

Focus on the Kingdom

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The Struggle Over Death and Resurrection

In an earlier edition of "Focus on the Kingdom" we produced clear evidence of the fact that the earliest post-biblical Christians did not believe and teach what is now the "orthodox" understanding of what happens when we die. The earliest "church fathers" would have been reckoned "heretics" by today's evangelical — indeed, traditional — standard. By traditional, I mean the view which has become built into Christian thinking by centuries of indoctrination — the view that at the moment of death a Christian departs consciously as a "disembodied soul" to heaven or hell. The earliest post-biblical writers conscientiously opposed the "immediate departure to heaven" teaching. They insisted that "the soul" went not to heaven but to Hades (the world of the dead) until the resurrection destined to occur when Jesus comes back (I Cor. 15:23, etc.). As proof, these early "fathers" claimed the biblical fact that Jesus himself did not "go to heaven" the moment he died. He went to Hades for three days (Matt. 12:40). He was resurrected from Hades (Acts 2:31) and *in this way* (via *resurrection not survival*) first came into the presence of God three days later than his death. Using the obvious evidence of Scripture they pointed out that Jesus had "not yet ascended to the Father" even on the Sunday of his resurrection (John 20:17). Justin Martyr, as spokesman for the orthodoxy of the mid-second century, was so perturbed by the false teaching that souls depart immediately to bliss in heaven that he warned his colleagues not to receive such teaching as Christian at all (see *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 8: "If you meet some who deny the resurrection and say that their souls go to heaven when they die, do not believe that they are Christians"). The words of other church fathers to the same effect can be seen in the January and February, 2000 issues of "Focus on the Kingdom," which are available at our web site.

It is an unarguable fact that the commonly received teaching that the faithful depart immediately into the presence of God in heaven, "have gone to be with the Lord," "gone home," "passed on," "crossed over" is irreconcilable with both the Bible and the

earliest "fathers" who are usually claimed by today's "orthodoxy" as responsible heirs to the faith of the Bible! Something is seriously amiss in the popular mind on this subject. Were those early fathers right in their opposition to what later become "orthodoxy," i.e., the view now constantly promoted in funeral sermons and popular language about the condition of the deceased?

Efforts to square the traditional, apparently comforting concept of the destiny of the believer are starkly unconvincing. We appreciate Hank Hanegraaff — "the Bible Answer Man's" — zeal to promote the corporeal resurrection of Jesus and thus of his followers in the future (*Resurrection*, Word Publishing, 2000). But his efforts to justify "orthodoxy's" additional claim that the dead can go immediately, disembodied, into the presence of Jesus are unconvincing. He fails to find biblical support for "orthodoxy's" underlying theory that Christians have an *immortal soul* which by definition cannot die and must survive consciously somewhere (pp. 101-108). Hank Hanegraaff thinks the place of survival is "heaven," and he struggles to make Paul support him. Hank is convinced that the dead have gone to heaven, but his analysis of the words of Paul in II Corinthians 5 is flawed by his admission that Paul dreaded such a disembodied condition. In many respects Mr. Hanegraaff writes convincingly about resurrection, that of Jesus in the past and our hope in the future. But when it comes to the question of an "intermediate state" his grip on Scripture slackens: he misses the point which pervades all of Paul's (and Jesus') various passages about Christian destiny. These may be summed up under one critical dictum: We can enter the presence of the Lord — be "with the Lord" — *only by resurrection of the whole man*. This resurrection, as Mr. Hanegraaff rightly says, will occur only when Jesus comes back, and not before. Until that resurrection due to occur when Jesus comes back (see I Cor. 15:23 for this "anchor" statement about the timing of resurrection), the dead remain dead. According to I

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Corinthians 15:23 the Christian dead are to be “*made alive* at the Second Coming of Jesus.” Logically then they are dead until that moment of resurrection. You cannot “make alive” what is already alive with Jesus in heaven! You can only make alive what is previously dead. The “dead in Christ” are going to rise in the resurrection when the Lord descends from heaven at his Second Coming, and “in this way [i.e. by this process] we shall always be with the Lord” (I Thess. 4:17). “Comfort one another with these words,” Paul adds. These beautiful words of comfort rely exclusively on the promise of the future corporate resurrection of dead people from their graves. This will happen only when Jesus returns. That is the basis of biblical comfort. Only and exclusively by resurrection can the dead become conscious in the presence of God and Jesus. That is the biblical hope and source of true comfort. Not so the popular view which “takes the steam” out of that glorious promise of life and immortality only via future resurrection. The popular, biblically unorthodox notion offers consolation on the basis of false hope — that the dead *are already* with Jesus in heaven, albeit without a body.

