

God Is . . . What?

by John W. Ritenbaugh
Forerunner, May 1994

Who is God? What is His nature? Is God one Being? Two? Three? Is God a family? What does Elohim mean, and does it speak of one or more than one Being?

Students of the Bible have searched for the answers to these questions for centuries. The answers are found in the revelation of the Bible, the only place where true knowledge of God, His plan and His ways is explained. The truth is simple—and astounding!

Questions about what God is have been debated—sometimes violently—since men began searching for Him. Obviously, we cannot see God, but if He has described Himself in the pages of the Bible, why should what He is be so difficult to fathom? Why argue about what the Bible says directly or implies in its terminology, visions, analogies and symbols? In answer to this latter question, *our concept of God determines the depth of our relationship with Him and our grasp of His purpose for us* (Isaiah 40).

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." The apostle Paul adds in I Corinthians 2:10-11 that God has revealed to us the mystery of His purpose by His Spirit.

Of course, Paul writes to converted people. Plainly, God does not hide Himself or what He is from those to whom He specifically reveals Himself and His Son (John 6:44; Matthew 11:27). So clear is God's revelation of Himself that Paul says that even the unconverted can understand much about Him through observation of His creation.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in [to, margin] them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead [*divine nature*, margin]. (Romans 1:18-20)

Jesus' own testimony shows He came to reveal the Father. When asked by Philip to show them the Father, He replies, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9). After combining Jesus' revelation of the Father with revelations through the prophets and apostles, a clear picture emerges of what we need to know about God relative to salvation.

Is God a Trinity?

In His inspired revelation of Himself and His purpose, does God reveal Himself to be a trinity? Notice these quotations from a few authoritative sources (author's emphasis throughout):

Though 'trinity' is a second-century term found nowhere in the Bible, and the Scriptures present **no finished trinitarian statement**, the NT does contain most of the building materials for later doctrine. (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Trinity," p. 914)

One does not find in the NT the trinitarian **paradox** of the coexistence of the Father, Son, and Spirit within a divine unity, the mystery of the three in one, yet one does find there the data that serve as the foundation of this **later** dogmatic formulation. [*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "God (NT)," p. 1055]

The new element is the historical Jesus, at once the representative of humanity and of God. As in philosophy, so now in theology, the easiest solution of the problem was the denial of one of its factors: and successively these efforts were made, until a solution was found in the doctrine of the Trinity, which satisfied both terms of the equation and became the fundamental creed of the church. Its moulds of thought are those of **Greek philosophy**, and into these were run the Jewish teachings. We have thus a **peculiar** combination—the religious doctrines of the Bible, as culminating in the person of Jesus, run through the forms of an **alien philosophy**. (*The Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Christianity," 11th ed., vol. 6, p. 284)

The New Testament teaching upon this subject is not given in the way of formal statement. The formal statement, however, is legitimately and necessarily **deduced** from the Scriptures of the New Testament, and these, as has been suggested, cast a light backward upon the intimations of the Old. . . . It is admitted by all who thoughtfully deal with this subject that the Scripture revelation here leads us into the presence of a deep mystery. (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, "Trinity," p. 1118)

These quotations admit that the idea of a trinity is at best deduced from Scripture, and these scholarly deductions are based on human and "alien" reasoning. What is wrong with the Bible's own description of God? The problems arise when one tries to blend alien, human, philosophical thinking with the Bible's own clear statements about God. To this odd mix is added man's unwillingness to believe "the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Corinthians 11:3). Would a loving God inspire the Bible to be difficult for His people to understand?

The Bible Reveals God!

The content of the Bible is the revelation of God to the converted. *Reveal* means "to make known through divine inspiration; to make (something secret or hidden) publicly or generally known; to make manifest, expose to view, divulge." Jesus says in Matthew 11:25, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes." What makes His statement especially interesting is that it is part of His response to a question asking who He was (verses 2-3).

His identity is plainly revealed in what He said about Himself. But the Jewish leadership rejected His teachings, while the humble, unlearned and simple accepted and believed it. Rather than denouncing true scholarship, Jesus emphasizes the attitude of the "babes." Thus He condemns the leaders' intellectual pride which led them to reject His clear revelation of God, in contrast to the "babes" whose humility enabled them to accept it.

In Genesis 1:26 Moses writes that man is created in God's "image" and "likeness." Any reliable lexicon mentions that "image" and "likeness" reinforce each other in a manner common to Hebrew. It means we are like God in form and implies that, like Him, we have a spiritual capacity and potential which animals do not have.

Genesis 2:24 shows that two human personalities—a husband and wife—can become one flesh. Why, then, can God not be one with two distinct personalities who work independently yet in complete harmony? Paul writes in I Corinthians 6:17, "But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him." If a human can be one with God and remain entirely distinct, why cannot another spirit being with a separate personality be one with Him? John's gospel proves this is possible in many passages.

The Physical Parallels the Spiritual

Another approach to this is through the Bible's use of parables (Greek, *parabole*). *Parable* is closest in meaning to "similitude." Generally, but not always, parables are introduced with the words, "The kingdom of God is like. . . ." In Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19, *parabole* is translated "figure," "figurative" or "symbolic," meaning a comparison is used to show parallels, so that from the human, temporal and material realm we may understand the eternal and spiritual reality.

