

GENESIS 1:26

TO WHOM WAS GOD SPEAKING?

*A Grammatical, Contextual and Causal Case
for the Continuation-Plural Reading*

READER EDITION

CHRIS SCALF

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ABOUT THIS READER EDITION. This edition keeps the full argument, evidence, objections, and source base of the article. It puts English first, explains technical grammar and causation in ordinary language, and uses the notes for deeper source support rather than making the main text depend on specialist terminology.

Part One

A Walk Through the Chapter

I want to begin not with a thesis, but with the text. Before I ask the reader to accept any reading of Genesis 1:26, I want us to walk through the chapter from the beginning and let the pattern appear in its own order. Watch the verbs. Watch what God says. Watch what part of creation is placed inside the action. Then watch what the narrator says happened. By the time we reach verse 26, the chapter itself should have already narrowed the possibilities.

The reading is primary; the thesis comes afterward. One distinction will guide the walk. Genesis 1 alternates between God's direct speech and the narrator's commentary. "Let there be light" belongs to God's speech; "and there was light" belongs to the narrator. Commentary can stand between two divine utterances without becoming another divine speech or silently giving God a new audience. So keep asking two things as we move through the days: What did God say, and what part of creation did that speech place in the action? Then ask separately: What does the narrator record? When Hebrew grammar matters to the argument, the main text explains its force in English rather than asking the reader to decode transliterated forms. Technical source support remains in the notes.¹

Before walking the days one by one, strip away the narrator for a moment and listen only to what God actually says. There is much less direct divine speech than the printed chapter makes it feel like. Most of Genesis 1 is the narrator's commentary on what happened after those

¹The basic distinction used here is simply between what God says and what the narrator reports happened. Wenham, Walsh, and Fishbane all discuss the literary structure of Genesis narrative in ways that support keeping quoted speech and narrator commentary distinct. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 6–10; Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, 42–55; Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 3–16.

short utterances. The table below isolates the productive speech of the six days so the pattern can be seen before it is interpreted.

WHAT GOD ACTUALLY SAYS: THE SIX-DAY PRODUCTIVE SPEECH STREAM

DAY	GOD'S PRODUCTIVE WORDS	WHAT THE WORDING PLACES IN THE ACTION
1	"Let there be light." (1:3)	No created producer named.
2	"Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." (1:6)	No created producer named.
3A	"Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear." (1:9)	Waters named, but passive: they are gathered.
3B	"Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind..." (1:11)	Earth is productive.
4	"Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night... and let them be for lights... to give light upon the earth." (1:14–15)	No created producer named.
5	"Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth..." (1:20)	Waters are productive.
6A	"Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind." (1:24)	Earth is productive.
6B	"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion..." (1:26)	The speaker enters the plural: God + ? No new participant is named.

Genesis also records God blessing the living creatures and humanity and giving food in verses 22 and 28–30. Those are direct divine speech too, but they are not new productive commands. The table isolates the productive sequence. That sequence is remarkably compact.

Read the table from top to bottom. Much of what fills the printed chapter between these utterances—“and there was light,” “God made,” “God saw that it was good,” and the evening-and-morning notices—is narrator commentary. Those are not words God speaks.

This becomes crucial on Day Six. God says, “Let the earth bring forth...” in verse 24. Verse 25 is narrator commentary on the result; it is not another thing God says, and it names no new audience. The next productive words God actually speaks are, “Let us make man.” Verse 25 can record the completion of the animal-making stage, but it cannot silently become a new divine utterance or supply an unmentioned participant. In God’s productive speech-stream, the sequence is therefore direct: earth is placed inside the action, the narrator records the result, and the next divine utterance changes to the first-person plural.

A. The Pattern Before Day Six

The chapter opens with one divine actor: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew word translated “God” is plural in form, but the verb paired with it here is singular. The narrator’s reports of God’s actions use singular agency throughout the chapter, including the threefold “created” of verse 27. Genesis 1 therefore presents the God who speaks and acts as one grammatical subject.

The opening also establishes the cast of the scene. Genesis names the heavens, earth, deep, waters, and the “Spirit” or “wind of God” hovering over the waters. Whatever theological significance is assigned to that phrase, the chapter does not stage the Spirit/wind as a second speaker or hearer: it is never addressed, never answers, and never becomes the addressee of a creative command. By verse 26 the reader has encountered many created realities and one continuously speaking God, but no scene of divine consultation.

Start with Day One. God says, “Let there be light,” and light exists. What part of creation is commanded to produce the light? None. No created producer is named. Now watch Day Two: “Let there be an expanse.” The waters are already present, but God does not command the waters to produce the expanse. Again, God speaks and the narrator records what God made. Two days in, the reader has seen the simplest pattern: God commands a result, and no created producer is placed inside the command.

Now watch the change on Day Three. In verse 9 the waters are named, but the command is passive: they are to be gathered, not to produce anything. Then verse 11 changes the role: “Let the earth bring forth vegetation.” The earth is no longer merely present in the scene. God commands the earth to produce, and the narrator then says that “the earth brought forth.” The Hebrew verb is third-person feminine singular because “the earth” is the explicit subject. In plain English, the sense is “let the earth bring forth,” not “you, earth, bring forth.”

Stop there for a moment, because Day Three gives us a control we will need later. Verse 9 names the waters. When the next act turns to the earth in verse 11, the earth is named. In other words, when the part of creation involved in the commanded result changes, Genesis tells the reader. The text does not quietly swap one created field for another and expect us to supply the change ourselves.

