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Jewishness and the Trinity

by Arnold Fruchtenbaum | April 23 2018

Is there anything Jewish about the Trinity?

In a question-and-answer article, Rabbi Stanley Greenberg of Temple Sinai in Philadelphia once wrote:

“Christians are, of course, entitled to believe in a trinitarian conception of God, but their effort to base this conception on the Hebrew Bible must fly in the face of the overwhelming story of that Bible. Hebrew Scriptures are clear and unequivocal on the oneness of God . . . The Hebrew Bible affirms the one God with unmistakable clarity. Monotheism, an uncompromising belief in one God, is the hallmark of the Hebrew Bible, the unwavering affirmation of Judaism and the unshakable faith of the Jew.”

Whether Christians are accused of being polytheists or tritheists or whether it is admitted that the Christian concept of the Tri-unity is a form of monotheism, one element always appears: one cannot believe in the Trinity and be Jewish. Even if what Christians believe is monotheistic, it still does not seem to be monotheistic enough to qualify as true Jewishness. Rabbi Greenberg's article tends to reflect that thinking.

He went on to say, *“...under no circumstances can a concept of a plurality of the Godhead or a trinity of the Godhead ever be based upon the Hebrew Bible.”* It is perhaps best then to begin with the very source of Jewish theology and the only means of testing it: the Hebrew Scriptures. Since so much relies on Hebrew language usage, then to the Hebrew we should turn.

1. God is a plurality

The name Elohim

It is generally agreed that Elohim is a plural noun having the masculine plural ending “im.” The very word Elohim used of the true God in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is also used in Exodus 20:3, “You shall have no other gods (Elohim) before Me,” and in Deuteronomy 13:2, “...let us go after other gods (Elohim)...” While the use of the plural Elohim does not prove a Tri-unity, it certainly opens the door to a doctrine of plurality in the Godhead since it is the word that is used of the one true God as well as for the many false gods.

Plural verbs used with Elohim

Virtually all Hebrew scholars do recognize that the word Elohim, as it stands by itself, is a plural noun. Nevertheless, they wish to deny that it allows for any plurality in the Godhead whatsoever. Their line of reasoning usually goes like this: When “Elohim” is used of the true God, it is followed by a singular verb; when it is used of false gods, it is followed by the plural verb. Rabbi Greenberg states it as follows:

“But, in fact, the verb used in the opening verse of Genesis is 'bara' which means 'he created'—singular. One need not be too profound a student of Hebrew to understand that the opening verse of Genesis clearly speaks of a singular God.”

The point made, of course, is generally true because the Bible does teach that God is only one God and, therefore, the general pattern is to have the plural noun followed by the singular verb when it

speaks of the one true God. However, there are places where the word is used of the true God and yet it is followed by a plural verb:

Genesis 20:13: "And it came to pass, when God (Elohim) caused me to wander [literally: They caused me to wander] from my father's house...

Genesis 35:7: "...because there God (Elohim) appeared unto him..." [Literally: They appeared unto him.]

2 Samuel 7:23: "...God (Elohim) went..." [Literally: They went.]

Psalms 58:12: "Surely He is God (Elohim) who judges..." [Literally: They judge.]

The name Eloah

If the plural form Elohim was the only form available for a reference to God, then conceivably the argument might be made that the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures had no other alternative but to use the word Elohim for both the one true God and the many false gods. However, the singular form for Elohim (Eloah) exists and is used in such passages as Deuteronomy 32:15-17 and Habakkuk 3:3. This singular form could have easily been used consistently. Yet it is only used 250 times, while the plural form is used 2,500 times. The far greater use of the plural form again turns the argument in favor of plurality in the Godhead rather than against it.

Plural pronouns for God

Another case in point regarding Hebrew grammar is that often when God speaks of himself, he clearly uses the plural pronoun:

Genesis 1:26: Then God (Elohim) said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..."

He could hardly have made reference to angels since man was created in the image of God and not of angels. The Midrash Rabbah on Genesis recognizes the strength of this passage and comments as follows:

*"Rabbi Samuel Bar Hanman in the name of Rabbi Jonathan said, that at the time when Moses wrote the Torah, writing a portion of it daily, when he came to this verse which says, "And Elohim said, let us make man in our image after our likeness," Moses said, "Master of the universe, why do you give herewith an excuse to the sectarians (who believe in the Tri-unity of God)." God answered Moses, "You write and whoever wants to err, let him err.""*¹

It is obvious that the Midrash Rabbah is trying to simply get around the problem and fails to answer adequately why God refers to Himself in the plural.

The use of the plural pronoun can also be seen in:

Genesis 3:22: Then the LORD God (YHVH Elohim) said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us..."

Genesis 11:7: "Come, let Us go down, and there confuse their language..."

Isaiah 6:8: Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

This last passage would appear contradictory with the singular "I" and the plural "us" except as viewed as a plurality (us) in a unity (I).