Jesus consistently referred to God as "Father," Himself as "Son" and whoever does the will of God as "brother," "sister" or "mother" (Mark 3:35). Paul adds in Romans 8:14, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God," and in verses 16, 17 and 19, he alternates between "children" and "sons."

John says, "We are children of God; and . . . we shall be like Him" (I John 3:2), implying we will one day be more like Him than we are today, though even now we are in His image and likeness. Many more scriptures show this family parallel, but Ephesians 3:14-15 plainly summarizes this truth: "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole **family in heaven and earth** is named." Already a Family exists in heaven—not the angelic family, but the Family in which we are sons and daughters! We are the part of that heavenly Family but still on the earth.

Jesus and the apostles use so many family parallels that the lesson is overwhelming. Do families consist of only one member? Of course not! Why would Jesus and the apostles even use such an analogy over and over if an honest parallel of kind between the human, physical family and a godly, spiritual one does not exist?

What Is *Elohim* ?

The fourth word of the Bible is the first-mentioned name of God, *elohim*, and it acts almost as God's signature, authenticating His authorship of the book. Appearing 2606 times, of which 2346 refer to God, *elohim* is also used of idols, men, angels and judges. Though its root means "to swear," the concepts of might and authority are implied, and the biblical writers use it in the sense of "mighty ones" or "authorities."

In form *elohim* is plural, but it is joined with singular verbs and adjectives in the Bible, indicating a body, group, class or family that contains more than one part. Herbert Armstrong coined the term "uniplural" to convey this meaning. We can easily see that angels, judges and idols are distinct,

powerful bodies, groups, classes or families of beings with more than one personality within them. Why should the usage of *elohim* be any different when applied to God?

Webster's Dictionary defines *class* as "a group of people of the same rank or status in a community; a comprehensive group of animals or plants." It defines *family* as "a group consisting of parents and their children; a harmonious group bound together by common interests."

"Family" need not be restricted to the sense of blood relationships. It can also be correctly used to designate a multi-member group, related by occupation, species, status, responsibility, kind, etc. It is in this sense that the Bible frequently uses *elohim*.

Angels are a family of created spirit beings, one kind. Judges are a group of individuals with common authority and responsibility. As Paul says, "There are many gods and many lords" (I Corinthians 8:5), false gods are a group—they fall into one category—because they share a common trait: They are all false.

Sometimes *elohim* is used with a singular pronoun. In *All the Divine Names and Titles in the Bible*, Herbert Lockyer writes:

Yet the word in this singular form is not full enough to set forth all that is intended. . . . It is a repository of truth concerning the Persons [plural] in the Godhead in the essential unity, and a mode of expressing the abundance and diversity of transcendent attributes combined in the Deity. (p. 6)

Dr. Parkhurst writes in his *Hebrew Lexicon*:

Elohim is plurality in unity. Accordingly Jehovah is at the beginning of Creation named *Elohim*, which implies that the divine Persons [plural] had sworn when they created.

Another way to understand the use of *elohim* in Scripture is by defining its Greek equivalent, *theos*. In the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, *theos* translates *elohim*. The King James Version translates both of these words as "God," but both carry the more definitive meaning of "ruler." Satan the Devil is named "the god [*theos*, ruler] of this age" (II Corinthians 4:4). Paul remarks that there are some people "whose god [*theos*, ruler] is their belly" (Philippians 3:19), clearly indicating a people ruled by their physical desires.

When applied to John 1:1-2, this definition becomes interesting: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." A literal translation begins to clear up any confusion: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with the God." If we insert the words "Jesus" and "Ruler" into them, these verses become plain: "In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with the Ruler, and Jesus was Ruler. He was in the beginning with the Ruler."

This simple exercise shows two Beings, both of the same class (Ruler), both eternal, but One has greater authority than the Other. John is teaching us that Jesus Christ is our Ruler, but He also has a Ruler (the Ruler). I Corinthians 11:3 further confirms this: "The head of man is the Christ and the head of Christ is the God" (literal translation). Jesus Christ is the Lord (Owner, Ruler or Master) of man and God the Father is Lord of the Christ (*cf.* I Corinthians 15:23-28).

Since John 1:1-2 establishes Him as God, when Jesus told Mary Magdalene, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God" (John 20:17), He plainly identifies two personalities of the class of Ruler. And to the greater of these He had to present Himself for acceptance.

Two Distinct Personalities

If this was all we had, we would already have strong evidence of God being a Family of individuals, living and working in harmony on a common plan toward a common goal. But there is much more! And, contrary to popular belief, it does not require a doctorate to understand—just normal intelligence.

As we have seen, John's gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2). *With* means "used to indicate that two or more persons or things are together, near each other, in agreement, harmony etc.; in the company of; accompanied by."

