

One and All – The Trinity and Monotheism

*I am first; I have no father.
I am last; I have no brother.
And beside me, there is no God.
I have no son.
—Shemot Rabbah 29, 5*

A conversation with a Jewish friend...

“Did you have a good Christmas?” she asks.

“It was okay,” I respond. “Sometimes I wish there wasn’t so much pressure.”

“You have pressure at Christmastime?”

She puts the accent on the “you,” and I understand her meaning. Christmas is sometimes difficult for Jews in the United States. Everywhere they turn they find reminders that theirs is a tiny community adrift in a sea of Gentiles. But I decide to press my point.

“You’d be surprised. It’s a lot of trouble. Buying presents and putting up decorations and going to parties . . .”

She is smiling now. “Yes, I can see how all those parties would be a burden.”

“Well, sometimes I wish I could just focus on Jesus, you know?”

“No. I don’t know, actually.” Suddenly she is serious. “I could never be a Christian. I think worshipping Jesus is idolatry.” (TGAM)

Christians believe Jesus is God, just as the Father is God, and as the Holy Spirit is God. They are three, yet they are one. The idea is such a central tenet of our belief that we sometimes forget how outrageous it is to those of other religions. As the above excerpt from an actual conversation shows, in their heart of hearts, many religious Jews believe we are idolaters. This is understandable, since the Hebrew Scriptures we share say God is one, as we learned when we studied the *Shema* (Dt 6:4). The word “trinity” is not in the Bible, nor is there a scripture that specifically says God is three persons in one, and each person has a distinct will, intellect and emotions. So why does Christianity teach such a strange idea?

We believe in the Trinity because we see the three persons of God in our Bibles. Again and again the Bible speaks of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The very first verse of the Bible mentions God the Creator/Father, and the second verse mentions God the Spirit. Jewish translations render this “spirit” in Ge 1:2 as a “wind,” but even they translate the same word as “spirit” in Ge 41:38 and in Ex 31:3, where He is said to be “in” Moses and Bezalel. As for the Son, we will see many places in the Hebrew Scriptures where He is mentioned when we study the next chapter of The Gospel according to Moses.

Could these simply be different ways of referring to the same “person” of God? Could our Bible’s “Father,” “Spirit,” and “Son,” be similar to calling one person

**GOD LOVES
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(continued)

“William,” “Will,” and “Billy”? Why does Christianity teach the extraordinary notion that these are three distinct personalities, all somehow unified as one?

There are many reasons for the central Christian belief that these are different persons. For example, by “person” we mean an entity with a distinct will, intellect and emotions, and a careful study of the *Tanakh* will reveal the Father (*Yahweh*) and the Spirit behaving in that way. Jesus, of course, also demonstrated those characteristics. And we have Jesus’ own references to the “Father” and “Counselor,” in which he clearly speaks of them as distinct from each other, and from himself.

- ▶ See **John 5:19-23**, **John 6:44-46**. List the ways Jesus indicates a distinction between himself and the Father. (See also Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer” in John 17, where he speaks directly to the Father, and gives many examples of the distinctions between them, and their unity together.)
- ▶ See **John 14:16-17 & 26** and **John 15:26**. List the things Jesus says that indicate the Holy Spirit (“Counselor,” or “Comforter”) is distinct from God the Father and Son.

The Trinity in the *Tanakh*

Plural pronouns... Of course, Jews do not believe the New Testament’s accounts of Jesus to be true or accurate, so the verses above carry no weight with them. But this “unity of three in one within the Godhead” idea is not only found in the New Testament. For example, most people, after they have been studying the Bible a little while, begin to notice God’s own use of plural pronouns in reference to Himself. (For examples see **Ge 1:26**, **Ge 3:22**, **Ge 11:7** and **Isa 6:8**.) Jews (and Muslims) usually explain these scriptures as examples of “plural majesty,” similar to Queen Victoria’s famous, “We are not amused.” This is a device many royal personages have used in the past to remind those listening that they are special. But consider this...