Plural descriptions of God

One point that also comes out of Hebrew is the fact that often nouns and adjectives used in speaking of God are plural. Some examples are as follows:

Ecclesiastes 12:1: "Remember now you creator..." [Literally: creators.]

Psalms 149:2: "Let Israel rejoice in their Maker." [Literally: makers.]

Joshua 24:19: "...holy God..." [Literally: holy Gods.]

Isaiah 54:5: "For your Maker is your husband..." [Literally: makers, husbands.]

Everything we have said so far rests firmly on the Hebrew language of the Scriptures. If we are to base our theology on the Scriptures alone, we have to say that on the one hand they affirm God's unity, while at the same time they tend towards the concept of a compound unity allowing for a plurality in the Godhead.

The Shema

Deuteronomy 6:4: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema, has always been Israel's great confession. It is this verse more than any other that is used to affirm the fact that God is one and is often used to contradict the concept of plurality in the Godhead. But is it a valid use of this verse?

On one hand, it should be noted that the very words "our God" are in the plural in the Hebrew text and literally mean "our Gods." However, the main argument lies in the word "one," which is a Hebrew word, echad. A glance through the Hebrew text where the word is used elsewhere can quickly show that the word echad does not mean an absolute "one" but a compound "one." For instance, in Genesis 1:5, the combination of evening and morning comprise one (echad) day. In Genesis 2:24, a man and a woman come together in marriage and the two "shall become one (echad) flesh." In Ezra 2:64, we are told that the whole assembly was as one (echad), though of course, it was composed of numerous people. Ezekiel 37:17 provides a rather striking example where two sticks are combined to become one (echad). The use of the word echad in Scripture shows it to be a compound and not an absolute unity.

There is a Hebrew word that does mean an absolute unity and that is yachid, which is found in many Scripture passages,² the emphasis being on the meaning of "only." If Moses intended to teach God's absolute oneness as over against a compound unity, this would have been a far more appropriate word. In fact, Maimonides noted the strength of "yachid" and chose to use that word in his "Thirteen Articles of Faith" in place of echad. However, Deuteronomy 6:4 (the Shema) does not use "yachid" in reference to God.

II. God is at least two

Elohim and YHVH applied to two personalities

As if to even make the case for plurality stronger, there are situations in the Hebrew Scriptures where the term Elohim is applied to two personalities in the same verse. One example is Psalm 45:7-8:

"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."

It should be noted that the first Elohim is being addressed and the second Elohim is the God of the first Elohim. And so God's God has anointed Him with the oil of gladness.

A second example is Hosea 1:7:

"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."

The speaker is Elohim who says He will have mercy on the house of Judah and will save them by the instrumentality of YHVH, their Elohim. So Elohim number one will save Israel by means of Elohim number two.

Not only is Elohim applied to two personalities in the same verse, but so is the very name of God. One example is Genesis 19:24 which reads:

"Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens."

Clearly we have YHVH number one raining fire and brimstone from a second YHVH who is in heaven, the first one being on earth.

A third example is Zechariah 2:8-9:

For thus says the LORD of Hosts: "He sent Me after glory, to the nations
which plunder you;
for he that touches you touches the apple of His eye. For surely I will
shake My hand against them,
and they shall become spoil for their servants. Then you will know that the
LORD of hosts has sent Me."

Again, we have one YHVH sending another YHVH to perform a specific task.

The author of the Zohar sensed plurality in the Tetragrammaton³ and wrote:

*"Come and see the mystery of the word YHVH: there are three steps, each existing by itself: nevertheless they are One, and so united that one cannot be separated from the other. The Ancient Holy One is revealed with three heads, which are united into one, and that head is three exalted. The Ancient One is described as being three: because the other lights emanating from him are included in the three. But how can three names be one? Are they really one because we call them one? How three can be one can only be known through the revelation of the Holy Spirit."*⁴

III. God is three

How many persons are there?

If the Hebrew Scriptures truly do point to plurality, the question arises, how many personalities in the Godhead exist? We have already seen the names of God applied to at least two different personalities. Going through the Hebrew Scriptures, we find that, in fact, three and only three distinct personalities are ever considered divine.

1. First, there are the numerous times when there is a reference to the Lord YHVH. This usage is so frequent that there is no need to devote space to it.
2. A second personality is referred to as the Angel of YHVH. This individual is always considered distinct from all other angels and is unique. In almost every passage where He is found He is referred to as both the Angel of YHVH and YHVH Himself. For instance, in Genesis 16:7 He is referred to as the Angel of YHVH, but then in 16:13 as YHVH Himself. In Genesis 22:11 He is the Angel of YHVH, but God Himself in 22:12. Other examples could be given.⁵ A very interesting passage is Exodus 23:20-23 where this angel has the power to pardon sin because God's own name YHVH is in him, and, therefore, he is to be obeyed without question. This can hardly be said of any ordinary angel. But the very fact that God's own name is in this angel shows His divine status.
3. A third major personality that comes through is the Spirit of God, often referred to as simply the Ruach Ha-kodesh. There are a good number of references to the Spirit of God among which are Genesis 1:2, 6:3; Job 33:4; Psalm 51:11; Psalm 139:7; Isaiah 11:2, etc. The Holy Spirit cannot be a mere emanation because He contains all the characteristics of personality (intellect, emotion and will) and is considered divine.

