

Let US Make Man, in OUR Image

Introduction

There are a number of *specific* verses in Scripture, which are *extremely* important from a theological standpoint. In other words, the verses in question are used quite frequently, to try to substantiate a wide variety of theological beliefs.

One such verse is Genesis 1:26. That verse reads as follows:

Genesis 1:26 (ESV):

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Notice the pronouns that are used in that verse: "Let **us** make man, in **our** image". Basically, when God talks about the creation of man, He uses *plural* pronouns.

Of course, over and over again in Scripture, Yahweh states that *only* **He** is Almighty God - i.e., that **no** other beings are Almighty God.

So, the question arises: Why does Genesis 1:26 use *plural* pronouns, when it refers to God creating humans? In other words, since *only* Yahweh is Almighty God, why should *plural* pronouns be used in that verse?

As with many other theological questions, there are *multiple* explanations for this issue. However, from my experience, most Christians have only heard about *one* such explanation. Here are the four primary explanations that I am aware of, for Genesis 1:26.

Explanation 1: The "Mainstream" View

The vast majority of Christian denominations believe that there is only *one* Almighty God - but that He exists as *three* co-equal and co-eternal persons. This belief is generally known as the Trinity doctrine, of course.

As a result, for mainstream Christians, it is quite easy to explain why Genesis 1:26 uses plural pronouns - it is because God the Father was talking to God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Simple, right?

Explanation 2: The "Master Worker" View

Some Christian denominations believe that only *one* person is Almighty God; and that one person is the Father - Yahweh. However, they *also* believe that Jesus had a *pre-human* existence, as a spirit being - i.e., as an angel.

Basically, those groups believe that Jesus is the very **first** creation of God; i.e., that God created Jesus - as a spirit being - *before* the universe even existed. Then, about 2,000 years ago, God transferred Jesus' life force into Mary's womb, in order to cause Jesus to become a human being.

This belief is generally known as the “personal pre-existence” doctrine (sometimes known as the “Arian” doctrine).

In addition, groups that have this belief also assert that after God created Jesus, **Jesus** created *everything else*. In other words, *first* God created Jesus, and then Jesus created all the *rest* of the universe (under God’s supervision). So, in this belief system, Jesus is God’s “master worker”, so to speak.

As a result, groups that have the “personal pre-existence” belief have the following explanation, for Genesis 1:26: Yahweh was talking to Jesus, when the creation of man occurred - and that is why plural pronouns are used in that verse.

Explanation 3: The “Figure of Speech” View

Some other groups believe that *only* Yahweh is Almighty God; *and* that Jesus did **not** have a personal pre-human existence. Basically, this belief states that Jesus did not exist at all, *until* God caused Mary to conceive. However, God knew that He would create Jesus, even before the foundation of the world.

This belief is generally known as the “ideal pre-existence” doctrine (sometimes known as the “Socinian” doctrine).

From my experience, groups that have the “ideal pre-existence” belief have two *different* explanations, for Genesis 1:26. One such explanation holds that a *figure of speech* was being used in that verse - and that figure of speech explains the plural pronouns.

Basically, in both ancient times, *and* in modern times, a ruler will sometimes refer to himself - **alone** - with **plural** pronouns. For example, a king may say, “**We** are not amused”; or a queen may say “It is **our** desire to go to bed now.” In fact, the queen of England still uses that figure of speech, to this very day.

That figure of speech is formally known as “The plural of majesty”; and it is colloquially known as “The royal ‘we’”.

So, groups that use this explanation assert that God was using the “plural of majesty”, in Genesis 1:26. In other words, God, *alone*, created man; but He used plural pronouns to refer to Himself - due to this figure of speech.

Explanation 4: The “Sons of God” View

As noted above, groups that have the “ideal pre-existence” belief have *two* different explanations for Genesis 1:26.

The *other* explanation for Genesis 1:26, that some Socinian groups hold, is that God was speaking to *angels* in that verse. That, in turn, explains why plural pronouns are used in the verse.

Basically, in this view, God created man, all by himself. However, He spoke to the angels during that creation - because angels were present at that time, and they were observing the entire creation process.

Which explanation has the most Scriptural support?

So, the final question to ask is: Of the four explanations listed above, *which one* appears to most *accurately* reflect what Scripture actually says?

Explanation 1 states that plural pronouns are used, because God exists as three separate “persons” - and *all three* of those persons created man. Explanation 2 states that plural pronouns are used, because God was speaking to Jesus - and **Jesus** actually *performed* the creation of man.

So, in explanations 1 and 2, Yahweh did **not** create man (and the universe) by himself - instead, he had “assistance” from others, in the creation process. Explanation 1 states that the Father had assistance from the Son and the Holy Spirit; and explanation 2 states that Yahweh had assistance from Jesus.