“...a careful investigation of the Hebrew Scriptures reveals that Pharaoh, King Saul, King David, and King Solomon never refer to themselves in this way. Nor is this “plural majesty” device used in Homer’s nearly contemporaneous ancient Greek stories about the royal Agamemnon, Achilles, or Odysseus. So it seems the tradition of ruling authorities referring to themselves as “us” and “we” did not exist in the ancient Greek, Egyptian, or Hebrew worlds at the time these plural self-references by God were written... God does not refer to himself this way because some scribe believed that is how great rulers should speak; rather, rulers of later times copied how the God of the Bible speaks.”
(TGAM)

Jews also sometimes assert that God uses plural pronouns because he is speaking for Himself plus the angels. But see **Ge 1:26**, and note that nowhere does the Bible state or imply that we were made in the image of angels.

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Multiple personality disorder? There is yet another telling Hebrew Scriptural indication of multiple persons in the Godhead, and while it is probably the most commonly found hint of the Trinity in the *Tanakh*, few ever notice it. To spot it, think first of the famous 1976 movie *Sybil*, starring Sally Field, in which a young woman's childhood was so difficult she developed 13 different personalities. Consider how such a person—one person who has several personalities—might refer to herself...

- ▶ See **Ex 3:12**. Read it in a *p'shat* way, looking only for the “plain sense” meaning of the words. Compare it to **Ex 19:24**. Do you notice something strange about the point of view of the speaker in both of these verses? Look for the same thing in **John 5:24-26**. How does this support the idea of the Trinity?
- ▶ Can you find more examples of this “Godly MPD” in Exodus? If this is evident in the Hebrew Scriptures, it should carry through to the New Testament as well. Can you find it in the Gospel of John?

The Trinity in the *Shema*

There are several indications of the Trinity in the one verse where we would least expect to find it, the verse that forms the very basis for Rabbinic Judaism's resistance to the idea of the Trinity, **Dt 6:4**, also known as the *Shema*.

The meaning of “one.” The word translated as “one” in the *shema* is *echad*. It is also used in **Ge 27:38** to mean “only one blessing,” (singular) and in **Ge 1:5** to mean “the first day”. If the Torah meant to make it clear that God is singular in nature, it could have used the Hebrew word *yachid*, which has that specific meaning. But *yachid* is not used in the *shema*, and it is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures in reference to God. *Echad* on the other hand, the word for “one” used in the *shema*, is used about God in other places, including for example **Zech 14:9**, where it is used twice for emphasis. Another word, *bad* (pronounced just like the English word “bad”) is sometimes used of God, but it carries the connotation “only,” or “alone,” rather than the meaning “numerically singular”. See for example **2 Ki 19:15** and **Neh 9:6**.

- ▶ We saw above that *echad* sometimes means “singular” and sometimes “first,” just as the English word “one” has several meanings. See yet another use of *echad* in **Ge 2:24**. What possible interpretation does this third meaning give to the *shema*?
- ▶ Compare the direct transliteration of the *Shema* in **Dt 6:4** (“Hear-Israel-Lord-our God-Lord-one”) to the Lord's initial response when Moses asks Him to reveal Himself in **Ex 34:6**. What similarity is most striking? What might this mean? (Hint: “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...”) NIV

GOD LOVES
AN HONEST QUESTION!

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A plural noun. In the shema and in the **Ex 34:6** (mentioned above), the same word—*Yahweh*—is translated “the Lord,” but while the generic *El* is translated as “God” in the Exodus passage (this is the word sometimes used for idols, or “gods” with a little “g”), in the *Shema* the plural form is used (*Elohenu*, which is the plural form *Elohim* plus a suffix which renders it possessive).

A strange way of writing. It’s interesting to note that the third letter of the word *shema* in Dt 6:4 (“hear”) and the third letter of the last word, *echad* (“one”) are written larger than the other letters in the verse on all hand written Torah scrolls. This enlargement of individual letters within a word is very rare in the hand written Torah, yet it has been done on these third letters of these two words on every Torah scroll since time out of mind. To this day Jewish scholars do not know where this tradition began, or what it means.

- ▶ As we will see in the next lesson, some Jews object to the Trinity because it makes no sense. Remembering our lesson on paradox and antinomy, what would you reply to this objection?

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