

# THE CASE FOR THE TRI-UNITY OF GOD

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A fundamental core belief of Christianity is the tri-unity of God (abbreviated as trinity), meaning the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit united as one God. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, rejects the concept, citing incompatibility with the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). But this denial fails to take into account the progress of revelation, meaning that God did not reveal the totality of His message in one big download. He communicated foundational principles in the Torah, and then added further information about those principles in the Prophets and other Old Testament writings, and then completed it in the New Testament, with much of that being focused on the way that Yeshua (Jesus) brings fulfillment to previously introduced concepts.

God's nature is one of these progressively revealed concepts. It is true that in the Torah some aspects like His holiness and expectation for righteous living are well-developed by Moses, but other elements are only introduced in a limited fashion. One way of evaluating these elements is to treat it like evidence being presented in a court of law. This, then, is the case for the tri-unity of God.

## The testimony of Moses as a linguistic expert

As the one who recorded under divine inspiration the first five books of the Bible, Moses testifies that the primary word for God is in plural form. Biblically speaking, there are two main Hebrew terms translated as God. אֱל (El) is in singular form while אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) is in plural form but is translated in Scripture as a singular when it refers to the one true God. Some people argue that the plural usage holds no significance. The verbs are singular, so it is said that the subject has to be singular. But that reduces the subject to an unnecessarily simplistic nature.

The best way of understanding *Elohim* is to look at some other related words. For example, the Hebrew words for water—מַיִם (*mayim*), and heaven—שָׁמַיִם (*shamayim*), are both in plural form. Linguistically these are called “quantitative plurals.” Water can be conceived in terms of many drops making up a larger body. Heaven can be thought of as many stars in one sky. *Elohim* is the same kind of word. It has the sense of multiplicity united within the whole. And that is emphasized by the biblical authors having options when it comes to terminology, yet the plural form, *Elohim* is used 92% of the time in reference to the true God, while the singular *El* is used only 8%.

## God's own words as a testimony

In multiple places, God refers to Himself with plural pronouns. In the Creation account, God said: “Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness” (Gen 1:26). When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, “The LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of *us*, knowing good and evil’” (Gen 3:22). When people erected the tower of Babel, the LORD said, “Come, let *us* go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other” (Gen 11:7).

Dissenters claim that these words are merely royal plurals or plurals of majesty. These

would be like the declarations made by the kings and queens of England who proclaim, “We hereby make the following decree. . .” In this usage, the “we” is the king or queen speaking alone. But the problem with applying this argument to the Bible is that it is a modern way of thinking, not the ancient Hebrew way. In the Bible, the kings of Israel and Judah always spoke in the singular. And the same is true for the words spoken by kings of other lands in the Ancient Near East. It was never part of any of the cultures in the biblical world. So this is an attempt to project a more modern concept back onto the Bible.

The next evidence is that God describes Himself as being a composite unity. The *Shema* is the fundamental statement of Judaism, derived from Deuteronomy 6:4. It reads: “*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu Adona echad*—Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Since God commanded Moses to teach those words (Deut 6:1), it indicates His intentionality. This is significant because it was not the only option He had, as there are two Hebrew words that carry the meaning of oneness:

- **יְחִיד** (*yachid*) communicates absolute unity. An example of the use of *yachid* is found in Genesis 22:2 where God instructed Abraham to “take your only one son.” Clearly, Isaac was one person. He was not part of a whole.
- **אֶחָד** (*echad*) communicates composite unity. It is the numerical form of a root verb that means “to unify.” So it has the sense of parts being unified within the whole. That is why the term “composite unity” applies. For example, in Genesis 2:24, male and female are said to become *basar echad*—“one flesh” through marriage. In this case, they are two persons united as one couple. Likewise, Numbers 13:23 uses the phrase *eshkol anavim echad*—“one cluster of grapes.” There are many individual fruits within the whole cluster. So the word choice has great implications, and God chose *echad* over *yachid*, thus emphasizing His composite unity.