“Without a body.” This is where Mr. Hanegraaff’s line of argument for a conscious disembodiment in heaven is unconvincing. Referring to II Corinthians 5:3 he says: “Paul refers to death as being ‘naked,’ or ‘away from the body.’ Why would he dread being naked if he were going to receive another body at death?” (*Resurrection*, p. 111). Exactly so. Mr. Hanegraaff is here rightly opposing the false idea that a Christian will receive a resurrection body the moment he dies. Such a proposal, as Hanegraaff points out, contradicts every biblical passage on resurrection. But notice that Mr. Hanegraaff thinks of death and nakedness, i.e. disembodiment, as a condition to *be dreaded*. He calls in Dr. Geisler for support: “Speaking of death as disembodiment (‘absent from the body’) and as an *undesirable experience* makes little sense if that is the moment of one’s ultimate triumph with a resurrection body (see II Cor. 5:1, I Cor. 15:50-58)” (p. 111, emphasis mine). But then speaking of disembodiment as undesirable (as Paul does) would mean that contemporary preachers are preaching the dead into an undesirable condition at death. In fact the opposite impression is given at funerals: the faithful are supposed to be “alive and well” and enjoying the glory of “heaven.”

So now we ask: What sense does it make to preach the glorious survival of disembodied dead in

heaven in the presence of the Lord, if such a condition, on the words of Paul, is to be dreaded and an undesirable experience? We fully grant that Paul does not want such a condition, yet orthodoxy is caught in the trap of promoting this very disembodied state as a desirable condition, the glory of heaven in the presence of God and Christ! Thus Hanegraaff and Geisler admit that disembodiment is something Paul did not want. Yet they also promote that “undesirable condition” as apparently the blessed condition of the faithful the moment they die. Hanegraaff’s “Bible plus pagan-immortal-soul-in heaven” theology does not ring true and was opposed, as we pointed out, by the earliest believers.

What the “orthodox” opinion has not understood is this: It is precisely because disembodiment is a repugnant idea, and because when this present body (“home,” “tent”) is destroyed by death we shall indeed be naked, that Paul looks forward *exclusively* to the future resurrection. He always looks forward to re-embodiment at resurrection. It is only at the resurrection that we can come into the presence of the Lord. It is only at the resurrection that we shall be “made alive” from a condition of death. So Paul said emphatically in I Thessalonians 4:17 and I Corinthians 15:23. And if context is kept in mind, Paul said exactly the same thing in II Corinthians 5. He has been speaking about the hope of *resurrection* (II Cor. 4:14). That is his topic. He teaches us that a new body has been prepared for us. God in heaven has prepared it. It is a body which he says is going to come “from heaven.” It is “fit for the life of the age to come” (*aionios*, “eternal”). It will be put on as new clothing at the resurrection. It is our only hope of conscious glory. There is no present conscious glory for the faithful dead precisely because they have *not yet* received the new body in resurrection. Without a body there is no conscious living. The Hebrews think holistically about man. Unfortunately the later believers departed from the truth into a confusing mix of the Bible with the alien, Platonic views of the immortal soul, and thus of survival at death. That later view — pagan view — dominates evangelical Christianity and receives constant pulpit support.

Context, context, context. Like the slogan about real estate (“location, location, location”), context is all-important in our Bible study. We are in danger of reading into the Bible what we expect to be there. But we may not have subjected our received opinions to careful analysis. Mr. Hanegraaff, despite his imposition of a fictitious intermediate bodiless condition for the dead on the words of Scripture, gives us an excellent statement about the need to survey all the evidence on a

given topic. “Simply stated, this principle, also known as the analogy of Scripture, means that individual passages of Scripture must always be harmonized with Scripture as a whole. An isolated passage should never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with other passages” (*Resurrection*, p. 111).

