong, *Genesis*, pp. 127-128.

threatened excommunication for all those who denied it.⁷ This trinitarian interpretation has become the traditional view but is widely questioned today even among Roman Catholic scholars.⁸

This introduction provides the background for a consideration of current views.

1. *The Mythological Interpretation*

In comparison to ancient Near Eastern parallels the suggestion has been put forth that the expression "let us" expresses the idea of counseling in a divine assembly, namely one god addresses another in preparation for the creation of man. This view has an early interpreter in J. Ph. Gabler who in 1795 suggested that here are "remnants of a Semitic polytheism."⁹ This mythological interpretation has been supported by H. Gunkel¹⁰ and is adopted by many other scholars.¹¹

A number of ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies contain the idea of the creation of man as the outcome of conversations between gods. In the *Enuma elish* Marduk addresses the god Ea to reveal the plan of the creation of man "for the relief of the gods." A Sumerian text describes how Nammu, the primordial sea-goddess, urges her son Enki to "fashion servants of the gods."¹² Enki then gives instruction for man's creation. In the most important single witness to the Babylonian speculation on man's origin, the Atrahasis Epic, man is also created after conversations be-

⁷ Somers, *Folia* 9 (1955): 63-67.

⁸ H. Junker, *Genesis* (Würzburg, 1949), p. 13: "The OT reader can recognize here no 'vestigium Trinitatis.'" P. Heinisch, *Das Buch Genesis* (Bonn, 1930), p. 100: "Whoever understands this verse of the trinity forgets that Gen 1 is part of the OT."

⁹ *Neuer Versuch* (Altdorf, 1795), p. 36. See also his footnote in J. G. Eichhorn's *Urgeschichte* 1 (Altdorf, 1790): 217, n. 25, which he edited for publication.

¹⁰ H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen, 1901), p. 101.

¹¹ A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften* 1 (Munich, 1953): 351 ff.; J. Hempel, *Gott, Mensch und Tier* (BZAW, 81; Berlin, 1961), p. 220; G. W. Ahlström, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Leiden, 1963), p. 50; S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1963), p. 151; and others.

¹² S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 2d ed. (New York, 1961), p. 70.

tween a variety of gods and goddesses.¹³ There is an Akkadian text which contains the phrase "let us create mankind." We may quote it as being the closest parallel of all known texts from the ancient Near East:

The banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates
 Have been established,
 What (else) shall we do?
 What (else) shall we create?

 Let us slay (two) Lamga gods.
 With their blood let us create mankind.
 The service of the gods be their portion,
 For all times.¹⁴

Gn 1:26 is said to reflect this kind of mythological picture. Further support is sought in the OT notion of a heavenly court.¹⁵ Although the OT knows a heavenly court which is usually understood to be made up of angelic or other created beings, this is not identical to the notions presented in the ancient Near Eastern myths with their conversations between gods. It is extremely unlikely that the use of the plural in the expression "let us" in Gn 1:26 is in any way dependent on such mythological descriptions.¹⁶ C. Westermann has recently pointed out the impossibility that the writer of Gn 1 could have considered the plural in terms of a conversation in a heavenly court because "he did not know the notion of a heavenly court," and also because "he emphasizes strongly the uniqueness of Yahweh beside which there is no other heavenly being."¹⁷ We can only agree with G. von Rad who has summarized succinctly:

Nothing is here by chance; everything must be considered carefully, deliberately and precisely. It is false, to reckon here [Gen 1] even occasionally with archaic and half-mythological

¹³ W. G. Lambert, *Atra-ḥasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 57-61; W. L. Moran, "The Creation of Man in Atrahasis I 192-248," *BASOR* 200 (1970): 48-56.

¹⁴ A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1963), p. 69.

¹⁵ 1 Ki 22:19-20; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; 38:7.

¹⁶ D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 64.

¹⁷ C. Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1968), p. 200.

rudiments. . . . What is said here is intended to hold true entirely and exactly as it stands.¹⁸

If we couple this idea so well expressed and correct on general grounds with the established fact that Gn 1 contains a strong anti-mythological polemic¹⁹ then it is difficult to understand how a trace of polytheism could have been maintained in the phrase "let us." On the one hand the writer composes "carefully, deliberately and precisely" and on the other hand he fights off any mythological notions in the creation story. These considerations indicate that the mythological interpretation is totally inadequate.²⁰

2. *Address to Earthly Elements*

A view held by some Jewish scholars in the past²¹ but hardly supported in modern times²² is the idea that God talked to the earth or to earthly elements. The phrase "in our image" would then refer to man's likeness of both God and earth or earthly elements, which view would pose most serious difficulties.

In Gn 2:7 man is certainly formed from the dust of the ground and becomes a living being through God's breathing the breath of life into him. But why would God wish to invite the earth as a partner in the work of the creation of man? In the creation story the earth is made and exists in a completely undifferentiated, unpersonalized condition. The view that there is a partnership

¹⁸ G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 45.

¹⁹ Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *EQ* 46 (1974): 81-102.