The next verse reads, "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." Paul expands this thought in Colossians 1:16:

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

These verses reveal the Word, who became Jesus Christ, as the agent of creation, performing the work necessary to carry it out. He is not only God but *with* another who is also God. "Through Him" implies that this other Being authorized the works of creation carried out by the Word. Does this not indicate two distinct personalities, both by inspiration called God, working in harmony to accomplish a work?

Psalms 45 is a Messianic prophecy:

You are fairer than the sons of men; grace is poured upon Your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird Your sword upon Your thigh, O Mighty One, with Your glory and Your majesty. And in Your majesty ride prosperously because of truth, humility, and righteousness; and Your right hand shall teach You awesome things. Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the King's enemies; the peoples fall under You. Your throne, O **God**, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore **God**, Your **God**, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions. (verses 2-7)

The word for "God" used once of the Messiah and later for the Messiah's God, is *elohim*! Paul quotes this psalm in Hebrews 1:8-9 to prove that Jesus ("through whom also He made the worlds," verse 2) is worthy of the worship of angels. To worship anything less than God breaks the first commandment! This shows Jesus to be God before and after His incarnation.

Philippians 2:6-7 adds more to our understanding of this:

[Jesus Christ], being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men.

J. B. Phillips renders it:

For he, who had **always been God by nature**, did not cling to his privileges as God's equal, but stripped Himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born a man.

James Moffatt translates:

Though he was **divine by nature**, he did not set store upon equality with God, but emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant; born in human guise and appearing in human form.

As in other scriptures, He was God, divine by nature, with—beside, accompanying—a different personality also called God!

A similar conclusion emerges in considering the subject of will. Jesus prays to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Does God have a multiple personality disorder? The best explanation is that two Beings with individual wills harmoniously coexist in one Family because One submits His will to the Other.

This also explains why Genesis 1:26 uses the plural pronouns "Us" and "Our" to refer to their antecedent *elohim*. Two divine personalities were working as one. They are equal in that both are God but not equal in authority, even as husband, wife and child are equal in their humanity but not equal in authority. Jesus says it Himself: "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28).

Has Anyone Ever Seen God?

In John 8:58 Jesus identifies Himself as the "I AM." Furthermore, He also says man has "neither heard His [the Father's] voice at any time, nor seen His form" (John 5:37), and only Jesus Christ who came from God has seen the Father (John 6:46).

Is this a contradiction? Israel heard God speak the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1), and Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel saw the God of Israel (Exodus 24:9-11). Evidently, they ate a meal in His presence!

Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8-24). Abraham often talked with God (Genesis 15), and before the destruction of Sodom, he entertained Him at his tents (Genesis 18). He gave tithes to Melchizedek, whom Paul identifies as Christ (Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 7). Joshua saw Him before the children of Israel marched around Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15), and so forth.

If many have seen God, yet no one has seen God "at any time," there can be only one conclusion: Two personalities make up the Godhead. They saw God, the One who became Jesus of Nazareth, not the other personality of the Godhead, called later "the Father." Before Jesus' ministry, Israel had only hints of the Father's existence, for part of His mission was to declare the Father to His people (John 1:18; 17:25-26).

So too the "physical" relationship between the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son, illustrates their distinctiveness. Through the power of His Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), God the Father impregnated Mary, and His Seed, Jesus, was called Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). He is called "the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). Since it is impossible for any being to father or beget himself, two separate Beings must be involved.

An additional point to consider is that the very hope of a Christian is in vain if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead (I Corinthians 15:12-19). But we know He did rise (verses 3-4). Who resurrected Him, then, if not a distinct and separate Being?

The same reasoning holds true with His ascension. He told Mary Magdalene not to cling to Him, "for I have not yet ascended to My Father" (John 20:17). He could not ascend to Himself! And where did He go? To the third heaven to sit at His Father's right hand (Hebrews 1:3)!

We Can Be One With Them!

The Bible is full of similar examples which clearly show God consisting of two Beings cooperating in family harmony. In John 17:20-22, part of Jesus' prayer before His crucifixion, He prays that we would all be one with the Father as He and the Father are one. When He made that prayer, He and His Father were certainly distinct personalities, yet they were one. They are of one nature, one mind and one Family (Kingdom). They are *elohim* working in complete cooperation and harmony. And we have the awesome opportunity to be one with them as they are (Matthew 25:34; John 14:1-3)!

Christ's prayer in John 17 implies that this oneness, at least its fullness, will occur when we inherit His Kingdom. Will we be enveloped in God and lose our personal identity? Revelation 3:12 says we will be given a new name. Names are given to things and people to establish personal identity or to distinguish one from another! Just as the Father and the Son are distinct personalities, so will we be.

Revelation 21:24 shows kings of nations, as part of the Kingdom of God, clearly identifiable as individuals. John saw nation *s*, meaning he saw national characteristics in spirit-composed individuals inheriting the Kingdom of God and taking their place within the divine Family. Just as a child is distinguishable from his father, while sharing a family resemblance with him, we will enter the Family of God and retain our individuality.

The overwhelming evidence is that God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4), a Family at work fulfilling its purpose of bringing multiple billions into itself. What a tremendous burden will be lifted from all creation when God, by grace and awesome creative power, molds the division and conflict of man's realm into the oneness of God!