

Let Us make man...

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The word "person" has multiple meanings. In normal conversation, it means simply a human being. However, in theological terminology (thanks to the council of Nicaea in AD 325) "person" means a being that has a mind (an independent consciousness). According to this definition, God is a person because He (note the personal pronoun) thinks, acts, and feels demonstrating his unique personality. Even so, the Trinity states that there are three persons in one God. Thus, each person — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — are independent in mind but are thought to share the same substance (i.e. they are all considered to be fully God).

"The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament contain well over twenty thousand pronouns and verbs describing the One God."¹ In order to grasp this statement, perhaps a brief grammar lesson will clarify. Personal pronouns are those little words that are used to refer to a person rather than repeating his or her name. There are both singular and plural personal pronouns. Plural personal pronouns include: we, us, our, ours, they, them, their, and theirs. Singular personal pronouns include: I, me, my, he, him, his, she, her, and hers. Back to the Bible: God is referred to by the words "he," "his," and "him" thousands of times. For example, perhaps the most famous verse in the whole Bible is John 3:16: "For **God** so loved the world that **He** gave **His** only begotten Son...." Notice the type of personal pronouns used for God — "he" and "his." These pronouns are singular; thus, God is a singular person (i.e. He is one). If God were a Trinity (three persons), then John 3:16 should read: "For **God** so loved the world that **They** gave **Their** only begotten Son...." Thus, the simple fact that God is always** referred to by singular personal pronouns is strong evidence that God is a single person!

This is exactly what one would expect if the central creed of Jesus (the Shema) is taken seriously: "Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one LORD" (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29). Yahweh is in a class by Himself (Deut. 4:35, 39; Is. 45:5 and 6). There is no one that even comes close to Him — He has no equals. He alone is the uncreated One, and He alone deserves all of our worship (Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8; John 4:23 and 24).

There are four "us" texts in the Bible (Genesis 1.26; 3.22; 11.7; Isaiah 6.8). These are verses in which God uses a plural pronoun when referring to something He will do. The most common example of this phenomenon is quoted below.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'...God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."
(Genesis 1.26-27)

¹ *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self Inflicted Wound*, Buzzard & Hunting, page 17.

The traditional understanding is that these places prove that God is composed of multiple persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) who are conferring together to act. This view, although popular, is not the only interpretation that makes sense. In order to shed light on this, we will consider a number of times when men saw visions of God.

Isaiah saw God seated upon the throne with the train of His robe filling the temple with glory. Yet, Yahweh was not alone; He was accompanied by an undisclosed number of seraphim.

"In the first year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.'" (Isaiah 6.1-3)

Immediately Isaiah became aware of his own impurity and the sin of his people. One seraph flew and purified Isaiah with a coal of fire. Then as if Isaiah wasn't even there God asks a question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah perks up and boldly declares, "Here am I. Send me!" God needed a human agent to declare His word to the people of Israel. The seraphim are part of His host and so God sent Isaiah for Him and the seraphim to be his appointed prophet on earth.

Many years after Isaiah, the prophet Ezekiel saw God (shortly after many of the people of Judah were exiled by Nebuchadnezzar) (Ezekiel 1.1-3). His vision of God is one of the most bizarre in the entire Bible. In fact, the first chapter of Ezekiel reads like a science fiction novel. The chapter abounds with the words "like," "resembling," and "appearance" as he relates to the reader what he has seen. He saw God engulfed in flames (Ezekiel 1.26-27) seated upon a throne situated upon a crystalline surface (Ezekiel 1.22), which was carried by four cherubim (Ezekiel 1.5; 10.15,20). These four cherubim carry God wherever His spirit leads them.

Shortly after Ezekiel's vision, Daniel saw God while he was living in Babylon. After a vision of four great beasts coming up from the sea, and the little horn, Daniel saw the Ancient of Days sitting on His throne.

"I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were burning with fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened." (Daniel 7.9-10)

Notice that again God is not pictured alone. He is attended by myriads upon myriads or as the KJV says, “ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.” This is amazing—millions of heavenly beings surround the throne of the supreme Judge as he determines the verdict of the little horn.

The last Bible prophet, John, saw God seated on His heavenly throne (Revelation 4.1–11). In this case there are a series of concentric beings described from closest to farthest. The inner circle around the throne is made up of four creatures (possibly the cherubim from Ezekiel’s vision). Beyond the four creatures are twenty–four elders sitting upon their thrones. Lastly, the outer circle consists of myriads of angels (Revelation 5.11; 7.11). God is surrounded by heavenly creatures about whom very little is said in Scripture. Other texts which demonstrate that God is accompanied by heavenly beings include Job 1.6; 2.1; Psalm 89.6–7; 103.19–20; Zech 6.5; 1 Timothy 5.21.

One incident wonderfully puts all of this together and effectively explains God’s level and method of interaction with His heavenly host. The episode involves a prophet named Micaiah who saw God. However, before getting to that, a little background may prove beneficial. The king of Israel, a wicked man named Ahab, wanted to go to war against Syria (Aram) to reclaim some lost territory but he wanted the assistance of the king of Judah, a righteous man, named Jehoshaphat. Thus, Ahab sent for Jehoshaphat and while the two were sitting side–by–side preparing to go to war, Jehoshaphat said, “I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses. Please inquire first for the word of Yahweh” (1 Kings 22.4–5).

