

Messiah” (2 Peter 1:1), to believe that such a truth is in concert with what the Tanach records and mandates of our Eternal Creator.

This section of *Salvation on the Line*, “**Approaching the Nature of Yeshua from the Tanach**,” addresses a selection of passages from across the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. These range from dealing with the uniqueness of the God of Israel, Ancient Israelite and Jewish monotheism, various passages which directly or indirectly are seen being applied to Yeshua of Nazareth, some via quotes in the Apostolic Writings or New Testament, as well as conceptual ideas involving pre-existence and supernatural agency. Yeshua the Messiah being God, is something which is defended as being compatible from the Tanach or Old Testament, and is in fact absolutely required, lest those who believe that Yeshua is God ever be accused of adhering to polytheism or idolatry, venerating a deity other than the God of Israel.

Genesis 1:26-28; 3:22-23; 11:7-8 **“God Speaking as ‘Us’”**

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26-28).

“Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken” (Genesis 3:22-23).

“Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city” (Genesis 11:7-8).

A significantly important component, on whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is to be considered God, involves whether or not the oneness of God (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4) is a solitary or composite oneness. Is God a singular being, composed of only one manifestation? Or, could the One God be a plural being, composed of multiple manifestations—the most relevant for our examinations being the Father and the Son? It is certainly true that the most frequently employed term in the Hebrew Bible for “God,” *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), is plural, which could be taken as some sort of evidence in favor of an internal multiplicity of God’s being on some level. Yet, more would surely have to be considered across the scope of Scripture.

Throughout religious history, some significant controversy and debate has ensued by a number of statements made by God in the early Genesis narratives of Creation and the Tower of Babel, regarding God’s own nature. That a supernatural being is communicating something, with a contrast intended between God and humanity, is obvious enough. But when various plural statements appear, with God speaking in terms of “Us,” what is intended?

- *na’aseh adam b’tzalmeinu k’demuteinu* (נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ), “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV).
- *hein ha’adam hayah k’echad m’mennu* (הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאֶחָד מִמֵּנוּ), “The human being has now become like one of us” (Genesis 3:22, Common English Bible).
- *ha’bah neir’dah* (הֲבָה יֵרְדָה), “Come, let us descend” (Genesis 11:7, ATS).

Approaching the Nature of Yeshua from the Tanach

It is very easy to see how many Christians throughout the centuries, upon seeing God speak in terms of a plural “We” or “Us,” would conclude how this would likely be God speaking as: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ A small survey of Jewish and Christian resources on Genesis 1:26, where God announces the intention to create the first human, Adam, will show that there are three main ways that the “We” or “Us” has often been approached. These include: (1) the magisterial or royal “we,” or the “we” of respect,² (2) “we” or “us” involving God consulting His magisterial court of both Himself and His angels,³ and (3) a plural God speaking to or within Himself.⁴ While it is important to note and weigh the importance of God speaking with a plural “We” or “Us” in early lines of dialogue in the Book of Genesis, these statements do not present Bible readers with a comprehensive picture of the nature of God. As far as these statements can be pressed, regardless of which conclusions someone may draw, is for us to detect whether a plural Godhead, of at least the Father and the Son, is compatible with some reading of the text of the Tanach.

It is hardly a surprise that those who hold to a low Christology, of Yeshua the Messiah not being God, would conclude that *Elohim* speaking in the plural “We” or “Us” is not the Father and Son (at least) carrying on a conversation—but instead God speaking with a magisterial or royal “we,” and/or God consulting with His angels as members of His Heavenly court. Even a number of evangelical Christian commentators, who would affirm that Yeshua is God, would not argue for a plural Godhead from Genesis 1:26. John H. Walton, for example, concludes, “if we ask what the Hebrew author and audience understood, any explanation assuming plurality in the Godhead is easily eliminated...Without a specific New Testament treatment, we have no authoritative basis for bypassing the human author.”⁵ So, if Genesis on its own is read *separate from* the wider record of Holy Scripture, could the Ancient Israelites seeing statements such as, “Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness” (Genesis 1:26, Alter), only conclude that God was communicating to His Heavenly court, God’s associates or His angels?

Doubts have arisen as to whether or not the view of God speaking to His celestial court in Genesis 1:26, and subsequent verses, is the appropriate conclusion to draw. In his specialty Jewish translation *The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox renders Genesis 1:26 with, “Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness!” He notes, “The ‘our’ is an old problem. Some take it to refer to the heavenly court (although, not surprisingly, no angels are mentioned here).”⁶ Textually from Genesis, it is entirely legitimate to ask, when witnessing God speaking in the plural “We” or “Us,” whether the male and female were made in the image of *both* God and His angels, or in *just* the image of God. Genesis 1:27 makes it clear that male and female are only created in the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NRSV). C. John Collins concurs in his resource *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*,

¹ The Amplified Bible rendering of Genesis 1:26a actually has, “God said, Let Us [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] make mankind in Our image.”

² J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 5.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Vol 1 (Dallas: Word Incorporated, 1987), 28; Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12; John H. Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 128.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 134; C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 60.

⁵ Walton, 128.

⁶ Everett Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 15.

⁷ Heb. *b'tzalmo b'tzelem Elohim bara oto* (בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֵלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ).

“...[T]he possessive ‘our’ in ‘our image’ should refer to the same person(s) as the ‘us’ that is the subject of the verb: ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.’ Then God carries this out in Genesis 1:27, ‘God created man in his own image’; that is, only God is the subject of the verb, and only God is the referent of the possessive. In fact, man is only said to be in *God’s* image, not in the image of any other heavenly being (as also Gen. 5:1)...[W]e have a parallel in Genesis 11:7, where the Lord says, ‘Let *us* go down and confuse,’ with its fulfillment in Genesis 11:8, where the Lord is the only actor.”⁸

The early statements in Genesis, with God speaking in the plural “We” or “Us,” do not present anything comprehensive on what *Elohim* composes. But, the view that God is speaking to His celestial court in Genesis 1:26-28; 3:22-23; 11:7-8 can legitimately be ruled out. And, while it is surely important for us as Bible readers and examiners to consider various ANE components to the early chapters of Genesis, we also have a responsibility to consider the wider scope of Holy Scripture, and the explicit Gospel claim that Yeshua the Messiah was present with God the Father at the Creation (John 1:1)—meaning that the “We” or the “Us” present can very well be taken to be (at least) the Father and the Son. Victor P. Hamilton asserts that the Ancient Israelites, while certainly not engaged with later Christian discussions and debates over the “Trinity,” were not so limited or ignorant so as to consider the concept of plurality in unity. As he states in his commentary,

“The best suggestion {for the ‘us’ of Genesis 1:26} approaches the trinitarian understanding but employs less direct terminology...It is one thing to say that the author of Gen. 1 was not schooled in the intricacies of Christian dogma. It is another thing to say he was theologically too primitive or naive to handle such ideas as plurality within unity. What we often so blithely dismiss as ‘foreign to the thought of the OT’ may be nothing of the sort. True, the concept may not be etched on every page of Scripture, but hints and clues are dropped enticingly here and there, and such hints await their full understanding ‘at the correct time’ (Gal. 4:4).”⁹

It is textually appropriate, with humanity made in the image of God—not both the image of God and the angels—for the “We” or “Us” in Genesis 1:26 to denote some kind of plurality in unity. Such a plurality in unity might not approach some of the rigidity of later Christian debates on the doctrine of the “Trinity,” but can surely be read as compatible with the belief of a pre-existent and eternal Son, who created all things (Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:2), as a part of a plural Godhead of *Elohim*.

⁸ Collins, 60.

⁹ Hamilton, 134.