

Adonim, Elohim, and The Implications of Plurality

I OFTEN SEE WELL-MEANING CHRISTIANS MENTION THE HEBREW WORD ELOHIM

(אלהים) in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. Because the word Elohim is plural, our Trinitarian friends suggest that this Hebrew term proves that God is more than one person. The problem with this claim is that it overlooks the way that plural nouns work in the Hebrew language.

In English (and many other languages) there are only two numerical categories: singular, which refers only to one person/thing; and plural, which refers only to multiple persons/things. In languages that function this way there is no middle ground—if a thing has a plural form then it is numerically plural and if a thing has a singular form then it is numerically singular. Such is not the case in Hebrew, however.

In Hebrew, there are not two numerical categories, but three. Just like any other language, Hebrew has singular and plural; but the third option, known as the “intensive plural,” stands half way in between the other two. The intensive plural refers to *only one* person/thing, even though it *looks plural*.

Numerical plurals and intensive plurals are identical in form; for example, one cannot tell whether *elohim* is a numerical plural or an intensive plural simply by looking at the word. Nevertheless, intensive plurals in Hebrew are very easy to spot in context. When a Hebrew noun is numerically plural, it will be the subject of plural verbs and be modified by plural adjectives and predicate nouns. Not so with the intensive plural. When an intensive plural is being used, the noun will still look plural (with a characteristic ם or ך ending), but it will be the subject of singular verbs and be modified by singular adjectives and predicate nouns.

Hebrew often uses an intensive plural to express the greatness, hugeness, authority, or majesty of the thing being described; multiplicity, however, is not implied at all. Hebrew frequently uses *elohim* as an intensive plural, but it is by no means the only Hebrew word so used. Let’s look at the Hebrew word *adon* (אדון, pl. *adonim* אדונים), a word meaning “master,” “lord,” or “overseer,” to illustrate this point. In the Hebrew Bible, the term *adon* is used in all three categories: singular, numerical plural, and intensive plural.

Singular

- Gen 23:6—Hear us, my lord (אדני): thou art a mighty prince (נשיא...אחיה) among us
The children of Heth address Abraham, who is obviously only one person, with the singular form *adoni* (as opposed to the plural form *adonai*). Abraham is further described with the singular noun *nesiy’* and the singular verb *attah*.

Numerically Plural

- Gen 19:2—And he said, Behold now, my lords (אדני), turn in (סורו), I pray you, into your servant’s house, and tarry (יילני) all night, and wash (ורתצו) your feet, and ye shall rise up early (והשכמתם), and go (ולכתם) ways.
Lot addresses the two angels with the plural form *adonai*. All of the verbs in the passage have a second person plural form. Two persons are obviously in view.
- Isa 26:13—O LORD our God, other lords (אדנים) beside thee have had dominion over us (בגלוינו)
Isaiah is lamenting the fact that multiple foreign kings had controlled Israel. He uses the plural noun *adonim* and the plural verb *bealu*.

Intensive Plural

- Gen 42:30—The man, who is the lord (אדני) of the land, spake (דבר) roughly to us, and took us (ייתק) for spies of the country.
Although the plural form *adonei* is used, Joseph is the only person being described. He is further described with the singular noun *ish* and the singular verbs *diber* and *yitten*.
- Ex 21:6—Then his master shall bring him (והגישו אדניו) unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore (ורצע אדניו) his ear through with an aul; and he shall ever.
Only one slave owner is intended. Although the plural form *adonaiw* is used twice, the singular verbs “he shall bring” and “he shall bore” prove that this verse is only talking about one person.
- 2 Kings 2:3—And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master (אדניך) from thy head to day?
Although the plural form *adoneika* is used, Elisha’s master Elijah is obviously only one person

More instances of the intensive plural in the Hebrew Bible could be added to the above examples. Only one person is intended in all three verses, even though a plural form of *adon* is used. To say the same thing differently—although these verses use a plural form of *adon*, the referent in each case is numerically singular.

When we understand how Hebrew grammar uses the intensive plural, we understand that multiplicity is not being implied at all. Therefore, it does not surprise us when the one God is described with plural terms like *adonim* or *elohim*.

- Mal 1:6—If I am a father (אב אבי), where is my honor? If I am a master (אדני), where is my fear? says the Lord of Hosts
Although the plural form *adonei* is used, the noun “father” and both instances of the pronoun *ani* are singular. This shows that we are dealing with an intensive plural God speaks as if he is a singular person (I, not we).
- Ps 135:5—For I know that the LORD is great (גדול), and that our Lord (אדנינו) is above all gods (אלהים). God is described with the plural form *adoneinu*, but the singular adjective *gadol* shows that we are dealing with an intensive plural. Note the use of *elohim*—which is numerically plural in this case, describing all of the other false gods. (See also Psalm 136:3 & 147:5)

These descriptions are intensive plurals, not numerical plurals; consequently they don’t imply any multiplicity in God’s nature at all. Rather, they emphasize how great and powerful God is. We know this because the plural nouns are modified with singular verbs, predicate nouns, and adjectives. Just as *adonim* does not imply that Joseph is more than one person, so *adonim* does not imply that Jehovah is more than one person. The Bible uses intensive plurals to describe God starting with Genesis 1:1, and continuing through the entire Bible. “In the beginning God (אלהים) created (ברא) the heavens and the earth.” Although the noun *elohim* is plural, the third person singular verb *bara’* “he created” lets us know that this is an intensive plural.

In closing, I want to highlight one more example of the intensive plural in Deuteronomy 10:17:

For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward
כי יהוה אלהיכם הוא אלהי האלהים ואדני האדנים האל הגדול הגבר והגורא אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד

Notice that God is described with the plural forms *elohei* and *adonei* in this verse. Nevertheless, they do not imply any sort of multiplicity; just the opposite, in fact. We know that these are intensive plurals because of the string of singular descriptors that follow: the noun *el*, the pronoun *hu’*, the adjectives *gadol* and *gibor*, and the verbs *nora’*, *yisa’*, and *yiqach* are all singular. In contrast to the many false *elohim* and the many false *adonim*, Jehovah alone is God and Lord. They are many *elohim*, he is a single *elohim*; they are many *adonim*, he is a single *adonim*. Rather than denoting multiplicity, the plural forms emphasize how powerful, majestic, sovereign, and glorious the one true God is. He (יהוה) is a great, mighty, terrifying God (אל).