We can enter into evidence virtually any *siddur* (Jewish prayer book) that is read liturgically in virtually all synagogues today. It will contain a liturgy called “*Ani Ma’amin*,” meaning “I believe.” There in the *siddur*, you will see the word *yachid* used instead of *echad*.

*Ani Ma’amin*, is based on the Thirteen Principles of Faith that were established by Maimonides, the influential 12th century rabbi. Maimonides did not change the *Shema* itself. But he did create this new statement as his second principle: “I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be his name, is absolute unity (*yachid*).” Because the Thirteen Principles of Faith became the accepted declaration of the beliefs of Rabbinic Judaism, and their inclusion in the *Ani Ma’amin* liturgy made them very familiar, it has resulted in the common perception of God’s absolute unity, not composite unity, in the minds of synagogue worshipers.

Having this understanding is important because *yachid* is never used regarding God anywhere in the Bible. It is always *echad*. So rather than trusting in the unreliable evidence of tradition, God’s own testimony is that He is a composite unity, meaning more than one person united together in some manner.

Look once again at Genesis 3:22. The text reads: “The LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us.’” Why does He include *echad*—the word for “one” in this statement? If He was just employing a royal plural, He would just omit *echad* and it would read: “The man has become like us,” thus interpreted as “The man has become like me.” But not only is the explanation of royal plurals an anachronism, as we have seen, God makes it impossible for that concept to apply anyway. Once He quantifies the phrase with *echad*, by making it “one of us,” there is only one possible meaning linguistically. It becomes a relational matter between more

than one person. Another expert witness, Professor of Semitic languages, Dr Gleason Archer, states:

“This can only be understood in terms of the trinitarian nature of God. The one true God subsists in three persons, persons who are able to confer with one another and carry their plans into action together—without ceasing to be one God.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The testimony of eyewitnesses**

The Old Testament depicts a series of eyewitnesses who attest that they saw God with the appearance of human or bodily form:

- In Genesis 18, three men appeared to Abraham and they shared a meal together. Two of them are identified as being angels and they left to go to Sodom (19:1). But the third man is identified as *YHWH*—the LORD (18:22).
- After Jacob wrestled with a man, he said, “I saw God face to face” (Gen 32:30).
- Sometimes the person who appears to people is called *Malach Adonai*, the “Angel of the Lord.” The Hebrew word, *malach* is commonly translated as “angel.” But the word literally means “messenger.” In Judges 6, we are told that the Angel of the Lord sat down with Gideon and had a conversation with him. The angel is directly identified as being *YHWH*—the LORD (v. 14). Then Gideon performed a sacrificial offering to the Angel of the Lord (vv. 19-21), an act that is reserved for God alone.
- When the Angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife, Manoah responded, “We have seen God” (Judges 13:22).
- When the three Jewish men were thrown into the fiery furnace in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar looked inside and saw alongside them a man who he said “looks like the son of God” (Dan 3:25).

These appearances are known as theophanies. You can see how these are special moments when God temporarily revealed Himself to people with the resemblance of a man. Scholars have debated whether these appearances are actually Yeshua or another way of God interacting with humanity. But at a very minimum, it is clear that God made physical appearances on earth on many occasions from the times of the patriarchs to the prophets.

### **The testimony of the prophets**

The prophets foretold the identity of the persons of God’s tri-unity.

- “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).
- According to Micah 5:2, the Messiah was not just prophesied to be born in Bethlehem, but He has always existed, which is an attribute of God alone:

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah. From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 359.

- In the 63rd chapter of Isaiah, the prophet describes the historical relationship between God and Israel. And within this passage, he reveals with remarkable precision the divine persons who are united as one God:

“He became their Savior” (v. 8). The word for Savior comes from the verb *yasha*, from which we get the noun *yeshua*, meaning “salvation” In other words, this verse can be read as, “He became their **Yeshua.**” This is consistent with the same declaration in Isaiah 12:2 that God “*hineh el yeshuati*—has become my salvation.”

