

Elohim: A Plurality Of At Least 1 Male and 1 Female God

Description

Elohim: A Plurality Of At Least 1 Male and 1 Female God

A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 2nd Quarter
The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant
Week 1

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This week's lesson is entitled, "What Happened?" and looks at the stories in Genesis 1 and 2 of the creation of humankind. Monday's lesson is entitled, "In the Image of the Maker," and looks at what Genesis has to say about who God is, and therefore who we are. And Tuesday's lesson is entitled, "God and Humankind Together," and investigates what Genesis has to say about the kind of relationship we had with God before Adam and Eve chose to disobey, and how we are to relate to God now.

So today, we are going to address both of these topics by looking into the original Hebrew language that Genesis 1 and 2 were written in, and hopefully shed some new light on the image of God in an attempt to understand the truth about our humanity, and about how we are intended to relate to God and to each other, especially as men and women.

Now today's lesson might get a little technical because we are going to get into the original Hebrew text today, but we will break it down in as simple terms as possible. And trust us, if we can understand this, anyone can.

It is important to investigate the original language of any written work, because then we can have a better understanding of what the author originally intended to communicate to their audience. It is also important to understand the author's intended audience for the same reason. The problem we commonly have with translations is that they are often affected by the translators theological biases, usually the result of the traditions of man...otherwise called, "making flesh your arm."

Ellen White used this phrase repeatedly, but as a quick example, here is something she said to correct people's lack of personal investigation when it came to the 1888 message. She said,

“Whatever your position, do not depend on men, or make flesh your arm.” Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 349

Of course, the antidote for this is to accept the leading of the testimony of Jesus – which is the Spirit of Prophecy active among us. Obviously, we can have a better understanding of scripture if we are being guided by God's spokesperson rather than relying on theologians who are not guided by God's prophet. For more on the Spirit of Prophecy active among us today, listen to our free audio-book [What is the Spirit of Prophecy? \(SDA Edition\)](#).

And also, before we get started, anytime we learn something new, something different from what we previously held to be true, it can be unsettling. This is why Ellen White said,

“[The seal of God] is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually...” Ellen White, *Last Day Events*, p. 219

God knows that we need time to settle into new truths as He gives us new light through his chosen spokesperson, the prophet living among us today.

As an example, it can be quite unsettling to someone who has held that Sunday is the Lord's day for all their lives to learn from the weight of scriptural evidence that actually Saturday that is the seventh-day Sabbath of the Lord. People can get very upset by this, and understandably so. Maybe they work on Saturday and fear that they will lose their jobs and not be able to get another one. Or, upon learning this, they may realize that to observe the Sabbath on Saturday will cause them to lose family and friends, and most likely their church community.

As difficult as the truth may be to settle into, the truth is still the truth. And we must remember that our knowledge of truth is necessarily going to be progressive. That is just a fact of reality. Scientific knowledge, for example, is always progressing. Can you imagine a medical doctor still prescribing cigarettes to calm your nerves? Of course not...because medical knowledge has increased. This is true for everything, not only medicine. Our knowledge of religious truth also progresses. This is why Ellen White said,

“...it is '*present truth*' that the flock needs now.” Ellen White, *Early Writings*, p.

This is also why creeds are so dangerous. One of the main problems with creeds, as James White said, is that it stops the progress of truth. He said,

“I take the ground that creeds stand in direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point and the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too. But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement.” James White, “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Acts 5:16, 1861,” *Review and Herald* 18/19 (8 October 1861), 148-149.

The gifts, in particular the gift of a living prophet in our midst, is for the purpose of guiding us into all truth. We would only need to be guided into truth if we did not already know what it was; hence, the revelation of new light. People have a tendency to set their stake in a belief and refuse to take an honest look at new evidence when it is presented. This was the problem with the Protestant churches, according to James White. He said,

“The greatest fault we can find in the Reformation is, the Reformers stopped reforming.” James White, February 7, 1856, *Review & Herald*, vol. 7, no. 19, page 148, par. 26

So, with that said, let’s dig in to the Hebrew of Genesis 1 and 2 and see if we can understand the image of God, the nature of humanity, and the relationship between God and humanity, and between men and women in a new light today, according to the Spirit of Prophecy rather than the traditions of man!

