

Echad

Excerpt from "Je was not a Trinitarian" pp. 307-312

by Anthony Buzzard

The Hebrew Word for One Means One

Faced with a traditional creed which contradicts the strict unitary monotheism of Jesus and of the Bible, some believers in Jesus as Messiah, even, remarkably, Messianic Jews, have felt compelled to find a way to justify their departure from Jesus' creedal monotheism. This has led to one of the most bizarre exercises in the distortion of simple words known, I suppose, to the history of ideas. It needs to be exposed as a bold venture in twisting the straightforward terminology by which the God of the Bible declares that He is one single Person.

The assault on common sense, simple language facts, and biblical authority we are speaking of has to do with the Hebrew word *echad*, which is the cardinal number "one." In counting in Hebrew one says *echad*, *sh'nayim*, *shalosh*: "one, two, three..."

Extraordinary verbal acrobatics have been performed with the word *echad* by some Trinitarians, in an effort to convince the public that the number one does not mean one. It is a tactic of desperation. It takes in only those who are not alert to the meaning of simple words. The obstruction of the straightforward meaning of the Hebrew *echad* (one) must rank amongst the most amazing pieces of bogus propaganda found in theological writing.

We cite some examples. Professor Boice attempted to find good reasons in the Hebrew Bible for believing that God is three in one. He wrote:

It has been argued that because Deuteronomy 6:4 reads "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" that the Trinity is excluded. But in this very verse the word for "one" is *echad* which means not one in isolation but one in unity. In fact, the word is never used in the Hebrew Bible of a stark singular entity. It is the word used in speaking of one bunch of grapes, for example, or in saying that the people of Israel responded as one people. After God has brought his wife to him, Adam says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:23-24). Again the word is *echad*. It is not suggested that the man and woman were to become one person, but rather that in a divine way they do become one. In a similar but not identical way God is one God, but also existent in three "persons."¹

The statement proposed by Professor Boice about the meaning of *echad* is completely untrue. *Echad* occurs 970 times in the Hebrew Bible and it is the number "one." It means "one single." It is a numeral adjective, the ordinary word for "one" functioning very much like our English number "one." The Hebrew for eleven is "one (*echad*) plus ten."

Lexicons of the Hebrew offer no support at all for any complication of the simple word "one."² Some unsuspecting readers have been bamboozled into the fraudulent argument that because "one" in English

¹J.M. Boice, *The Sovereign God*, Intervarsity Press, 1978, 1:139.

²Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon of Biblical Hebrew*. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* speaks of diversity within unity, but states rightly that this sense is found in its plural form *achadim*, an adjective never used for the One God. Abraham was viewed as "the one" (*echad*) and "the one father." He was certainly not plural. The same work, however, curiously and without citing any examples, says that *echad* "recognizes diversity within that oneness." Actual definitions then follow: "one single blessing," "Solomon was alone," "uniqueness," "a single man," "one voice" (Moody Press, 1980, 1:30). The word "one" displays no sense of diversity. The complaint about the popular misuse of the Hebrew word for "one" is made well in Lindsey Killian and Dr. Emily Palik, *The God of the Hebrew Bible and His Relationship to Jesus*, Association for Christian Development, 2005, Appendix A, 35-37.

or Hebrew can *modify a compound noun*, then the word “one” itself must be “compound”! One can think of humorous ways of exposing this trick. Does the word “one” mean “black and white” in the phrase “one zebra”? Does “one” mean “one single” in the phrase “one loaf of bread” and yet *more than one* in the phrase “one loaf of *sliced* bread”? We trust that the point is clear. One tripod is still one tripod, despite the three legs on the tripod. It is the noun, in these examples, which contains the idea of plurality (three legs), while the word “one” maintains, thankfully, the stable meaning of “one single.” One tripod is a single tripod. “One Lord” in the Bible does not mean two or three Lords. The meaning of “one” is precisely the same in “one rock” and “one family.” The numeral adjective “one” is not affected in any way by the collective noun “family.”

According to numerous popular websites and even a number of textbooks, the combination “one bunch,” we are invited to think, shows that “one” means more than one, so-called “compound one” or “composite one.” The mistake is quite obvious. One bunch is still in Hebrew and English *one* bunch and not two or more bunches! It is nonsense to suppose that the word “one” has altered its meaning when it modifies a compound noun. It is *the noun* which is compound and gives us the sense of plurality. The word “one” is fixed and unchanged in meaning in both “one pencil” and “one bunch.” The numerical adjective, “one,” retains its meaning always as “one single.” When Adam and Eve are “one flesh,” they are not two or more “fleshes”! One still means one. The combining of Adam and Eve as “one flesh” has not altered the meaning of “one” (*echad*).

On this amazing piece of verbal trickery Christians have been persuaded that in the phrase “one God” the word “one” imparts some sort of plurality to the word God. This is completely unfounded. It is plainly false. Imagine the confusion which would ensue if when we present our one-dollar purchase at the check-out counter, we are told that “one” is really “compound one.” Thus the item will cost three (or more) dollars! A compound noun is clearly made up of a number of items. But the word “one” which stands before it is not in any way changed by its proximity to the compound noun. However, the unwary have been taken in by the most amazing assertions that *echad* tells us that God is *more than one*!

