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Elohim: Plural or Singular

Part 2

by Nehemia Gordon

www.karaites.info

In part 1 we saw that the word *Elohim* is an "intensive plural". The *intensive plural* has the plural ending but the verbs and adjectives that accompany it are singular. The intensive plural denotes a singular object or individual but adds a connotation of greatness. So Elohim does not mean *gods* but *great God*.

Until now it was observed that the verbs and adjectives connected with Elohim are always singular. However, in the book of Genesis we find three passages in which God speaks in the first person plural as "we", "our", and "us". The first such passage deals with the creation of mankind, in which God declares, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the animals and over the whole earth and over all the creeping things that creep on the earth." (Gen 1:26). Who is this "us" and "our"? Does God have multiple personalities? Is there more than one God?

Immediately before the words "Let us make man in our image" we read "And (he) Elohim said" וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים. The word וַיֹּאמֶר "and he said" is the 3rd person singular form of the verb אָמַר (*qal inverted future*). This indicates that the speaker is a singular individual. Were Elohim a plurality the verse would have opened "And (they) Elohim said" וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהִים. The phrase "Elohim said/ spoke" appears about fifty times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in every single instance it is "(he) God said/ spoke" in the singular and never "(they) God said/ spoke" in the plural.

From the words "Let us make man" we might expect mankind to be created by multiple creators. The word נַעֲשֶׂה "let us make" is the 1st person plural (*qal future*) of the verb עָשָׂה (to do, to make). The ו- prefix indicates that it is "us" which seems to imply multiple creators. Similarly, from the words בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ "in our image after our likeness" we might expect man to be made in the images of multiple individuals. The suffix -נוּ at the end of each word is the possessive suffix which means "our". We might think that "our" image and "our" likeness refers to multiple individuals with similar characteristics with which mankind was to be endowed. Yet when the creation of mankind actually takes place, in the very next verse, it says, "And (he) Elohim created man in His image, in the image of Elohim He created him" וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּעֶלְמוֹ (Gen 1:27). So man was not created by the multiple "we" but by the single individual Elohim who is termed "He". Nor was man created in the image of a group of multiple individuals but only in the single image of Elohim which is described as "His image", that is, the single image of the Creator. Were Elohim a multiplicity the verse would have to have read, "And (they) Elohim created man in their image, in the image of Elohim they created them" וַיִּבְרְאוּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמָם בְּעֶלְמָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָאוּ אֹתוֹ. Since this is not what Scripture says we must conclude once again that Elohim is a singular individual.

What of the other two instances in which God speaks in the 1st person plural as "we/ us"? The next instance is in the Garden of Eden Account. After Adam eats of the forbidden fruit, God declares, "Behold the man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22). Despite this reference to "us" we again find that God is a singular individual. The very same verse opens, "And (he) YHWH Elohim said". Were YHWH Elohim a plurality the verse would have to have read, "And (they) YHWH Elohim said". Furthermore, after God explains the concern that the undeserving Adam may eat from the Tree of Life we

read, "And (he) YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". It is the single individual YHWH Elohim who banishes Adam from the garden, not the plural "we".

The third instance of the divine "we" appears in the Tower of Babel Account. After observing that mankind is in a state of rebellion, God declares, "Let us go down and let us mix up there their language" (Gen 11:7). The very same speech opens, "And (he) YHWH said" (Gen 11:6) which indicates that we are dealing with a single individual YHWH. When God actually descends to mix up the languages we read, "And (he) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". In this passage as well, YHWH is referred to as a singular individual ("He said", "He scattered").

The Royal We

If YHWH Elohim is a single individual, why does He speak about "we", "our", and "us"? How can any singular speaker refer to himself as "we"? There is a linguistic phenomenon in which a speaker refers to himself in the plural. In many cultures and civilizations kings refer to themselves in the first person plural as "we". This is generally considered a sign of self-magnification, similar to the *intensive plural* used to magnify nouns. The best-known example of this is the British royal family who use the "*royal we*". The 19th century English Queen Victoria used to express her dissatisfaction by declaring, "We are not amused" rather than the expected, "I am not amused". In modern English the *royal we* is used in a variety of contexts not necessarily related to royalty. For example, in certain types of formal speaking and writing, "we" can be used "by a speaker or writer, in order to secure an impersonal tone, or to avoid the obtrusive repetition of 'I'". Modern English also has the "modest we" in which "a person uses a plural form in order not to call attention to himself as an individual." In some dialects of American English "we" is used in place of "I" as a colloquialism, without any connotation of formality or self-magnification. For example, "Give us a chance!" in certain dialects of American English has the meaning of "Give me a chance!". Thus the *royal we* in English is not strictly speaking "royal" as it is used in a number of social contexts.