So then, from various sections of the Hebrew Scriptures there is a clear showing that three personalities are referred to as divine and as being God: the Lord YHVH, the Angel of YHVH and the Spirit of God.

The Three Personalities in the Same Passage Nor have the Hebrew Scriptures neglected to put all three personalities of the Godhead together in one passage. Two examples are Isaiah 48:12-16 and 63:7-14.

Because of the significance of the first passage, it will be quoted:

"Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last.
Indeed My hand also has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has stretched out the heavens;
when I call to them, they stand up together. All of you, assemble yourselves, and hear!
Who among them has declared these things? The LORD has loved him; he shall do His pleasure on Babylon,
and His arm shall be against the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him, I have brought him,
and his way will prosper. 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."

It should be noted that the speaker refers to himself as the one who is responsible for the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is clear that he cannot be speaking of anyone other than God. But then in verse 16, the speaker refers to himself using the pronouns of I and me and then distinguishes himself from two other personalities. He distinguishes himself from the Lord YHVH and then from the Spirit of God. Here is the Tri-unity as clearly defined as the Hebrew Scriptures make it.

In the second passage, there is a reflection back to the time of the Exodus where all three personalities were present and active. The Lord YHVH is referred to in verse 7, the Angel of YHVH in verse 9 and the Spirit of God in verses 10, 11 and 14. While often throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God refers to Himself as being the one solely responsible for Israel's redemption from Egypt, in this passage three personalities are given credit for it. Yet, no contradiction is seen since all three comprise the unity of the one Godhead.

Conclusion on the Jewishness of the Trinity

The teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, then, is that there is a plurality of the Godhead. The first person is consistently called YHVH while the second person is given the names of YHVH, the Angel of YHVH and the Servant of YHVH. Consistently and without fail, the second person is sent by the first person. The third person is referred to as the Spirit of YHVH or the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit. He, too, is sent by the first person but is continually related to the ministry of the second person.

If the concept of the Tri-unity in the Godhead is not Jewish according to modern rabbis, then neither are the Hebrew Scriptures. Jewish Christians cannot be accused of having slipped into paganism when they hold to the fact that Jesus is the divine Son of God. He is the same one of whom Moses wrote when he said:

"Behold, I send an Angel before you, to keep you in the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For 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."

—Exodus 23:20-23

New Testament insight on the Trinity

In keeping with the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament clearly recognizes that there are three persons in the Godhead, although it becomes quite a bit more specific. The first person is called the Father while the second person is called the Son. The New Testament answers the question of Proverbs 30:4: "What is His name, and what is his Son's name, if you know?" His son's name is Yeshua (Jesus). In accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures, he is sent by God to be the Messiah, but this time as a man instead of as an angel. Furthermore, He is sent for a specific purpose: to die for our sins. In essence, what happened is that God became a man (not that man became God) in order to accomplish the work of atonement.

The New Testament calls the third person of the Godhead the Holy Spirit. Throughout the New Testament he is related to the work of the second person, in keeping with the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. We see, then, that there is a continuous body of teaching in both the Old and New Testaments relating to the Tri-unity of God.

This content was adapted from an earlier Jews for Jesus article.

End Notes

1. Midrash Rabbah on Genesis 1:26, New York: NOP Press, N.D.
2. Genesis 22:2,12; Judges 11:34; Psalm 22:21; 25:16; Proverbs 4:3; Jeremiah 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zechariah 12:10
3. "Personal Name of God of Israel," written in Hebrew Bible with the four consonants YHWH. Pronunciation of name has been avoided since at least 3rd c. B.C.E.; initial substitute was "Adonai" ("the Lord"), itself later replaced by "ha-Shem" ("the Name"). The name Jehovah is a hybrid misreading of the original Hebrew letters with the vowels of "Adonai."—Encyclopedic Dictionary of Judaica, p. 593
4. Zohar, vol. III, 288, vol. II, 43, Hebrew editions. See also Soncino Press edition, vol. III, 134.
5. In Genesis 31 he is the Angel of God in verse 11, but then he is the God of Bethel in verse 13. In Exodus 3 he is the Angel of YHVH in verse 2 and he is both YHVH and God in verse 4. In Judges 6 he is the Angel of YHVH in verses 11, 12, 20, and 21 but is YHVH himself in verses 14, 16, 22 and 23. Then in Judges 13:3 and 21 he is the Angel of YHVH but is referred to as God himself in verse 22.

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