

Since it is a question that often comes up when studying Genesis I wanted to comment on the plural use of "us" as applied to God in the creation narrative in **Genesis 1:26**. While I am not a trained Hebrew scholar, I have made several observations from various study materials over time that I think may be useful to keep in mind when reading this passage to provide a broader context for Hebrew speech and thought. There are several instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where lexical plurals are used in reference to God but do not refer to plurality in the quantitative sense. A few of the verses that do this are

Ecclesiastes 12:1

,
Proverbs 9:10

,
Proverbs 30:3

,
Hosea 11:12

,
Isaiah 54:5

, and

Psalms 149:2

, which I will cover below.

Before examining the examples though I will say that some who are familiar with those texts note that, in contrast to this text in Genesis, they chiefly provide evidence of plural participles

(largely serving as nouns) that occur in sentences with singular

pronouns and pronominal suffixes (word endings that determine the grammatical person

in which it is addressed - 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person

singular or plural endings), which clearly give the object being represented by the plural participle a

singular sense

(this will be made clearer below). This does, however, stand in grammatical distinction with the "let us make" in

Genesis 1:26

which is a cohortative

verb

- rather than a plural participle - which indeed justifies the plural rendering, but I argue that its **sense**

in context can still be taken as singular. Just as context and grammatical agreement helps determine when a plural participle is to be taken in a singular sense I believe the same can be said for this cohortative verb used in self-reference by Elohim.

First though I want to make some general observations on plurals and provide a parallel example from some observations in an Arabic text (the Quran). Then I will review the plural participle/noun instances in those verses mentioned above to establish some context for understanding lexical plurals for "we" and "us" references.

In general, Hebrew plurals can not only serve as indication of quantity but can also be intensifiers and amplifiers indicating a plurality of quality or degree rather than numerical value. When referring to God such plural usage is commonly called the "plural of majesty" or the "royal plural". This could even be called a "superlative plural". This characteristic of Hebrew lexical plurals is not limited to references to God either.

Jeff Benner in his ***Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible*** and on his website notes the following about Hebrew plurals:

Nouns are made plural by adding the suffix ים or ות. Generally the ים is used for masculine nouns and ות for feminine nouns. In some cases masculine words, usually very ancient words, will use the ות suffix. The Hebrew words אב (av – father) and אור (or – light) are masculine words but are written as אבות and אורות in the plural. In all modern languages the plural is always quantitative while in Ancient Hebrew a plural can be quantitative or qualitative. For instance the word "trees" refers to more than one tree (quantitative) while in Hebrew the plural word עצים (etsiyim – trees) can mean more than one tree (quantitative) or one very large tree (qualitative). An example of this is the word בהמות (behemot or usually transliterated as behemoth in Job 40:15). This word is the plural form of the singular בהמה (behemah), meaning beast, but refers to a very large beast rather than more than one beast. One of the most common uses of the qualitative plural is the word אלהים (elohim) which can be translated as "gods" (quantitative) or as "God" (qualitative). ([source:1](#))

As with the example of ***etsiyim*** referring to a large tree this is possibly even the case with the reference in Genesis to the "oaks of Mamre" in **Genesis 13:18,**

14:13

, and

18:1

referring perhaps to one, well-known "oak" of Mamre that was a notable landmark, perhaps indicating the "(great) oak of Mamre" where the word 'great' would supply the qualitative or intensive sense of the Hebrew plural here. One scholar, Liv Ingeborg Lied, also notes, "[T]he LXX and Syriac version of Gen 18:1 both render the plural oaks of the Hebrew versions with a singular oak

" ([source:2](#))
) . Dr. Jonathan Pennington in his book ***Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*** surveys the use of the word for 'heaven' in the Old Testament, *Shamayim* (שמים), (singular the in translated often though) form plural peculiar its about says and ,
[T]he consensus is now that שמים
is in fact plural morphologically. Yet, **as with several other Hebrew words** the sense of the plural is not purely numeric, but functions as a **pluralis amplitudinis** (pg. 40; emphasis mine). This same phenomenon of Hebrew plurals being used in the qualitative or amplifying sense applies to references to God as has already been noted, hence the well-known instance of the royal plural.