But contemporary and traditional orthodoxy have not observed this principle well. Seizing on one third of one verse in II Corinthians 5:8, “absent from the body and present with the Lord” (usually slightly misquoted thus), evangelicals have pitted Paul against himself. Not only in the immediate context (II Cor. 4:14) but in every other passage where he refers to being “with the Lord,” Paul means “with the Lord” at the moment of the future *resurrection*. Paul did not for a moment believe our popular view that the dead are already alive in glory, disembodied or even embodied with the Lord in heaven *before the resurrection!* Christian destiny is to rise from death, the whole person, and to inherit the earth and reign with Christ on the renewed earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10). The exclusion of all the “heaven” language from our Christian conversation would go far to correct our unbiblical theology. Following Jesus means saying what he said, and Jesus spoke always of believers inheriting the Kingdom of God. He never said anything about “going to heaven as a disembodied soul.” In fact Jesus promised “heaven” to no one. He promised them the Kingdom always.

May Plato and Greek philosophy be expunged from our minds so that the holy spirit can teach us to think with Jesus and so “have the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16). The wrist band might be more effective if it read “WWJT and S?” “What would Jesus think and say?” Our language about the all-important issues of Christian destiny should conform to the words of Scripture. ✧

Following an unavoidable delay, our complete set of 260 15-minute radio programs, “Focus on the Kingdom” are now available at www.restorationfellowship.org These programs provide a supplement to our two books *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah: A Solution to the Riddle of the New Testament*, and *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, available from 800-347-4261.

Elohim and Echad

by Lindsey Killian

To support the commonly held teaching that God is a plural entity consisting of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit,¹ Messianic — as well as other — Christians will appeal to two Hebrew words: *Elohim* (eloheem) and *echad* (echad, “ch” as in Scottish “loch”). *Elohim*, it is asserted, indicates that God is a plural entity because it is the plural form of the word for God and is the title most often used for the God of Israel. *Echad* — used in the well-known “shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4 instructing Israel that their God is “one” — also shows the plurality of God because, it is claimed, *echad* in the Hebrew actually indicates a compound, rather than an absolute, unity; that is, rather than a “simple” one, *echad* indicates a unity of more than one.

Each claim will now be examined.

I. Elohim

Elohim (Heb. אֱלֹהִים) is the plural form of *Eloah* (Heb. אֱלֹהַ) and appears closely related to *El* (Heb. אֱל) which usually means “god,” “God,” or “mighty one.” But if we were right, indeed, to translate *Elohim* as a plural word, the Bible would teach us that in the beginning “Gods” created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). The Bible would then support the idea that more than one God created the universe, spoke to Abraham, delivered Israel from bondage and continued dealing with them through many more centuries, etc. — as *Elohim* is used throughout the Tanakh (“Old Testament”) as Israel’s God(s). But virtually no Christian — Messianic or otherwise — would profess that there is more than one God.

So, how do we solve this dilemma? And why do all the translations translate *Elohim* as simply “God” and not “Gods” when it refers to the true God?

In Biblical Hebrew, a noun that is plural in form is not necessarily plural in meaning. For instance, the Hebrew words *chayim* (chayeem, “life”)² and *panim* (paneem, “face,” “presence,” “countenance”)³ are plural in form, but almost always singular in meaning. Another word, *adon*, “lord,” “master,”⁴ is often plural

¹ Some Christians believe that God consists of the Father and Son only, and that the Holy Spirit is essentially God’s active power, not a third Person.

² E.g., Gen. 23:1: Sarah’s “life”

³ E.g., Gen. 43:31: Joseph’s “face”

⁴ This is another word, like *Elohim*, which is a title denoting someone superior in rank. See “plurality of majesty” discussion below.

in form. In its plural form it is sometimes used of a single person — Abraham (Gen. 24:9-10), Joseph (Gen. 42:30, 33), the king of Egypt (Gen. 40:1) and an anonymous “fierce king” under whose rule the Egyptians were prophesied to come (Isa. 19:4, NRSV). There are instances of other plural Hebrew words employed in the Hebrew Bible with singular meaning.

Equally striking is the fact that the same term *Elohim* is used of the individual false gods of Israel’s surrounding nations. *Elohim* is used of Dagon, the god of the Philistines (I Sam. 5:7); of Chemosh, the god of Ammon and Moab (Jud. 11:24; I Kings 11:33); of Ashtarte (or Ashtoreth), the god(dess) of the Sidonians (I Kings 11:33); and Milcom, another god of the Ammonites (I Kings 11:33). In Smith’s Bible Dictionary and the New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (NISBE) no plurality in any one of these gods is even hinted at. Additionally, in Ezra’s prayer in Nehemiah 9:18, *Elohim* is used to refer to the single golden calf made by Israel in the wilderness.

