

# Elohim and Echad

By Lindsey Killian

**NOTE:** Ministers of the New Covenant does not use the terms "God" and "Jesus" in the manner that the author of this article does. However, what he has written has been written well, and I feel that the intent of the article in explaining the Hebrew words *elohim* and *echad* makes it worth reading for study. This does not mean that I endorse all the beliefs of this particular author.

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,<sup>[1]</sup> 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* is the plural form of *Eloah* and appears closely related to *El* 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")<sup>[2]</sup> and *panim* (paneem, "face," "presence," "countenance")<sup>[3]</sup> are plural in form, but almost always singular in meaning. Another word, *adon*, "lord," "master,"<sup>[4]</sup> is often plural 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 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.<sup>[7]</sup> 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.<sup>[8]</sup>

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 whenever<sup>[9]</sup> we read that "*Elohim* created" or "*Elohim* said" or "*Elohim* made," etc.<sup>[10]</sup>

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.<sup>[11]</sup>

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* 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*, 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).<sup>[12]</sup> 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 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.<sup>[13]</sup> 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 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).

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#### Footnotes:

[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.

[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*.

[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 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 fleshes." The unity intended is obviously that of purpose and mind. And "one" here still means just one.

[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.