²⁰ Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of OT Theology*, 2d ed. (Newton, Mass., 1970), p. 327: "It is necessary however, to devote a few words to the possibility of a polytheistic survival in Gen 1:26. The whole atmosphere of Gen 1, where God is recognized as existing before all other things and where all present existence is traced back to His Word only, is so anti-polytheistic that the very idea of polytheism is out of the question."

²¹ Joseph Kimchi and Maimonides *Genesis Rabbah* 8.3 (Soncino ed. 1:56): "R. Joshua b. Levi said: He took counsel with the works of heaven and earth . . . R. Samuel b. Nahman: With the works of each day."

²² W. Caspari, "Imago Divina," *Festschrift Reinhold Seeberg I*, ed. W. Koepf Leipzig, 1929), p. 207.

between God and earth in the creation of man finds no support in the OT or in ancient Near Eastern texts. The idea is actually contradicted in Gn 1:27 where God alone is the Creator of the world. It would be also strange that the earth is spoken of in the third person in vs. 24. These difficulties have rightly led interpreters to reject the theory that the "us" refers to God's address to the earth or earthly elements.

3. *Address to Heavenly Court*

A prominent interpretation among modern scholars is that the plural refers to God's addressing a heavenly court.²³ In support of this position the traditional texts known in the OT concerning a heavenly court are used.²⁴ This position is considered by many to be an extension of the mythological interpretation but it is said to avoid a crude polytheism.

If this suggestion should be correct, the implication would clearly be that man must be made in the image not only of God but also of other heavenly beings. This conclusion has been drawn by G. von Rad who explains: "The meaning of vs. 26f. is that man is created by God in the form of and similar to the Elohim." This "means that God's image does not refer directly to Yahweh but to the 'angels.'"²⁵ But this suggestion on the part of von Rad is contradicted in vs. 27: "and God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him."

Another objection of considerable weight rests in the fact that the words "let us make" would not simply be communicative²⁶ but include the heavenly court in the act of the creation of man. The consistent picture of the OT, however, is that the act of creation is that of Yahweh alone. For example, the rhetorical question in Is 40:14—"With whom took he counsel?"—shows that

²³ G. von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 57.

²⁴ I Ki 22:19; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; 38:7.

²⁵ G. von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 57.

²⁶ F. Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh, 1888), 1: 98; H. E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis* (Cambridge, 1914), p. 19.

Yahweh did not include in his speaking and counseling any other heavenly creature. Furthermore, we must remember that those that were addressed in Gn 1:26 are not merely consulted by the speaker but are indeed summoned to an act of creation in harmony with the one who speaks.²⁷ It is no surprise that many scholars have seen these to be cogent reasons on the basis of which the interpretation of the plural in terms of an address to the heavenly court is judged inadequate.

4. *Plural of Majesty*

Many interpreters in the past regarded the plural as a plural of majesty (*pluralis majestatis*). This means that God speaks of himself and with himself in the plural number. This suggestion, held by only a few today, needs some consideration.

Plurals of majesty exist with nouns in the Hebrew language²⁸ but there are no certain examples of plurals of majesty with either verbs or pronouns. The only possible exception where there may be a plural of majesty with a pronoun is said to come from post-exilic times. A statement by a Persian king quoted in Ezr 4:18²⁹ reads, "The document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me" (NAS). It had been suggested, however, that more probably the "us" means "my government" or "my court," and the pronoun "me" equals "me personally," so that "in fact 'us' is here not really a plural of majesty."³⁰ If this suggestion is correct, then the OT nowhere contains a verb or pronoun used in connection with a plural of majesty. Even if there were an exception, it is correct that the verb used in Gn 1:26

²⁷ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1 (Edinburgh, 1958): 191-192.

²⁸ P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'Hebreu biblique* (Rome, 1947), #136 d-e; C. Brockelmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen* (Berlin, 1913), 2: 60-61, #29d; idem, *Hebräische Syntax* (Neukirchen, 1956), #19c.

²⁹ W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (2d ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967), p. 129; Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 200.

³⁰ Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 65.

(*ʿāsāh*) is *never* used with a plural of majesty.³¹ There is no linguistic or grammatical basis upon which the "us" can be considered to be a plural of majesty. It is for this reason that this interpretation is today generally abandoned.

5. *Plural of Deliberation*

One of the most widely accepted interpretations of the plural in Gn 1:26 is that God addresses himself and that the plural is a plural of deliberation. The arguments put forth in its favor rest upon a colloquial use in modern languages. In English one can say, "Let's see."³² L. Koehler has noted a similar usage in Swiss German.³³ The question is being raised whether such a use can be found in the OT. Supporters of this hypothesis point to 2 Sam 24:14, where David speaks of himself in the plural "let us fall [*nippelāh*] into the hand of the Lord . . . but into the hand of men let me not fall [*eppolāh*]." In Ps 1:11 the following supposedly close parallel is found: "Let us make [*na^{ca}śeh*, as in Gn 1:26] ornaments of gold studded with silver."³⁴ However, it is by no means certain that this is really the plural expressing self-deliberation because the speaker can include here the craftsman who would be asked to produce such ornaments of gold. In any case, these examples hardly qualify as explanations that there is a plural of deliberation used in Gn 1:26, because in none of these examples do we find God as the speaker. Passages with God as the speaker are Is 6:8; Gn 3:22; 11:7. But these passages can hardly be used in support of a plural of deliberation in Gn 1:26, because they have the same problems as the passage under discussion and either fall into the same category without any supportive evidence or are to be explained as Gn 1:26 in other ways. "The rarity of parallels gives us little confidence in

³¹ Jotun, *Grammaire*, #114e.

³² Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 68.

³³ L. Koehler, "Die Grundstelle der Imago-Dei-Lehre, Gen 1, 26" *TZ* 4 (1968): 21-22.

³⁴ Schmidt, *Schöpfungsgeschichte*, p. 130.

the correctness of this view, . . ."³⁵ It is difficult to disagree with this conclusion.

6. *Plural of Fullness*

The inadequacies of the suggestions already discussed lead us to suggest that the plural in the phrase "let us" (Gn 1:26) is a plural of fullness.³⁶ This plural supposes that there is within the divine Being the distinction of personalities, a plurality within the deity, a "unanimity of intention and plan."³⁷ In other words, a distinction in the divine Being with regard to a plurality of persons is here represented as a germinal idea.³⁸ Thus the phrase "let us" expresses through its plural of fullness an intra-divine deliberation among "persons" within the divine Being.³⁹ The understanding of the plural as a plural of fullness gives all indications of being an adequate interpretation which avoids the unsatisfactory aspects of the other solutions.

There is no explicit indication in the narrative of man's creation as to the identity of the partners within the plurality of persons in the divine Being. It has been suggested that God is addressing his Spirit who has appeared in Gn 1:2 in a prominent role.⁴⁰ The translation "mighty wind" for "Spirit of God" is full of difficulties.⁴¹ Other OT passages in which the Spirit is the agent of creation may be cited.⁴² On the other hand, one may point

³⁵ Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 68.

³⁶ The expression "plural of fullness" is used explicitly by D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago, 1967), p. 52.

³⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1: 192.

³⁸ J. P. Lange, *Genesis* (London, 1890), p. 173.

³⁹ The idea of another "person" within the divine Being is affirmed among these by J. J. Stamm, "Die Imago-Lehre von Karl Barth und die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft," *Antwort. Festschrift für K. Barth*, ed. E. Wolf et al. (Zollikon-Zurich, 1956), p. 94; Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 69. M. J. Lagrange, "Hexameron," *RB* 5 (1896): 387, writes, "If he uses the plural, this supposes that there is in him a fullness of being so that he can deliberate with himself."

⁴⁰ So Lange, *Genesis*, p. 173, whose view is more fully developed by Clines, *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 69.

⁴¹ See W. H. McClellan, "The Meaning of *RUAH 'ELOHIM* in Gen 1:2," *Bib* 15 (1934): 517-527; D. W. Thomas, "A Consideration of Some Unusual

to the vivid personification⁴³ or more likely a hypostasis⁴⁴ of wisdom in Pr 8. Wisdom seems to have divine rank and has a share with Yahweh in seeing the world coming into existence. Pr 8:31 may be understood to allude "to the topics of conversation between Yahweh and Wisdom."⁴⁵ The figure of Wisdom must be seen as distinct from the Spirit and may represent another veiled indication of plurality of persons in the divine Being. If one considers such passages as Gn 3:22 and 11:7, and especially Dan 7:9-10, 13-14, along with Pr 8, it does not seem to be inconceivable that the writer of Gn 1 wished to imply in vs. 26 that in the creation of man a deliberating counseling between "persons" and a mutual summons within the deity or divine Being took place. In any case, the OT by itself does not know of an explicit trinity, although the passage above is considered by many to have veiled hints in that direction. The trinitarian concept of deity is clearly revealed only in the NT.

A proper understanding of the "let us" as a plural of fullness does not militate against OT monotheism. The transition between the plural in the phrase "let us" in vs. 26 to the singular in the phrase "God created" in vs. 27 remains harmonious because the plurality of "persons" within the divine Being keeps them all within divine rank and maintains the emphasis on creation through the one Godhead. On the basis of our discussion of the various suggestions for coming to grips with the plural "let us" in Gn 1:26, it seems that to take this plural as a plural of fullness avoids the pitfalls of the other views we have considered and appears to have most in its favor.

Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," *VT* 3 (1953): 209-244; I. Blythin "A Note on Gen 1:2," *VT* 12 (1962): 120-121; A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Cardiff, 1964), p. 32, n. 8.

⁴² Job 33:4; Ps 104:30; Ezk 37.

⁴³ R. B. Y. Scott, "Wisdom in Creation," *VT* 10 (1960): 213-223; R. Marcus, "On Biblical Hypostasis of Wisdom," *HUCA* 23 (1950/51): 157-171.

⁴⁴ So especially H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom* (London, 1947), pp. 102-103.

⁴⁵ W. McKane, *Proverbs* (Philadelphia, 1970), p. 358.