The memory text for this week is Genesis 1:26, 27 which reads,

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:26, 27, NRSV

So, if we were from Mars and had absolutely no preconceived ideas about any interpretations of this verse, we would have to say that the image of God must be male and female according to this author. It only becomes messy when we assume that the word here translated “God” refers to a single male being.

The Hebrew word translated “God” here, and in most places throughout the Old Testament, is “Elohim.” The “im” ending makes the root word, “Eloah” plural. In other words, a better translation right out of the gates of the word “Elohim” would be “Gods.” And this makes

obvious sense, because the Gods in this verse say, “Let US make mankind in OUR image...” Plural.

Now, let’s go a little further. The verse reads, “Then Elohim said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....male and female....’”

So, just according to the plain reading of the text here, it is pretty obvious that the author is implying that the image of Elohim – Gods – is both male and female, as we said.

Now let’s take a closer look at the word “Elohim.” The word “Elohim,” as we said, has a plural ending, “im.” So why don’t people translate it as a plural word?

Well, first of all, this goes against the idea of Jewish monotheism. We assume that Elohim is a single male deity. But does the context here really lead to that conclusion? If we want to truly understand what the author of a text is saying, we have to evaluate it according to its own merits. In this case, is it logical to assume that the author was speaking of a single male god here? No.

Secondly, many will claim subject-verb disagreement here. In Hebrew, a plural noun should connect with a plural verb. In the case of Genesis 1:26 (and also in Genesis 1:1), it is argued that since a verb that is connected to the noun “Elohim” is singular, the word Elohim must also be singular, regardless of its plural suffix.

Genesis 1:1 reads, “In the beginning, God (Elohim – a plural noun) created (which is a singular verb in the Hebrew text)....” So, here we can see a case where the noun is seemingly plural grammatically because it has a plural suffix, “im.” But since it governs a singular verb, and since the noun and verb need to be in agreement in number, it is thought that the word “Elohim” must also be singular in order to match the singular verb.

Genesis 1:26 reads, “Then God (Elohim – a plural noun) said (singular verb in the Hebrew text), ‘Let us make humankind in our image’...” Here again it is assumed that since the verb “said” is singular in the Hebrew text (and it is) the noun “Elohim” necessarily has to be singular too.

But there is one rule of Hebrew grammar that is often overlooked in regard to this. What I’m referring to is collective pronouns. You know how in English we have collective nouns, like “humankind” or “flock”? Well, in Hebrew they have collective nouns as well, but they also have collective pronouns. Here is a brief example from 1 Samuel 17:21:

“And Israel and the Philistines arranged troop to meet troop.”

The verb in this verse is “arranged;” and it, like most verbs in Hebrew, has a pronoun built into it. The pronoun usually matches the subject in number and gender. So, if you were to say “Jack went up the hill,” in Hebrew it would actually be “Jack, he~went up the hill.” And if you wanted to say “Jill went up the hill” the Hebrew would be “Jill, she~went up the hill.”

If Jill and Cindy went up the hill, the Hebrew would say “Jill and Cindy, they~went up the hill” with a feminine form of “they,” and if Jack and Hank went up the hill it would use a masculine form of “they” which would also be used if there was a mixed gender group.

But sometimes, Hebrew uses a collective pronoun, like here in 1 Samuel 17:21. Instead of saying, “Israel and the Philistines, they~arranged troop to meet troop” it says “Israel and the Philistines, she~arranged troop to meet troop.” It uses a feminine singular form of the verb. It is feminine because people-groups were conceptualized in feminine terms and it is singular because it is describing the collective action of both groups. Do we conclude from this that the Israelites are actually a single female person or that the Philistines are a single female person or that both the Israelites and Philistines are a single female person? No! We recognize that there are multiple individuals making up each group. This is just how it works in Hebrew when you have a plural noun with corresponding singular verbs or pronouns; the pronouns are collective and the plural noun indicates an actual plurality of entities.

