

Genesis 1:26-27: Are we “Little Gods” and Other Misinterpretations

By Dr. Norman Geisler

Genesis 1:26—Does this verse indicate that there is more than one god?

Misinterpretation:

If there is only one God, why does this verse in Genesis use the word *us* in reference to God? Mormons often note that the Hebrew word usually translated God, *Elohim*, is in the plural, and the plural pronoun *us* is used. To them this indicates that there is more than one God: “In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation....The word *Elohim* ought to be in the plural all the way through—Gods” (Smith, 1976, 372).

Correcting the misinterpretation:

Several explanations for the use of the pronoun *us* have been offered throughout history. Some commentators have claimed that God is addressing the angels. But this is unlikely since in verse 26 God says, “Let us make man in *our* image,” while verse 27 makes it clear that “God created man in *his own* image; in the image of *God* he created him,” and not in the image of the angels.

Others have claimed that the plural pronoun refers to the Trinity. It is true that the New Testament (e.g., John 1:1) teaches that the Son was involved in the creation of the heavens and the earth. Also, Genesis 1:2 indicates that the Holy Spirit was involved in the creation process. However, students of Hebrew grammar point out that the plural pronoun *us* is simply required by the plural Hebrew noun *Elohim*, which is translated “God” (“Then God [*Elohim*, plural] said, ‘Let *us* [plural] make man in *our* [plural] image”). Consequently, they claim that this statement should not be used to prove the doctrine of the Trinity.

Still others have asserted that the plural is used as a figure of speech called a *majestic plural*. Indeed, the Qur’an, which denies that there is more than one person in God, uses *us* of God. In this use, God is speaking to himself in such a manner as to indicate that all of his majestic power and wisdom were involved in the creation of humanity. As has been noted, the plural pronoun *us* corresponds to the plural Hebrew word *Elohim*, which is translated God. The fact that the name *God* is plural in Hebrew does not indicate that there is more than one God. (Queen Victoria used the plural of majesty when referring only to herself. She once commented, “We are not amused.”) A number of passages in the New Testament refer to God with the singular Greek noun *theos*, which is also translated “God” (for example John 1:1; Mark 13:19; Eph. 3:9). The plural nature of the Hebrew word is designed to give a fuller, more majestic sense to God’s name.

It should be noted, however, that the New Testament clearly teaches that God is a Trinity (Matt. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2), and, although the doctrine of the Trinity is not fully developed in the Old Testament, it is foreshadowed (cf. Ps. 110:1; Prov. 30:4; Isa. 63:7,9-10).

Genesis 1:26—Does the fact that we are created in God’s image mean that we are “little gods,” as the Word-Faith leaders say?

Misinterpretation:

Word-Faith teachers suggest that the Hebrew word for “likeness” in this verse literally means “an exact duplication in kind” (Savelle, 1990, 141). Indeed, humanity “was created on terms of equality with God, and he could stand in God’s presence without any consciousness of inferiority....God has made us as much like Himself as possible....He made us the same class of being that He is Himself” (Hagin, 1989, 35-36, 41).

Correcting the Misinterpretation:

All Genesis 1:26-27 is teaching is that humanity was created in God’s image or likeness in the sense that a human being is a finite reflection of God in rational nature (Col. 3:10), in moral nature (Eph. 4:24), and in dominion over creation (Gen. 1:27-28). In the same way that the moon reflects the brilliant light of the sun, so finite humanity (as created in God’s image) is a limited reflection of God in these aspects. This verse has nothing to do with human beings becoming God or being in God’s “class.”

If it were true that human beings are “little gods,” then one would expect them to display qualities similar to those known to be true of God. However, when one compares the attributes of humankind with those of God, we find ample testimony for the truth of Paul’s statement in Romans 3:23 that human beings “fall short of the glory of God.” Consider:

1. God is *all-knowing* (Isa. 40:13-14), but a human being is limited in knowledge (Job 38:4);
2. God is *all-powerful* (Rev. 19:6), but a human being is weak (Heb. 4:15);
3. God is *everywhere-present* (Ps. 139:7-12), but a human being is confined to a single space at a time (John 1:50);
4. God is *holy* (1 John 1:5), but even human “righteous” deeds are as filthy garments before God (Isa. 64:6);
5. God is *eternal* (Ps. 90:2), but humanity was created at a point in time (Gen. 1:1, 26-27);
6. God is *truth* (John 14:6), but a human heart (since the Fall) is deceitful above all else (Jer. 17:9);
7. God is characterized by *justice* (Acts 17:31), but humankind is lawless (1 John 3:4; see also Rom. 3:23);
8. God is *love* (Eph. 2:4-5), but human relationships are plagued with numerous vices like jealousy and strife (1 Cor. 3:3).

Genesis 1:26-27—Does this passage support the idea that God has a physical body?

Misinterpretation:

Mormons argue that, because humans were created with a body of flesh and bones, God the Father must have a physical body, since humanity was created in God’s image (Smith, 1975, 1:3)

Correcting the Misinterpretation:

A fundamental interpretive principle is that Scripture interprets Scripture. When other Scriptures about God’s nature are consulted, the Mormon understanding of Genesis 1:26-27 becomes impossible. John 4:24 indicates that God is spirit. Luke 24:39 tells us that a spirit does not have flesh and bones. Conclusion: Since God is spirit, he does not have flesh and bones.

Genesis 1:26-27—Does the fact that a human being is made in the image of God support the Christian Science claim that humanity is co-eternal with God?

Misinterpretation:

These verses assert that God created humanity in his own image. Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy urges that this means that “man and woman—as coexistent and eternal with God—forever reflect, in glorified quality, the infinite Father-Mother God” (Eddy, 516).

Correcting the Misinterpretation:

Eddy completely misunderstands this passage of Scripture. Several mistakes will be briefly noted.

It is contrary to the meaning of the words “image” and “likeness” to insist that human-kind is like God in all respects. Even an “image” in this context is not the same as the original, as is clear from the use of this same Hebrew word (*tzeblem*) of an idol (e.g., Num. 33:52; 2 Chron. 23:17; Ezek. 7:20) as only a *representation* of the god, not the god itself.

The word *create* reveals that the text is not speaking of something that is eternal but of something that came to be. This word (*bara*) is never used in the Old Testament of something that is eternal. Indeed, in this context it means something that is brought into being. The same is true of the New Testament use of the word for “create” (cf. Col. 1:15-16; Rev. 4:11).

Also, it is a fallacy to assume, as Eddy does, that because we are like God, God must be like us. For example, she speaks of God as male and female (“Father-Mother God”). This is known in logic as an *illicit conversion*. Just because all horses have four legs does not mean that all four-legged things are horses. And just because God made male and female does not mean he is male and female. “God is spirit” (John 4:24), yet he made people with bodies (Gen. 2:7). Just because we have a physical body does not mean that God has one too.

The Old Testament was first written as a Jewish book, and Judaism is uncompromisingly a monotheistic religion. But Christian Science is pantheistic, and Eddy is reading her pantheistic view into this Jewish document. A human being is neither eternal with God nor identical with God. Each person is a finite creature who was brought into existence by an infinite God and who resembles God *morally* and *personally*, but is not the same *metaphysically*.

For full documentation, see Dr. Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask*, Baker Books, 1997