Elohim is also used of single human figures. Moses in both Exodus 4:16 and 7:1 and the Messianic king in Psalm 45:6 (verse 7 in the Hebrew Bible) are each referred to as *Elohim*.⁵

What all this indicates is that in Biblical Hebrew, plural nouns in general and *Elohim* in particular do *not* always have plural meanings. In the case of the word *Elohim*, in fact, it would appear as though we should almost always understand it as singular in meaning unless the context indicates that “gods” are referred to.

Hebrew scholars are entirely familiar with these facts. The expressions “plural of majesty” or “plural of rank” or “intensive plural” are sometimes used to describe this phenomenon of language (not just Hebrew) where the form of a word can be plural but its meaning singular. The idea is that the plural stresses or exalts the importance of the person referred to. The following is a quotation regarding *Elohim* from the NISBE, in their article on “God, Names of”:

“The use of the plural form with singular meaning is not unique to Israel. Similar forms occur in pre-Israelite Babylonian and Canaanite texts in which a worshiper wishes to exalt a particular god above others. This form has been called the ‘plural of majesty’ or the ‘intensive plural’ because it implies that all the fullness of deity is concentrated in the one

⁵ The fact that Ps. 45:6 (7) is viewed as messianic does not change the point: The Messiah is just one individual and yet is given the title of the plural (in form) *Elohim*.

god. *Elohim*’s being the most common word for God in the OT thus conveys this idea” (Vol. 2, p. 505).

Smith’s Bible Dictionary has this to say on the same subject in their article entitled “God”:

“The plural form of *Elohim* has given rise to much discussion. The fanciful idea that it referred to the *trinity of persons* in the Godhead hardly finds now a supporter among scholars. It is either what grammarians *call the plural of majesty*, or it denotes the *fullness* of divine strength, the *sum of the powers* displayed by God” (p. 220).

But by no means is YHWH (English letters representing the four Hebrew letters of the personal Divine Name of the God of Israel) ever referred to by plural forms. In fact, whenever the people of God speak of Him in the Hebrew Bible using a pronoun, they always employ the *singular* form. Whether it is the third person (He, Him, His) or the second person (You, Your, Thou, Thy) this is the case. The people of God understood their God to be a single Individual.⁶

Nor is He only referred to in the plural when “God” is the translated word. Two forms referred to above, *El* and *Eloah* used in the Tanakh to refer to the true God, are both *singular* in form.⁷ When an Aramaic word for God, *Elah*, is used, it too appears to be always in its singular form when referring to the true God.⁸

The form of the verb used in Hebrew when *Elohim* the true God is the subject is also instructive. It is virtually always *singular* in form throughout the Tanakh. In Genesis 1, for example — where the reader is first introduced to *Elohim* the Creator — the Hebrew verb form is always in the third masculine singular whenever⁹ we read that “*Elohim* created” or “*Elohim* said” or “*Elohim* made,” etc.¹⁰

⁶ Two rather emphatic examples: I Kings 18:39 and II Sam. 7:28. The relevant part of the former reads, “YHWH, He is God [*Elohim*]; YHWH, He is God.” The key portion of the latter reads, very literally, “Lord [*adonay*] YHWH, You [sing.], He, [is] the God [*Elohim*].”

⁷ God is translated from *El* in the following passages: Gen. 17:1, Ex. 34:6, Josh. 3:10, Isa. 5:16 and Ps. 29:3. From *Eloah*: Deut. 32:15, Neh. 9:17, Job 4:9 (used more often than *Elohim* in Job) and Ps. 114:7.

⁸ E.g., Dan. 2:28, Ezra 5:2.

⁹ Gen. 1:26 says, “Let us make...” where God is perhaps either referring to Himself in the plural (possibly another form of plural of majesty), or is condescending to His heavenly host (i.e., someone besides *Elohim*, reflecting the normal concept of any first person plural), bringing them into the creative act. “Make,” of course, is plural in its Hebrew form. In the next verse, where *Elohim* actually *performs* the action, the verb for “made” is back to its singular form.