Gesenius notes in his discussion of Hebrew plurals (emphasis in bold mine):

The plural is by no means used in Hebrew solely to express a number of individuals or separate objects, but may also denote them collectively. This use of the plural expresses either (a) a combination of various external constituent parts (plurals of local extension), or (b) a more or less intensive focusing of the characteristics inherent in the idea of the stem (abstract plurals, usually rendered in English by forms in -hood, -ness, -ship). A variety of the plurals described under (b), in which the secondary idea of intensity or of an internal multiplication of the idea of the stem may be clearly seen, is (c) **the pluralis excellentiae or pluralis maiestatis**.

In fact, the Quran, which is written in Arabic (a Semitic cousin to Hebrew), also uses the royal plural all throughout its text to refer to Allah. I was puzzled the first time that I read portions of the Quran when I tried to determine to whom the "we", "us", and "our" was referring throughout the text until I researched it and discovered that it is how Allah refers to himself in the Quran. Muslim scholars explain this as being a Semitic royal plural usage in the Quran. Here are some examples from the Quran:

"We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)." (al-Hijr 15:9)

"We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, but for just ends. And the Hour

is surely coming. " (al-Hijr 15:85)

"*Already has Our Word been passed before (this) to Our Servants sent (by Us). That they would certainly be assisted. And that Our forces, they surely must conquer.*" (al-Saffat 37:171-173)

So with all this in mind let's look first at **Ecclesiastes 12:1**. The passage is commonly translated as, "*Remember now thy*

Creator in the days of thy youth

" (KJV). However if you look at the Hebrew text it literally reads, "remember thy Creators

בְּיוֹרְאֵיךָ

-

bor'

eka

)," and yet it is clearly intended to refer to the singular Elohim of Israel, Yahweh. This plural form of "creator" (

bor'eka

which is related to the verb

בָּרָא

bara

found in Genesis 1:1

) conceptually parallels the very passage in question, though it is to be noted that the verb for create in Genesis 1:26 (

na'aseh

) is different from the verb for create in Genesis 1:1 (

bara

): "let us

create

(

נִעֲשֶׂה

-

na'aseh

) man in

our

image"

(Genesis 1:26)

. Nonetheless, the use of both verbs in Genesis 1 shows them to be in the same general semantic domain contextually. But also see

Psalms 149:2

(below) for an actual example of the noun form of

na'aseh

(from the root

asah

) used for "Creators" as well. Thus both verbs for creation or making found in Genesis have related noun forms

in plural form

found elsewhere in Scripture, as applied to God, that indicate him as creator.

Moving on to **Proverbs 9:10** it is translated (assume all translations are KJV from here on unless otherwise noted) "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding*"

." Once again the KJV doesn't quite catch it here but what it translates as "the holy" is plural in the Hebrew (

קְדוּשִׁים

; qodeshim - literally "holy ones") but means, as is clear by the parallelism of qodeshim with Yahweh that it indicates "the MOST Holy (One)", the plural form serving as an intensive to mean "most".

Proverbs 30:3 is the same way, "*I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy*" is literally qodeshim, meaning "knowledge of the Most Holy".

Hosea 11:12 too reads, "*Ephraim compasseth Me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit: but Judah yet ruleth with God, and is faithful with the saints*".

Once again "with the saints" comes from qodeshim and is better translated "with the Holy One" but is plural so indicates "the MOST Holy One" even though only referring to the single "God" (Elohim - also plural in form yet accompanied with verbs and adjectives in the singular).

Now, moving on to **Isaiah 54:5** we see a very interesting example with **dual plurals** intended in the singular sense, hence is plural in the qualitative sense

. It is translated, "

For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is His name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel

". The phrase "thy Maker is thine husband" is literally in the Hebrew "thy

Makers

are thy

Husbands

" with both nouns being plural. Once again "makers" is parallel to the idea of "us" in the creation narrative, with the plural being an intensive.

Lastly **Psalms 149:2** is translated (Young's Literal Translation) "*Israel doth rejoice in his Maker, Sons of Zion do joy in their king*" .

" Here "his Maker" is literally "his makers" (

בְּעֹשֵׂיוֹ

). This is the noun that is related to the verb

asah,

which the cohortative verb ('let us create/make') in Genesis 1:26 is a form of.

(

Note: Andrew Jukes in his book

The Names of God

discusses several of these plurals, which you can see in a sample of his discussion in

[this page scan](#)

).