In ancient times, the *royal we* was not strictly speaking "royal" either. Instead it was used as a formal mode of address in the context of a "royal court". An ancient king was always surrounded by a host of advisors, ministers, and attendants known as the "royal court" or "royal council". Daniel, standing in the Babylonian *royal court*, said to king Nebuchadnezzar, "This dream and its interpretation we shall say in the king's presence " (Dan 2:36 [Aramaic]). The singular individual Daniel refers to himself as "we" because this is the formal mode of address used in the royal court. Job's companion, Bildad the Shuchite complains to Job, "Why have we been considered as an animal, as stupid (pl) in your eyes" (Job 18:3). When Bildad says "we" he is not referring to himself and his two companions. Were this the case he would have said, "Why have we been considered as animals". The fact that Bildad complains that he has been considered "an animal" in the singular proves he is only talking about himself. While Bildad is not in a royal court he uses the *royal we* because he is partaking in a royal court-like audience. Before being tested by God, Job had been a local nobleman with great wealth (Job 1:3). After losing everything, Job sat on the floor (like a king sits on his throne) surrounded by his companions who came to comfort him and give him advice (like a king's courtiers) (Job 2:11-13). Job's companions proceed to give long flowery speeches full of advice in the manner that courtiers might address a king in the royal court. As a result, they occasionally resort to the use of the *royal we*. In both of the above examples the speaker is addressing a royal court or similar forum. In this context, the *royal we* is employed as a formal mode of address, somewhat like the "we" used in certain types of formal English oratory and writing (see above). It is worth noting that the *royal we* was used in an erratic fashion in biblical times. Thus when Daniel addresses the royal court on a different occasion he speaks as "I" (e.g. Dan 5:7). This is rather like the queen of England who now only refers to herself as "we" on rare occasions.

Another example of the *royal we* can be found in the words of Ahab king of Israel. Ahab had been planning an invasion of Aram and assembled 400 prophets to tell him how victorious he would be. Sitting on his royal throne before his assembly of courtiers Ahab asked the 400 prophets, "Shall we go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall I hold back" (2Chr 18:5). When speaking in the royal court the king freely switches off between the *royal we* and the regular "I"! The 400 prophets respond to Ahab as a singular king, "Go up (singular) and God will deliver into the hand of the king" (2Chr 18:5). Despite Ahab's use of the *royal we*, he is not "mysteriously" transformed into a multiplicity of personalities and his four hundred false prophets accordingly speak to him as a single individual king.

The Heavenly Council

If the ancients used the *royal we* as a formal mode of address when speaking in a royal court or council, who is YHWH addressing when he says "Let us make man in our image"? Does YHWH have a royal council? For that matter would the all-powerful Creator of the universe bother to tell His creations what He is about to do before doing it? As a matter of fact He would! Scripture informs us that YHWH is a wise king and like a human king he informs His subjects of what he is about to do. Thus we read, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* **סוד** to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The Hebrew word **סוד** *council* literally means a grouping of people such as an assembly or congregation, as in the verse, "Let not my soul come into their *assembly* **סוד**, let not my honor be united with their congregation" (Gen 49:6). By extension **סוד** also has the meaning of an assembly of advisors, as in the verse, "Plans are foiled without *council* **סוד**, but they succeed through many advisors" (Prov 15:22). In this last verse most English translations render the word **סוד** as "counsel", that is, the advice given by a council of advisors. However, the Hebrew word **סוד** refers to the council of advisors itself, and only indirectly to the advice that they give. When we read in Amos that YHWH reveals "His council" **סוד** to the prophets the meaning is that he makes known to them the secret deliberations that took place in the heavenly council. It is knowledge of these deliberations that false prophets are said to lack, as we read in Jeremiah, "For who among them has stood in the *council of YHWH* **סוד** and seen and heard his word? Who among them has listened to His word and heard?" (Jer 23:18). We see that a true prophet has knowledge of the deliberations that take place in the "council of YHWH" whereas the false prophet lacks this knowledge. We read further in the same passage, "(21) I did not send those prophets... I did not speak to them yet they prophesied. (22) Now if they have stood in my *council* **סוד**, let them announce my words to My people that they return from their evil way and the wickedness of their actions" (Jer 23:21-22). Again we see that the false prophets are unable to speak the word of YHWH because they have no knowledge of the deliberations that took place in His heavenly council.