So, when Genesis 1:26 says “Elohim said” – and the word “said” has a built-in singular form, that doesn’t mean that Elohim is a single being – it is just that the singular pronoun in the word “said” is collective. The same is true in Genesis 1:1 and in many other passages.

Now that we know that Elohim is truly plural and really refers to multiple beings, we need to address the issue of gender. Genesis 1:26-27 says that the image of Elohim is male and female, but the plural ending in Elohim is “im” – the masculine plural ending. Does this mean that Elohim are male? Well, the masculine singular form from which Elohim is ultimately derived is El – this refers to a single male deity. But adding the masculine plural ending to El gives Elim, not Elohim. Elim shows up in Hebrew too; it is a legit form that refers to multiple deities. But if Elohim and Elim mean the same thing, why have both forms? Well, it turns out they don’t mean exactly the same thing. Elohim doesn’t derive directly from El.

The base of the word “Elohim” is “Eloah.” This is a feminine noun meaning “goddess” and is correctly translated “goddess” when the word is used concerning Ashtoreth, “the goddess of the Zidonians” in 1 Kings 11:5. But when the exact same word is used in connection with “the goddess of Israel” in 1 Kings 11:9, the word is translated “God” instead. Again, this can only be because of preconceived ideas.

Feminine singular nouns typically end with the Hebrew letter “hey” or “tav” making the “ah” and the “t” sound respectively. Eloah does end with the letter ‘hey.’ This shows that the word Elohim is made up of both male and female aspects. “Eloah” is feminine and “im” is the masculine plural ending. This means that Elohim refers to multiple beings – at least two, with at least one male and one female. So the word Elohim itself actually testifies to the same truth mentioned in Genesis 1:26 – that Gods – Elohim – are male and female.

This has many profound implications, as you can imagine. We will leave you with one today.

Tuesday's lesson reads,

“When we read about the creation of man and woman, we can see elements, before sin, of the kind of relationship God wants us to have with Him now, after sin. Review the day's study and see what parallels you can find that help us understand how we can relate to Him, even in our fallen condition.” – Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Tuesday, March 30, 2021

Of course, most men have been able to relate somewhat to being made in God's image, but most women have been left not really understanding how they fit into the God-human relationship. Femininity has been viewed as lesser, or secondary by both men and women alike. I mean, how can a woman be made in God's image if he is male? This has led to a few issues, not only the false ideas of male headship, but also the idea that the image we are made in must not be physical, because if women are made in God's image too, and God is only male, well, it couldn't be physical for obvious reasons.

This would certainly affect our relationship to God and to each other, and it has. How could we possibly understand what God's image even is if we believe that both men and women are made in the image of a male deity? It makes no sense. So, we spiritualize God...which has led to, well, spiritualism, which is a great danger as all SDAs should know. See our study entitled, “Materialism: Our Forgotten Foundation,” by Trent Wilde for a better understanding of spiritualism vs. materialism from quotes from our SDA pioneers!

Let's read the rest of Genesis 1:26 to see how we can understand our intended relationship to heaven, to the earth, and to each other. Genesis 1:26 reads,

“Then God [Elohim] said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”

So here we see that the Gods, our heavenly Mother – The Holy Spirit – and Father, gave both men and women equal dominion over the earth. It was never intended to be the case that only men would be the leaders of humanity and of the world. Women and men alike are called to the priesthood of Melchizedek as equals, both are to see themselves and each other as a reflection of Elohim.

For a much deeper study on this topic, please see our studies, “Divine Plurality,” by Trent Wilde; “God Ordains Women,” by Doug Mitchell; “In Their Image,” by Lois Roden; and “What is the Spirit of Prophecy? SDA Edition,” by Trent Wilde.