¹⁰ The Hebrew word order may be relevant here as well. In Hebrew prose, the usual word order is that the verb precedes the noun. In Gen. 1:1, therefore, before the Hebrew reader even gets

Finally, the Septuagint (known as “LXX”), the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (probably translated in the third and second century B.C.E.) always translated the Hebrew word for God in the singular (Gr. *theos*). The LXX version of the Old Testament is often cited in the New Testament instead of the Hebrew.¹¹

Therefore — returning to the original argument (which usually includes the “Let us...” statement in Gen. 1:26) — if God must be regarded as a plural entity because He is referred to in a plural form, why then must He not be regarded as a singular entity since He is referred to in singular forms? Are not all these statements Holy Scripture? We could be left with a contradiction were it not for the many examples of plural forms with singular meanings in Hebrew, including the concept of “plural of majesty.” The plural of majesty clarifies the usage of the plural form for the true God in the Tanakh. He is described by thousands and thousands of singular verbs and pronouns. Language has no more definite way of telling us that God is one Person, the Father of Jesus.

II. Echad

The other main argument from the Hebrew used to teach that God is a “plural” entity is that the Hebrew word *echad* (Heb. אֶחָד) in Deuteronomy 6:4 means, not a simple “one,” but rather a “compound unity” of one, a “togetherness.” Those who teach this will often also teach that there is a different word for a “simple” one, *yachid* (Heb. יָחִיד), so that the absence of this word in Deuteronomy 6:4 is, apparently, significant.

First, it should be noted that when one learns the Hebrew numbers, it is *echad*, not *yachid*, that is the Hebrew for the number “one”: *echad* is one, *shenayim* is two, *shalosh* is three, *’arba* is four, etc. Any Hebrew grammar book, whether of Biblical or modern Hebrew, would demonstrate that *echad*, not *yachid*, is the everyday Hebrew word for the numeral “one.”

And when one looks in the Tanakh itself at the frequency and usage of the two words — *echad* and *yachid* — it is very quickly and easily seen that *echad*, not *yachid*, is in fact the standard Hebrew word for a simple “one.” *Echad* is used over 900 times in the

Hebrew Bible, making it the most frequently used adjective in the Tanakh. Here are some examples of its usage where the word “one” is translated from *echad*: “one place” (Gen. 1:9); “one man” (Gen. 42:13); “one law” (Ex. 12:49); “one side” (Ex. 25:12); “one ewe lamb” (Lev. 14:10); “one of his brethren” (Lev. 25:48); “one rod” (Num. 17:3); “one soul” (Num. 31:28); “one of these cities” (Deut. 4:42); “one way” (Deut. 28:7); “one ephah” (I Sam. 1:24); “one went out into the field” (II Kings 4:39); “one shepherd” (Ezek. 37:24); “one basket” (Jer. 24:2); “one [thing]” (Ps. 27:4); “Two are better than one” (Ecc. 4:9); “one day or for two” (Ezra 10:13).

Sometimes it is simply part of a number, like “eleven” (*echad+’asar*, one plus ten), in, for example, Genesis 32:22. Sometimes it is well translated by an indefinite article (“a[n]”): “a new cart” (I Sam. 6:7); “a juniper tree” (I Kings 19:4, 5); “a book” (Jer. 51:60).

Perhaps most importantly, *echad* clearly has the meaning of “single,” “only one,” or “just one,” the idea of a limit of one (Num. 10:4; Josh. 17:14; Esth. 4:11; Isa. 51:2). In Deuteronomy 17:6, for example, it really isn’t precise English to translate *echad* merely as “one.” For if the “one” witness referred to is the second or the third witness, then that one witness is enough to convict the hypothetical person of murder. The meaning is that a person must not be put to death on the evidence of *only one* witness (which is the way the NRSV translates it). *Echad* means “one” and *only one*.

Some make the argument that because *echad* is used in passages such as Gen. 1:5 (evening and morning were “day one [*echad*]”), Gen. 2:24 (a husband and wife shall be “one” flesh) and Ezek. 37:17 (two sticks are to become “one” stick), *echad* is therefore meant to be understood as some kind of compound unity. To begin with, such examples make up but a very small minority of the uses of *echad*, the vast majority being of the variety listed above. It is improper exegesis to define a word on the basis of a small percentage of its usage. But even this extreme minority of usage does not mean that *echad* actually has a different meaning than a simple one in these passages. In Gen. 1:5, “day” is the word that has “parts” to it (i.e., “evening and morning” make up the day), not *echad*. In Gen. 2:24, “flesh” acts as the collective noun (what the man and the woman comprise together).¹² The key factor in all such passages — a factor missing from Deut. 6:4 — is that two or more “parts” are mentioned, such that the reader

to the word *Elohim*, he or she reads “*bara*” (“created”), the third person masculine singular form, immediately telling him or her that the acting subject is singular in reality.