Professor Boice’s assertion that *echad* “in fact is never used in the Hebrew Bible of a stark singular entity” cannot possibly have been checked by that author. One suspects that it is a piece of misinformation passed on uncritically as dogma. It has, however, no basis in fact.

Equally unreasonable is the suggestion of Michael Brown on Zechariah 11:8, where the prophet speaks of one (*echad*) month. Brown asks, “What does that tell us about the essential nature of a month? Does it mean that a month does not have thirty days because it is one?”³ The word “one” modifying “month” is not remotely connected to how many days there are in a month! On Brown’s argument the word “one” loses its fixed sense as “one single.” And the whole argument is then brought to bear on the central question of monotheism and is used to justify a plurality in the Godhead.

How would the proponents of one as “compound one” explain Nehemiah 11:1: “one [*echad*] out of ten”? Or Ezra 10:13: “one [*echad*] day or two”? “Two are better than one [*echad*]” (Ecc. 4:9). “If two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one alone [*echad*] keep warm?” (Ecc. 4:11). “Where a lone [*echad*] man may be overcome, two together may resist” (Ecc. 4:12). The rest of the 970 appearances of *echad* might be cited to make exactly the same point.

Ignoring this massive evidence for the meaning of the word “one” as “one single,” “one alone,” Robert Morey says that *echad* means “a compound of unified oneness...If the authors of the Bible were unitarians, we would not expect to find *echad* applied to God.”⁴ The facts are precisely the opposite. *Echad* always means “one single” and it is applied to God who is a single Person. Morey invites his readers to imagine that “one” means more than one. He cites six examples, including “one day” (Gen. 1:5). The word “one” refers to compound oneness, because the day combines morning and evening! The truth is that this means one day and not two or more days. The whole congregation from Dan to Beersheba can of course assemble “as one man” (Judges 20:1). But the word “one” means just as much “one and not more” as in every one of its occurrences.

³ *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, Baker Books, 2000, 2:10.

⁴ *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*, World Publishing, 1996, 89.

In his long book on the Trinity Robert Morey claims that the Hebrew word “one” (*echad*) really means “more than one”! He claims support from a lexicon that “one” means “compound oneness.” Morey includes a footnote to the standard Brown, Driver and Briggs *Lexicon of Biblical Hebrew* for support.⁵ But the page he appeals to contains not a word of support for his theory that “one” really means “compound unity.” The lexicons rightly define “one” as the cardinal number “one.” *Echad is the word for “one” in counting.* Imagine the chaos of communication if “one” really means more than one. Ecclesiastes 4:9 speaks of two being better than one (*echad*). The use of “one” in the sentence “They shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) does not mean that “one” is really plural. It means that two human beings in marriage become one thing (not two). The idea of plurality is not found in the word “one” at all. It is found in the context: male and female human persons.

The idea that the word *yachid* would be the only word suitable to describe a unitarian God is false. *Yachid* in Scripture is very rare and has associations like “lonely” or “solitary” which are not appropriate for God. *Echad* itself is the mathematical term meaning one and it is sometimes rendered properly as “unique” or “lone” (Ecc. 4:12, NAB) or even by the indefinite article “a.” Professor Boice’s extraordinary assertion that *echad* never means anything other than “compound one”⁶ raises my suspicions as to how far people will go to force their view of God on to Scripture. When a contemporary author cited uncritically Boice’s misinformation on the meaning of *echad*, I wrote to him and received the following gracious reply:

Following our recent correspondence I have taken theological and academic advice, and it seems clear that...my comments on the Hebrew word *echad* are inaccurate. I am very grateful to you for pointing this out, and assure you that in the future printings of the book the paragraph will be replaced by one that uses other Old Testament arguments for the plurality of Yahweh’s being. Thank you again for preventing that particular error being perpetuated in the book.⁷

This elementary information about the word “one” deserves the widest publicity. At present, the alleged “plurality” of the word “one” is being inadmissibly used to substantiate the completely unfounded idea that God in Scripture is composed of a plurality of Persons. In 2002 the Seventh-Day Adventists produced a complete book on the Trinity to reassure the religious world of their “orthodoxy.” A team of their scholars argued for a personal tri-unity in God, and in support of this doctrine spoke of “the inherently plural word *echad*”⁸ found in Israel’s creed in Deuteronomy 6:4. If “one” is “inherently plural,” then language has ceased to have stable meaning and (to quote Henry Alford from another context, Rev. 20:4-6) “there is an end to all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a testimony to anything.”⁹

For too long some systematic theologians have blithely inserted a post-biblical dogma into the pages of the Hebrew Bible. Gustav Oehler refers to the Shema as “the locus of the unity and Trinity of God.”¹⁰ Jesus, and many another rabbis, would feel strongly that this is to deface the sacred text.

⁵Ibid., 104 referring to page 25f of Brown, Driver and Briggs.

⁶*The Sovereign God*, 1:139.

⁷The reference is to John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?* Evangelical Press, 2000, 450.

⁸Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon and John Reeve, *The Trinity*, Review and Herald, 2002, 76.

⁹*Greek Testament*, 4:726.

¹⁰*The Theology of the Old Testament*, Funk & Wagnalls, 1893, 30.