What is the "council of YHWH"? We find throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that YHWH is said to be surrounded by a large host of angels. For example, in one vision Daniel sees YHWH sitting like a king surrounded by millions of attendants:

"(9) And the Ancient One sat down, His garment like white snow, and the hair of His head like clean wool, His throne flames of fire and its wheels burning fire. (10) A river of fire flowed forth; a million attended Him and a hundred million stood before Him. The judgment began and the books were opened." (Dan 7:9-10)

In Daniel's vision YHWH is described as a mighty king with a large council of courtiers. YHWH sits like a wise king in judgment (Prov 20:8; 29:14; 1Ki 3:28; 2Sam 15:2). The courtiers serve as YHWH's royal council of advisors and among other things keep records.

Another description of the heavenly council can be found in the vision of Michayahu ben Yimla. Michayahu was called to advise Ahab King of Israel on whether or not he should set off on his invasion of Aram. We have already seen that Ahab assembled 400 prophets all of whom told him he would be victorious

in this invasion. However, one lone prophet, Michayahu ben Yimla, informed the king that he would die in battle and that the other prophets had been misled by a false spirit of prophecy. Michayahu explains how this false spirit of prophecy came to infect Ahab's prophets:

"(19) And he said, therefore, listen to the word of YHWH. I saw YHWH sitting on His throne and the entire host of heaven standing on His right and His left. (20) And YHWH said, Who will tempt Ahab that he go up and fall in the highlands of Gilead. And one said, 'In this manner' and another said, 'In that manner.' (21) And a certain spirit went forth and stood before YHWH and said, 'I will tempt him'. And YHWH said to him, 'In what manner?' (22) And he said, 'I will go out and be a false spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And He said, 'You shall tempt and be successful. Go and make it so!'" (1Ki 22:19-22).

In Michayahu's vision YHWH sits like a king on His throne surrounded by His royal council which consists of the "entire host of heaven". The "host of heaven" refers to the angels, as in the verse, "Praise Him, all His angels! Praise Him, all His hosts!" (Ps 148:2). YHWH consults His angels in the same way as a flesh and blood king might consult the members of his *royal council*. The angels raise various proposals ("And one said, 'In this manner' and another said, 'In that manner.'"). Finally a "spirit" comes forth and proposes that it be a false spirit of prophecy in the mouth of the prophets of Ahab. YHWH accepts the proposal and orders the spirit to carry out the mission.

Another description of the heavenly council appears in the book of Job. We read there, "And it was a certain time, and the *sons of God* came to stand before YHWH" (Job 1:6; 2:1). What follows is a deliberation between YHWH and a satanic angel, similar to that which took place in the vision of Michayahu between YHWH and the spirit of false prophecy. The "sons of God" that comprise the members of the heavenly court are the angels. The angels are called "sons of God" because they are YHWH's holy and chosen messengers. The Israelites are also described as *sons of God*, as we read in Deuteronomy:

"(1) You are sons of YHWH your God, you shall not cut yourselves nor place a baldness on your head for the dead. (2) Because you are a holy nation to YHWH your God, and YHWH has chosen you to be His chosen people out of all the nations on the face of the earth." (Dt 14:1-2).

Israel is forbidden to partake in pagan mourning practices because they are "sons of YHWH", which means they are a "holy nation to YHWH", a "chosen nation". So to be a "son of God" simply means to be *holy, chosen by God*. The angels are called "sons of God" in Job because they too are "chosen" and "holy". In fact, one of the biblical terms for angel is קָדוֹשׁ "holy one". Daniel sees an angel in a vision which he describes as a "holy one" (Dan 8:13). In Nebuchadnezzar's dream he sees "an angel and a holy one coming down from heaven" (Dan 4:10 [Aramaic]). The phrase "an angel and a holy one" is an example of the stylistic device *hendiadys*, that is, "two that are one" (like תְּהוֹ וְקָדוֹשׁ). This means that "angel" and "holy one" are functionally synonymous in this context.