So from the observations above we see that in **Ecclesiastes 12:1**, **Isaiah 54:5**, and **Psalm 149:2**

that

"makers" or "creators" are used in the plural lexically while intended to be understood in reference to a singular Maker and Creator, just as Elohim is

lexically plural

but taken to refer to the

singular God

. This is not some forgotten remnant from a conjectured

Israelite

polytheistic, religious past but rather an accepted and recurring feature of the Hebrew language and culture itself, and in particular in Hebrew scripture, that has survived even in Arabic as can be witnessed in the Quran.

A much more technical and full discussion on the multiple uses of the plural form in Hebrew can be found in Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar at §124 ([link here](#)). There he remarks (emphasis in bold mine):

Of (c): the *pluralis excellentiae* or *maiestatis*, as has been remarked above, is properly a variety of the abstract plural, since it sums up the several characteristics[5] belonging to the idea, besides possessing the secondary sense of an *intensification*

of the original idea. It is thus closely related to the plurals of amplification, treated under e, which are mostly found in poetry. So especially

אֱלֹהִים

Godhead, God

(to be distinguished from the numerical plural

gods

, Ex 12

12

, &c.) .

The supposition that

אֱלֹהִים

is to be regarded as merely a remnant of earlier polytheistic views (i.e. as originally only a numerical plural) is at least highly improbable, and, moreover, would not explain the analogous plurals (see below)

That the language has entirely rejected the idea of numerical plurality in

אֱלֹהִים

(whenever it denotes

one

God), is proved especially by its being almost invariably joined with a singular attribute

(cf. §132

h

), e.g.

אֱלֹהִים צַדִּיק

ψ

7

10

, &c. Hence

plural abstract an as also but numerical a as only not originally used been have may אֱלֹהִים

(corresponding to the Latin

numen

, and our

Godhead

), and, like other abstracts of the same kind, have been transferred to a concrete single god (even of the heathen).

Therefore the reference of God to "us" and "our" in Genesis may indeed be quite archaic, bearing witness to the antiquity of the narrative, but does not indicate a necessary interpretation that there were "gods" plural taking part in the creation. It is clear from other uses of plural forms of certain Hebrew words, in relation to God, that this is an accepted lexical (and ultimately oral) practice and that superlative plurals were occasionally applied to God. Also the broader context of Genesis 1 shows Elohim as a singular entity, and it would be strange to have a sudden shift in the intended indicated numerical quantity of the subject (Elohim) given the unity of the narrative.

Now, it is true however that the earliest Christian Church Fathers saw the plurals in **Genesis**

1:26

as a

reference to the

Trinity

. I will grant that as an interpretive and theological possibility as well, but only if it acknowledges that in that case such a meaning must have been originally vield to the Israelites' understanding at that time, and that also the text has to have made sense in its original context and time period in which it occurred. It however cannot simply be wholly reinterpreted to refer to only the Trinity without any consideration of its function and meaning in the original text. A careful biblical hermeneutic (method of interpretation) will not ignore the original contextual meaning of the text, even if it may have additional theological significance.

However, we do know from the New Testament writers' quotations of Old Testament scriptures that they often saw dual or multiple fulfillment in some prophetic passages and even attributed a second meaning to some passages such as in Matthew's reapplication of meaning to **Jeremiah 31:15**

which originally referred to the devastation of the Babylonian invasion of Israel, to Herod killing all young males around Bethlehem in

Matthew 2:18

. So conceivably

Genesis 1:26

may also be seen as offering a secondary meaning of reference to the Trinity. However I do believe that the lexical explanation for the Hebrew intensive, qualitative, or superlative plural usage as applied to "

let Us create man in Our image

"

(Genesis 1:26)

makes sense of the original text and is theologically satisfactory as well.

In any case, concerning how the Israelites would have understood it - as to whether "gods" or "God" took part in the creation - I am quite sure that when Yahweh's very presence was hovering over Mt. Sinai with a grand accompaniment of blaring trumpets, a smoking mountain, a dark cloud with lightings and thunder emanating from within, and a rumbling earthquake that made it difficult for the people to stand upright, that the ancient Israelites never misunderstood God's pronouncement reaching to their own ears with piercing clarity and power: "*For in six days*

Yahweh

made the heavens and the earth

, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day

"

(Exodus 20:11)

. I am quite confident that no Israelite who experienced that awe-inspiring event (at which they trembled - Exodus 19:16) ever believed that anyone other than Yahweh had any hand in creating the universe after that, if they ever did before!