

Don't Christians Believe in Three Gods?

Answers

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by Jews for Jesus | Apr 20, 2018

Three Gods? The Trinity? What do Christians believe?

It's a very common misrepresentation that while Jews believe in one God, Christians believe in three. The fact is that Christianity is as firmly monotheistic as Judaism.

What Christians believe is that this one God exists, in a way finite man can never fully understand, in three persons or personalities. This belief is not based upon philosophical arguments, but on the Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments.

We affirm that the Hebrew Bible teaches the oneness of God.

The cardinal affirmation of the Jewish people has always been the *Sh'ma*: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” But along with the emphasis on the oneness of God are a number of hints that He is at the same time somehow more than one.

A plethora of names for God

One such hint is the number of times plural forms of names and words are used in reference to God. The common Hebrew word for God, Elohim, is itself plural in form. The singular counterpart of Elohim, namely Eloah, is used ten times less than is the plural form. Plural verbs are sometimes employed with the name Elohim, as in [Genesis 20:13](#).¹ Plural pronouns are at times used by God when referring to Himself, as in [Genesis 1:26](#).² Other descriptions of God are sometimes found in the plural, which is not always evident in our English translations (for instance, [Ecclesiastes 12:13](#)³ or [Isaiah 54:5](#)⁴).

The plurality of God in Judaism

Even more striking is the very word used in the *Sh'ma* to proclaim the oneness of God, *echad*. This word allows for a plurality or diversity within unity. This can be seen especially clearly in several passages. In [Genesis 1:5](#)⁵, 2:24⁶, [Ezra 2:64](#)⁷ and [Ezekiel 37:17](#)⁸, the oneness is the result of combining evening and morning, man and wife, the individual members of an assembly, and two sticks, respectively. There is however, another word in Hebrew to describe an indivisible unity, namely *yachid*. It so happens that the scholar Maimonides⁹, when composing his famous Thirteen Articles of Faith, substituted *yachid* for *echad* in describing the nature of God. Ever since, the notion of an indivisible unity of God has been fostered in Judaism; nevertheless, the Bible gives ample instances to show that there is a diversity within God's unity.

The Zohar, the foundation book of Jewish mysticism, recognized that the idea of a plurality-in-unity is not foreign to Jewish thinking. While the medieval mystics' idea is different from the Christian idea of the Trinity, the basic idea of a plurality within the one God still holds. The passage from the Zohar, commenting on the *Sh'ma*, reads as follows:

“Hear, O Israel, YHVH Elohenu YHVH is one.” These three are one. How can the three Names be one? Only through the perception of Faith: in the vision of the Holy Spirit, in the beholding of the hidden eyes alone. The mystery of the audible voice is similar to this, for though it is one yet it consists of three elements—fire, air, and water, which have, however, become one in the mystery of the voice. Even so it is with the mystery of the threefold Divine manifestations designated by YHVH Elohenu YHVH—three modes which yet form one unity.¹⁰

Portrayals of God from Hebrew Scripture

In fact, beside God Himself, there are two other personalities in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures who are portrayed as distinct from, yet somehow the same as God. These other two are the angel of the Lord, and the Spirit of God or Holy Spirit.

The angel of the Lord is mentioned a number of times but is also identified with God Himself. For instance, in [Genesis 16:7](#) and

16:13 He is called respectively the angel of the Lord and then the Lord.¹¹ Another example would be **Genesis 22:11** and **22:12**. This particular individual is both distinct from and identified with God Himself.¹²

Then there is the Spirit of God. God's Spirit is spoken of in the Scriptures as a personality of His own, yet identified as God. Such passages include **Genesis 1:2**, **Psalms 51:13**, or **Isaiah 11:2**.¹³

Israel and the nations

Because Israel was surrounded by polytheists in ancient times and tended to absorb the idolatry of those nations, the Hebrew Scriptures emphasized God's oneness more than His "tri-unity." But by the days of the New Testament, when idolatry was no longer a problem in Israel, the idea of God's "tri-unity" was more clearly articulated in the Scriptures. The three personalities just mentioned are portrayed in the New Testament as God the Father, God the Son (the Messiah, Jesus) and God the Spirit—yet all without compromising the fundamental affirmation of the *Sh'ma*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," an affirmation which Jesus himself termed "the most important commandment."¹⁴

You might protest, "But don't Christians believe that Jesus is the *Son* of God? But if Jesus is God, how can he be the Son of God? Look, you're making a man into God, and on top of that, God doesn't have a son!"

Again, not true! In **Exodus 4:22-23**, Israel is called God's "son."¹⁵ The King of Israel is referred to as God's "son" in **I Chronicles 17:13**.¹⁶ That the Messiah would also be God's son is stated in the Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught, The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to the Messiah, the son of David (May he reveal himself speedily in our days); 'Ask of me anything and I will give it to thee, as it is said [**Ps. 2:7,8**]. *I will tell of the decree: [The Lord hath said unto me, "Thou art my son;"] this day have I begotten thee, ask of me and I will give the nations for thy inheritance.*"¹⁷

Messiah as a form of God's presence

The idea in the Scriptures is not that a man became God—God forbid—but that the Messiah would himself be God coming as a man. **Isaiah 9:6** portrays the coming of the Messiah in these terms: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." But if God is indeed a "tri-unity," then it is possible for the Messiah both to be called God and also to exist in a relationship characterized as "son of God." This is the conclusion we Jews who believe in Jesus are driven to as we study the Scriptures. With our fellow Jews, we affirm that "the Lord our God, the Lord is one"—a oneness characterized by a "tri-unity."

1. "And when God had me wander from my father's household..." The verb "had me wander" is plural in the Hebrew.
2. "And God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..."
3. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth..." In the Hebrew, "Creator" is a plural form.
4. "For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name..." Again, "Maker" and "husband" are plural forms.
5. **Genesis 1:5**: "God called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day."
6. **Genesis 2:24**: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."
7. **Ezra 2:64**: "The whole company numbered 42,360..."
8. **Ezekiel 37:15-17**: "...take a stick of wood...then take another stick of wood...Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand."
9. Maimonides is one of the greatest figures in Jewish history. Born in Spain in 1135, he was known as a rabbinic scholar, a philosopher, and even a physician. Maimonides is known among rabbinic students as "Rambam," an acronym for his Hebrew name "Rabbi Moses ben Maimon." His Thirteen Articles of Faith are accepted by Orthodox Jews today as a binding statement of belief. Maimonides died in 1204.
10. *Zohar*, III: **Exodus 43b**, Soncino translation.
11. **Genesis 16:7**: "The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur."
12. **Genesis 16:13**: "She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'"
13. **Genesis 22:11-12**: "But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'"
14. **Genesis 1:2**: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the water."
15. **Psalms 51:13** (in the Hebrew Bible; verse 11 in the English versions): "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."
16. **Isaiah 11:2**: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord..."
17. **Mark 12:28-30**: "One of the teachers of the law...asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" Jesus is quoting from **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**.
18. "Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says. Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may

worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.'"

19. "I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever."
20. Sukkah 52a, Soncino translation.

This content was adapted from an earlier Jews for Jesus article.

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