Then about four hundred prophets began to prophesy before the two kings saying “Go up, for the Lord will give *it* into the hand of the king.” Nevertheless, Jehoshaphat was not impressed by these false prophets (probably prophets of Baal) and said, “Is there not yet a prophet of Yahweh here that we may inquire of him?” Ahab replied with disdain, “there is yet one man by whom we may inquire of Yahweh, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. *He is* Micaiah son of Imlah.” Therefore, Ahab sent for Micaiah. When the king’s messenger came to him, he said, “behold now, the words of the prophets are uniformly favorable to the king. Please let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.” This pressure was exerted upon Micaiah so the king of Israel could save face in front of the king of Judah. Yet, Micaiah responded with conviction, “As Yahweh lives, what Yahweh says to me, that I shall speak.”

When Micaiah came before the kings, he was asked to prophecy and retorted sarcastically, “Go up and succeed, and Yahweh will give *it* into the hand of the king.” Ahab then put Micaiah under oath to only speak the truth in the name of Yahweh, so Micaiah responded, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd. And Yahweh said, ‘These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace.’” This prophecy upset Ahab (even though he asked for it) and he commented to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?” Micaiah then continued his prophecy,

“Micaiah said, ‘Therefore, hear the word of Yahweh. I saw Yahweh sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing on His right and on His left. Yahweh said, ‘Who will entice Ahab king of Israel to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh and said, ‘I will entice him.’ And Yahweh said to him, ‘How?’ He said, ‘I will go and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then He said, ‘You are to entice him and prevail also. Go and do so.’ Now therefore, behold, Yahweh had put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of these your prophets, for Yahweh has proclaimed disaster against you.” (2 Chronicles 18.18-22)

This is a remarkable prophecy. Micaiah saw the throne of the Almighty surrounded by His royal attendants—the spirit beings (angels). God knew what He wanted done but He did not preplan how it should be done. He left that open to discussion. The angels were given a chance to say one thing or another, and when one in particular came with the plan to confirm Ahab’s arrogance through the mouth of his four hundred prophets; God approved and sent him to perform the task.

God is not a domineering Leader. He involves others in His decisions. That He will get the job done is not the question but how it is done is left open. All of us have probably had the unpleasant experience of working for someone who thought they could do everything themselves and wouldn’t let others do the work. A boss with this kind of controlling attitude shows a lack of appreciation for those who are under him or her. God is not like that. He does not just do everything Himself. There are some things, such as the creation of the universe, in which He acted alone (Isaiah 44.24; 45.18). Yet, even in this situation the angels were there forming a choir to sing for joy as God worked (Job 38.6). However, it is probable that the majority of times that God acts, He empowers others to participate. Consider the first verse of Revelation, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and he sent and communicated *it* by his angel to his bond-servant John.” There is a chain of communication evident here. God is the source who assigned Jesus the task of giving this revelation to John, but Jesus does this through his angel. God could easily have just spoken directly to John but that would leave others out of the loop. God cares about His heavenly companions and works through them and with them to accomplish His own perfect will.

What does all of this have to do with the “us” texts—Genesis 1.26, 3.22 or 11.7? In the first instance, God somehow involves the heavenly beings in the making of man, the second refers to how God and His angels have the knowledge of both good and evil, and the last speaks about God and His angels going down to the tower to confuse the languages there. Thus, God is not a plurality but a single person—the Father (John 17.3)—who does not act in a vacuum but in concert with His spirit beings. He can say “us” if He wants to in an uncomplicated way, referring to both Himself and someone else other than himself—angels. What an awesome God, who demonstrates His perfect character even through His leadership style.

Below I have cited the study note from the NET Bible which surveys the various theories commonly put forward to interpret Genesis 1.26. What is noteworthy is the incredible honesty of the translators who, although trinitarian in theology, do not force their theological belief onto the plural pronoun.

The plural form of the verb has been the subject of much discussion through the years, and not surprisingly several suggestions have been put forward. Many Christian theologians interpret it as an early hint of plurality within the Godhead, but this view imposes later trinitarian concepts on the ancient text. Some have suggested the plural verb indicates majesty, but the plural of majesty is not used with verbs. C. Westermann (Genesis, 1:145) argues for a plural of "deliberation" here, but his proposed examples of this use (2 Sam 24:14; Isa 6:8) do not actually support his theory. In 2 Sam 24:14 David uses the plural as representative of all Israel, and in Isa 6:8 the Lord speaks on behalf of his heavenly court. In its ancient Israelite context the plural is most naturally understood as referring to God and his heavenly court (see 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Isa 6:1-8). (The most well-known members of this court are God's messengers, or angels. In Gen 3:5 the serpent may refer to this group as "gods/divine beings." See the note on the word "evil" in 3:5.) If this is the case, God invites the heavenly court to participate in the creation of humankind (perhaps in the role of offering praise, see Job 38:7), but he himself is the one who does the actual creative work (v. 27). Of course, this view does assume that the members of the heavenly court possess the divine "image" in some way. Since the image is closely associated with rulership, perhaps they share the divine image in that they, together with God and under his royal authority, are the executive authority over the world.²

The entry in the NIV Study Bible wonderfully confirms this concept when it says,

1.26 *us...our...our*. God speaks as the Creator-King, announcing his crowning work to the members of his heavenly court (see 3.22; 11.7; Isa 6.8; see also 1 Ki 22.19-23; Job 15.8; Jer 23.18).

With all this in mind I would suggest that "us" refers to God in relation to his heavenly court. Understanding the "us" texts like this does not in any way damage the massive evidence from the singular pronouns, yet it satisfactorily explains the verses in their context.

² sn #47 from the NET Bible (www.bible.org) concerning Genesis 1.26