¹¹ See Heb. 1:6 for example, where a version of the LXX of Deut. 32:43 is quoted. The passage is quite different from the Hebrew text we now have and use.

¹² There wouldn’t be much point in saying, “The two shall be two fleashes.” The unity intended is obviously that of purpose and mind. And “one” here still means just one.

can immediately discern that there is some kind of “coming together” of the people or things mentioned, usually for just *one* purpose or goal. *Echad*, in fact, must maintain its meaning of “just one” for these expressions to convey their intended sense. To make our point clear: Deut. 6:4 does *not* say, “YHWH our God, though three (or two or whatever plural number you like), is one.” There is no hint of “coming together” here. The verse says that YHWH our God is plainly, simply, one.

Once again, scholarship is in agreement. The *Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Lexicon*, the standard Hebrew lexicon of the Bible used in seminaries, lists eight ways *echad* is used — e.g. meaning “each/every,” or “a certain,” or “only,” etc. — but there is no mention or hint in the entire ½-page article that *echad* ever means any kind of compound unity.¹³ And the “*echad*” article in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* also nowhere teaches that *echad* implies a compound unity. It says that Deuteronomy 6:4 is essentially saying that YHWH is the “*one* and *only* God for *Israel*” (Vol. I, p. 196).

Yachid, on the other hand, is a very rarely used word in the Tanakh, and it is employed in a special sense when it *is* used. It is found a grand total of 12 times in the Tanakh, three of those times in the same passage (Gen. 22, referring to Isaac as Abraham’s “only” son), so virtually any argument based on its absence from a Bible text is necessarily weak. Its meaning is restricted to a unique, priceless possession, whether a person or thing (Isaac in Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; one’s soul in Ps. 22:21, 35:17); or to solitary, isolated or lonely people (Ps. 25:16, 68:7). There is a “neediness” seen in all that *yachid* applies to in the Tanakh. YHWH our God is not dependent on anyone. Based on Biblical usage, therefore, it would be entirely inappropriate to use *yachid* as an adjective for God for any reason.

Conclusion

In conclusion, neither the word *Elohim* nor the word *echad* supports the notion of a plurality in God. The plural form *Elohim* when used of God does not

¹³ Interestingly, there are five instances where *echad* is used in the plural (*echadim*): Gen. 27:44, 29:20; Ezek. 37:17; and Dan. 11:20. *Echadim* is usually translated “few,” but “one” may be the best translation in Gen. 11:1 and Ezek. 37:17 (“so that they may become ‘one’ in your hand”). In those passages, *echadim* is used with plural nouns, and perhaps here has the sense of a compound. All the more remarkable, then, that Deut. 6:4 — which has the plural form *Elohim* — has *echad* in its singular form. This may be yet another indicator that Deut. 6:4 quite strongly emphasizes the simple oneness of God.

have to mean a “plural entity.” In Hebrew, plural forms can be singular in meaning. This is sometimes referred to as a “plural of majesty” or “plural of rank.” The very term *elohim* is used of single, foreign gods and of the Messiah. But YHWH is, in fact, always referred to by grammatically singular forms and used with verbs in the singular (even when the plural form *Elohim* is the subject). Finally, the Greek Old Testament, sometimes quoted in the New Testament, always translates the term for God — whether the Hebrew word is singular or plural — in the singular Greek form.

Echad, rather than being any kind of support for a plural God, teaches the opposite. It means “one” and *only* one. God is one.

Final Word

It seems clear that the sole reason for these arguments attempting to teach a plural God from the Tanakh is a desire among many Christians to find Old Testament substantiation for the concept of the Trinity or some other form of plural God. But of course, that is no way to proceed in a Bible study. We must accept the definitions which the words reveal about themselves and how they are used in the Bible text, not what we would like them to mean. May God help us to accept what the Scripture has to say about who the true God is. “Yahweh our God is one single Person” (cp. Paul in Gal 3:20: “God is only One Person,” Amplified Version). ☩

Atlanta Bible College will host its tenth annual Theological Conference from Friday, February 16th to Sunday, February 18th, 2001. This is a unique opportunity for biblical unitarians and believers in the Gospel of the Kingdom to meet others interested in the Jewish roots of Christianity. Various topics pertaining to the Abrahamic faith (to be announced later) will be addressed. This weekend has proven to be a stimulating experience for those seeking fellowship with believers of similar persuasion. Please mark the dates in your calendar. Transportation from Atlanta Hartsfield Airport to Atlanta Bible College will be provided free, and group rates in a local hotel will be offered.