The terms "angel" and "son of God" are also used synonymously. When Nebuchadnezzar throws Daniel's three companions into the fiery furnace, he is surprised to see a fourth person in the furnace with them. He explains that "the appearance of the fourth one is like a son of God בֶּר אֱלֹהִים" (Dan 3:25 [Aramaic]). Only a few verses later Nebuchadnezzar declares, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Aved-Nego who sent His angel מַלְאָכָה and saved His servants who trusted in Him" (Dan 3:28 [Aramaic]). Thus when Nebuchadnezzar sees a man with the appearance of "a son of God" he knows this to be an "angel" מַלְאָךְ of God.

The phrase "holy ones" is used interchangeably with the phrase "sons of God" when referring to the *heavenly council* of angels. Thus we read "May your wonder, O YHWH, be professed in heaven; even your faithfulness in the congregation of holy ones" (Ps 89:6). The "congregation of holy ones" קהל קדשים in Ps 89:6 is the heavenly council of angels and in the following verses is referred to as the "sons of God" בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים (Ps 89:7) and the "great council of holy ones" סֹד קדשים (Ps 89:8).

The Divine "We"

We have seen that kings and courtiers use the *royal we* as a formal mode of address in the royal council. We have also seen that YHWH is described as being surrounded by a heavenly council of angels. In the sixth chapter of Isaiah we find that YHWH uses the *royal we* when addressing the heavenly council. In Isaiah's vision he sees YHWH on His throne surrounded by the heavenly council of angels:

"(1) In the year that king Uziyahu died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and elevated, and His train filling the sanctuary. (2) Burning-ones (*seraphim*) standing above him, six wings each one, with two it covers its face, and with two it legs, and with two it flies. (3) And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts, the entire earth is filled with his glory... (8) And I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Who shall I send and who shall go for us?' and I said 'Here I am, send me!' And He said, 'Go and say to this people...'" (Isa 6:1-3,8-9)

YHWH is sitting on His throne as the king of the entire universe surrounded by fiery angels. As in the vision of Michayahu, YHWH addresses his court asking who He should send on the divine mission. When addressing the heavenly council YHWH freely switches off between "I" and the *royal we*, even in mid-sentence! YHWH says, "Who shall I send and who shall go for us?" This is reminiscent of Ahab's question to his royal council, "Shall we go to the highlands of Gilead for war or shall I hold back" (2Chr 18:5). Both YHWH and Ahab freely switch off between "I" and the *royal we* when addressing the royal/ heavenly council.

Conclusion

When YHWH says in Gen 3:26, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" He is also addressing the heavenly council of angels. The same is true when He says, "Behold the man has become as one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22) and "Let us go down and let us mix up there their language" (Gen 11:7). In all three instances YHWH is speaking to His heavenly council of angels as He did in the visions of Michayahu and Isaiah and in the book of Job. This is also what is meant in the verse, "Lord YHWH does not do anything unless he has revealed His *council* סֹד to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). We see from this that YHWH's actions are deliberated upon in His *heavenly council* סֹד of angels. The use of the *royal we* is simply a formal mode of address employed when speaking before such a council. It can be freely used by kings and courtiers, but it does not imply the king or courtier is a multiplicity. Daniel, Bildad, and Ahab all spoke in this fashion even though they were all singular individuals with single personalities. YHWH, the king of the entire universe, speaks in this fashion before His heavenly council of angels. Yet when YHWH acts he is always described as acting alone as a singular individual. Thus in the first "we" passage we find, "And Elohim (he) created man in His image" and not "And Elohim (they) created man in their image". In the second "we" passage we find, "And (he) YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden" and not "And (they) YHWH Elohim sent him from the Garden of Eden". Finally, in the third "we" passage we find "And (he) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth" and not "And (they) YHWH scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth". Although YHWH brought up these actions for deliberation in the heavenly council, when they were actually carried out YHWH is said to have done them alone, for YHWH is the sole master of all creation, as it is written:

"(5) I am YHWH and there is no other; besides Me there are no gods; I have girded you [i.e. protected you] even though you did not know Me. (6) So that they will know from the rising of the sun to the setting that there is none besides Me; I am YHWH and there is no other. (7) The one who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil, I YHWH do all these things." (Isa 45:5-7).

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