However, is it actually true that Yahweh had any “assistance” in the creation process? Let’s see if we can find out:

Genesis 2:2-3 (ESV):

²And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Job 38:1-4 (ESV):

¹Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:
²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.

Isaiah 44:24 (ESV):

²⁴Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
“I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself,

The passage in Genesis states that “**God** finished **his** work that **he** had done”; and “**God** rested from all **his** work that **he** had done in creation”. That passage certainly appears to state the following:

- The being who created the universe was **God** - *not* Jesus.
- The being who “rested” after creation was **God** - *not* Jesus.

As a result, that passage certainly seems to indicate that Yahweh, **alone**, created the universe - i.e., that Yahweh did *not* have any “assistance” from others.

The passage in Job states that God asked Job: “Where were you when **I** laid the foundation of the earth?”. Once again, that passage certainly appears to indicate that Yahweh created the universe all by himself - *without* any assistance from others.

The passage in Isaiah states the following: “I am the LORD (**Yahweh**) who created all things, who **alone** stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth **by myself**”.

That passage definitively indicates to me that Yahweh did NOT have any assistance, when He created the universe - especially when the passages from Genesis and Job are also considered. In other words, God - **alone** - created the universe; Jesus was *not* involved in the creation process at all.

Explanations 3 and 4 both assert that Yahweh, *alone*, created man. However, those two explanations differ, about the plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26. Explanation 3 states that God was using the “plural of majesty” figure of speech, while explanation 4 states that God was talking to angels.

The biggest challenge that I can see with explanation 3 is: If that explanation is true, then why isn’t the “plural of majesty” figure of speech used **consistently**, to refer to God? In other words, if Scripture used the “royal we” in Genesis 1:26, then why isn’t that figure of speech used in all of the *other* verses which refer to God?

For example, take another look at some of the verses listed above:

Genesis 2:2 - “God finished **his** work that **he** had done”

Job 38:4 - “Where were you when **I** laid the foundation of the earth”

Isaiah 44:24 - “**I** am the LORD, who made all things”

As we can see, all of those verses use *singular* pronouns to refer to God - and all of those verses refer to the creation of the universe. So, if the plural of majesty explains the plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26, then why *aren’t* plural pronouns used to refer to God in the above verses?

In fact, in almost *every case* in Scripture, where a pronoun is used to refer to God, the *singular* version of the pronoun is used. So, it is not clear why Genesis 1:26 would be such an “exception to the rule”.

There are two main challenges that I can see, with explanation 4. First off, the question may arise, “How do we know that angels were present - and were observing the process - when God created the universe?” Fortunately, that question has a very straightforward answer - again in the book of Job:

Job 38:4-8 (ESV):

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

The above passage tells us that the “sons of God” were present - and *rejoiced* - when God created the earth. The term “son of God” has several meanings; but it definitely refers to a being that was *directly* created by God. Since human beings had not yet been created while the earth was being formed, it stands to reason that the “sons of God” referred to here are angels.

The other - and more difficult - challenge to explanation 4 regards the phrase “in our image”. Here is the first part of Genesis 1:26 again:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

If God *was* speaking to angels in that verse, then that seems to imply that angels are *also* made in God’s “image” - just like humans are.

So, that raises a huge question: What, *exactly*, does it **mean**, to be made in God’s “image” - or in his “likeness”? Of course, there are many, *many* beliefs about the above question. However, consider the following passage:

Genesis 3:22-23 (ESV):

²²Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—”
²³therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

Notice what God says, in the above passage. He states the following: “the man has become **like one of us, in knowing good and evil**”.

That seems to imply the following: If a creature is made in God’s “image”, or “likeness”, that means that the creature has the ability to *distinguish between good and evil*. Note that animals do *not* have that ability - but humans *do*.

From what I can see, Scripture indicates that angels can distinguish between good and evil. As a result, that implies that angels *were* created in God’s “image” - just like humans were. That, in turn, resolves the second “challenge” to explanation 4.

Conclusion

As noted above, there are a number of different explanations, for the plural pronouns that are used in Genesis 1:26:

- Explanation 1: God exists as a trinity - so the different persons of the trinity were talking to *each other*.
- Explanation 2: God created Jesus, and then Jesus created *everything else*. So, God was talking to Jesus.
- Explanation 3: God created the universe all by himself - and He used a *figure of speech* in that verse.
- Explanation 4: God created the universe all by himself - and He was talking to *angels* in that verse.

Of course, there are undoubtedly other explanations for Genesis 1:26 as well; the above four are just the ones I am familiar with. For the record, up until recently I personally leaned toward explanation 3. However, I now have a higher degree of confidence in explanation 4.