Summarizing the Biblical Plan

When historians describe God's Great Plan revealed in the Bible, they often do so much more accurately than "believers" who approach the text with all sorts of presuppositions. Norman Cohn's excellent and classic study of the *Pursuit of the Millennium* (OUP, 1961) has this to say about what the Bible and the early Christians believed for the future. It is a fine summary of biblical theology and we recommend it to our readers as accurate commentary. It should be supplemented with the additional information from the New Testament that the followers of Christ provide the first stage of the restoration. As the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3) they can be born again now, baptized in recognition of the death and resurrection of Jesus and in acceptance of his Gospel about the coming Kingdom (Acts 8:12; Luke 8:11, 12) and receive the spirit of God in anticipation of the restoration of the nation of Israel and the world at the return of the Messiah (Acts 1:6; 3:21), who comes in the name of Yahweh the One True God of Israel.

"Some of the prophetic books date from the eighth century [BC]. They foretell how, out of an immense cosmic catastrophe, there will arise a Palestine which will be nothing less than a new Eden, Paradise regained. Because of their neglect of Yahweh the Chosen People must indeed be punished by famine and pestilence, war and captivity, they must indeed be subjected to a sifting judgment so severe that it will effect a clean break with the guilty past. There must indeed be a Day of Yahweh, a Day of Wrath, when sun and moon and stars are darkened, when the heavens are rolled together and the earth is shaken. There must indeed be a judgment when the misbelievers — those in Israel who have not trusted in the Lord and also Israel's enemies, the heathen nations — are judged and cast down, if not utterly destroyed. But this is not the end: a 'saving remnant' of Israel will survive these chastisements and through that remnant the divine purpose will be accomplished. When the nation is thus regenerated and reformed Yahweh will cease from vengeance and become the Deliverer. The righteous remnant — together, it was held latterly, with the righteous dead now resurrected [Dan. 12:2, sixth century] — will be assembled once more in Palestine, and Yahweh will dwell amongst them as ruler and judge. He will reign from a rebuilt Jerusalem, a Zion which has become the spiritual capital of the world, where the poor are protected, and a harmonious and peaceful world, where wild and

dangerous beasts have become tame and harmless. The moon will shine as the sun and the sun's light will be increased sevenfold. Deserts and wastelands will become fertile and beautiful. There will be abundance of water and provender for flocks and herds, for men there will be abundance of corn and wine and fish and fruit; men and flocks and herds will multiply exceedingly. Freed from sorrow and disease of every kind, doing no more iniquity but living according to the law of Yahweh now written in their hearts, the Chosen People will live in joy and gladness." ✧

Theologians from various "camps" are beginning to complain that the received doctrine of the Trinity is a post-biblical development, not a doctrine of Scripture. From the pen of a distinguished Roman Catholic professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Saarland, Germany, comes this summary:

"Theologically considered, the Trinity grew out of a syncretism [mixing] of Judaism and Christianity with Hellenism and a resulting combination of Jewish and Christian monotheism with Hellenistic monism [belief in One God]...What the theologian thus discovers poses a question to Theology about the legitimacy of such a construct. When it is clear — and there is no way around this — that Jesus himself knew only the God of Israel, whom he called Father, and knew nothing about his own later 'being made God,' what right have we to call the doctrine of the Trinity normative and binding on Christians?...However we interpret the various stages of the development of the Trinity, it is clear that this doctrine, which became 'dogma' in the East and West, has no biblical basis and cannot be traced continuously back to the New Testament" (Karl-Heinz Ohlig, *One God in Three Persons?* [German title: *Ein Gott in Drei Personen?*] *From the Father of Jesus to the "Mystery of the Trinity,"* Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 2000, translation from the German ours).

Comments

"The week before last I read *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* by Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting...The book is an excellent summary of the history and biblical basis for both sides of the Trinitarian debate. In a constructive way it argues that the biblical case for the unitarian is far stronger than for the Trinitarian position...It also explains how the historical origin and strongest source of the Trinitarian view was from pagan Greek philosophy, especially Gnosticism, with some help from the Roman Emperor Constantine."

"Thanks for your ministry. I received your July newsletter today and was fascinated by the lead article. I want to copy it for some friends as part of the ongoing debate we are having."