“Yet they rebelled and grieved his **Holy Spirit**” (v. 10). Again, in v. 11: God put “His Holy Spirit in the midst of them.”

“But you are our **Father**” (v. 16).

So in this one chapter we have this sense of multiple divine persons identified as the Savior (Yeshua), the Holy Spirit and the Father all being God.

### **Closing arguments**

The inadequacy of the position of the opponents of God’s triune nature can be summed up with these words found in an ancient rabbinical commentary on Genesis:

When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, “And God said, ‘Let us make man’ and so on, he said: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! Why did You furnish an excuse to heretics?’ (for believing a plurality of deity). ‘Write,’ replied He; ‘whoever wishes to err may err.’”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, they are saying: “We realize we have a problem, and we have protested to God about it, and He hasn’t given us anything that will effectively impeach the position of Christians whom we consider to be heretics. But it doesn’t matter if we are in error.”

The closing argument affirming the case for the trinity in the Old Testament might be summed up this way:

- 1st—Since God has demonstrated that He is capable of manifesting Himself in human form, His ultimate incarnation as Yeshua is consistent with that principle.
- 2nd—Although there is no place in Scripture that uses the term Trinity, we have evidence in the Old Testament that God exists as more than one person linked in unity.
- 3rd—Because God has given us a glimpse of who He is in the first books of the Bible, we should not be surprised that He would reveal Himself in greater detail in the latter books of the Bible.

### **The high court confirmation in the New Testament**

In keeping with the aforementioned progress of revelation, direct statements of God’s tri-unity are evident throughout the New Testament:

- John affirms that “the Word [a term for Yeshua] was God” (John 1:1).
- Paul states that Yeshua has “equality with God” (Phil 2:6).
- The writer to the Hebrews declares that Yeshua is the one who “made the world” and is “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:2-3).

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<sup>2</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:8.

- Yeshua unequivocally declared His full deity by calling Himself “I AM” (John 8:58), which is the root for the divine name *YHWH* and the way that God identified Himself to Moses at the burning bush.
- Because they are united as *echad*, Yeshua proclaimed, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
- Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a person, not as some kind of force like in Star Wars. For He can be grieved (Eph 4:30), He exercises His will (1 Cor 12:4-7), and He has fellowship with believers (2 Cor 13:14).

Many more passages can be cited, but the complete revelation by God in the Old and New Testaments demonstrates that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons, yet they share the exact same nature and are united as one God. It truly is a mystery that is far beyond our ability to comprehend.

It is foolish to deny the evidence and to assume that God must be limited to a concept that fits our own understanding. If He can create the universe out of nothing, surely He is able to manifest Himself however He sees fit. So if we are truly seeking God’s truth, not trying to fit Him into a box of our own making, or that which is taught by those who reject the authority of God’s written Word alone, we can ask the question, why is this important? What is God trying to communicate to us by revealing Himself in this way?

### **God’s triune nature demonstrates His high value on relationship**

The Father, Son, and Spirit have eternally existed in perfect harmony. We can see clues in Scripture where internal conversations take place. And we can see the genuine joy and satisfaction expressed by Yeshua about the intimacy He shares with the Father. That is very much manifested in Yeshua’s prayer on the eve of His crucifixion. He said to the Father:

“I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (Jn 17:4-5).

He then expressed His desire for believers to be one, just as He and the Father are one:

“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me” (v. 22).

These are all expressions of relationships—believing the same way, being united as one, and exchanging mutual love. Having this understanding is a call to go beyond mere recognition of His nature, to applying it to our lives. As Paul writes:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:4-6).

This kind of unity only comes about by sharing a common nature and purpose, and by submitting to one another in love, just as God has always done as part of His unique and incredible triune nature. This is not merely a theological issue. It is about discovering the reality behind the mystery, which is God’s desire for us to emulate the perfect kind of relationship with Him and with others that He has had in a very personal way throughout eternity.