Day Four returns to the simpler pattern: “Let there be lights.” No created producer is named. Then Day Five changes again: “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures.” This time the waters themselves are commanded to act productively. Now watch the narrator:

“God created the great sea creatures.” The waters swarm; God creates. The created medium truly participates, but it does not become another Creator.²

Do not interpret verse 26 yet. Just mark what the chapter has shown. Sometimes God commands a result and names no created producer. At other times God places something already created inside the productive action: the earth brings forth, or the waters swarm. Those differences in wording are doing real work. They tell the reader when a created part of the world is participating in the result.

Now look at the same pattern from the narrator’s side. Genesis does not describe every part of the work with the same grammatical subject. The earth “brought forth” vegetation; the waters “swarmed”; yet God “made” and God “created.” The chapter can therefore name more than one participant in a result while still reserving creation to God. Keep that distinction in view, because a plural of making in verse 26 does not have to mean a plurality of Creators.

By the end of Day Five, two patterns are clear enough to carry forward. Sometimes God commands a result directly: “Let there be....” At other times he commands something already created to produce: “Let the earth bring forth,” or “Let the waters swarm.” We have not yet reached the unusual grammar of verse 26. The point is simply that the chapter has already taught the reader how to notice when a created medium is, and is not, inside the action.

Those two patterns are all we need to carry into Day Six. Do not decide the meaning of “Let us make” in advance. Walk into the day with the chapter’s own questions still open: What

²Standard Hebrew grammars note that the plural-form noun translated “God” takes singular verbs when it refers to Israel’s God. The point is grammatical: the noun’s plural form does not make God several acting subjects in Genesis 1. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §7.4.3; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §136d.

has God just placed inside the productive action? Does the text replace that participant before the next speech? And what changes when God himself enters the grammar of the making?

B. Day Six: The Same Earth, a Second Productive Act

Now watch Day Six carefully. God begins exactly where the established pattern would lead us to expect: “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds” (v. 24). The earth is again the commanded productive subject. Verse 25 then belongs to the narrator: God made the beasts of the earth and saw that they were good. The first act has reached its result. But before we move on, notice what verse 25 does not do. It does not name a new material source, introduce a new hearer, or tell us that the earth has dropped out of the Day-Six work.

Then God speaks again: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” In Hebrew, “let us make” is carried by a single first-person plural verb. Verses 24 and 26 are distinct utterances; each begins with “And God said.” The claim is not that they form one grammatical sentence. The claim is that the Day-Six work continues across the narrator’s commentary. Verse 25 records the accomplishment of the first command; it does not reset the material setting or replace the participant already established in God’s speech.

Now slow the sequence down. Four facts meet on Day Six, but they do not all explain the same thing. First, Day Six contains two successive creature-making acts. Second, the same already-named material source, the earth, carries from the land animals into the making of humanity without a replacement source being named. Third, the wording changes from “Let the earth bring forth” to “Let us make.” Fourth, humanity is specified by image, likeness, and dominion in a way the animals are not. The third fact is the thing that needs explanation, so we

cannot use the plural to explain itself. We have to ask what was already different in the scene before the plural appeared.

“Same productive medium” simply means that verse 24 has already named the earth as the Day-Six source being used in the work, and nothing in verse 25 marks a change. Day Three gives the comparison: when Genesis shifts from one named productive medium to another, it names the new medium. Day Six names no replacement before verse 26.

The point becomes stronger when we follow the sources Genesis actually names. The earth brings forth vegetation in verse 11, the waters swarm with sea life in verse 20, and the earth brings forth land animals in verse 24. In each case, God’s productive command names the created source or medium involved. Genesis 2:7 later confirms that humanity is materially from the ground. That is positive evidence that the earthly source has not changed, not merely an argument from verse 25’s silence. If a rival reading keeps the earth as humanity’s material source but excludes it from the “we,” it still must explain why another proposed member of the “we”—one not introduced in the Day-Six scene—fits the scene better than the productive participant already active in the work.

So do not let verse 25 do more than the narrator says it does. It records that the first command reached its result and that God judged that result good. It does not function like a hidden stage direction saying, “The earth is dismissed; a new audience now appears.” If the scene has changed that radically, the text has to show us the change. Verse 25 does not.

This is why verse 25 can make the continuity look more broken on the printed page than it is in the work itself. The argument is not that the nearest noun automatically controls verse 26.

The point is that the earth has already been placed in the Day-Six productive action, and nothing between the two divine speeches tells the reader that this role has ended or been replaced.

That is the continuity principle this paper will carry forward: once Genesis has placed a created participant inside the work, that participant remains the locally established participant unless the text marks a change. This continuity does not by itself prove that the participant belongs to the later “we.” It means a rival reading must explain why another participant fits the immediate scene better.

The first command is complete, but Day Six is not. The animals have been made; humanity follows immediately within the same day, under the same Creator and in the same earthly field. That lets us distinguish a completed stage from a completed work. The continuation reading does not collapse verses 24 and 26 into one sentence. It asks whether the second command inherits the material and narrative setting the first command has just established.

A new command does not necessarily begin a new work. Think of a potter working at the same wheel from the same supply of clay. One vessel can be completed and another begun without changing the material source or the working setting; what changes is the form and purpose of the next object. Day Six follows that kind of continuity. “Let the earth bring forth” completes the animal-making stage. “Let us make” begins the human-making stage while the same earthly source remains in the work. The comparison is only about continuity of material and setting; Genesis itself must identify who belongs to the “we.”

Now zoom in on Day Six. Read only God’s speech-stream and the movement becomes visible:

Genesis 1:24 — “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind...”

Genesis 1:26 — “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...”

The shift is not merely from one vocabulary word to another. Verse 24 places the earth as the producer under God’s command. Verse 26 changes the grammatical subject: the speaker now includes himself in a first-person plural act. The wording widens from “Let the earth bring forth” to “Let us make.” The earth has not been replaced; the scope of participation has changed. The first command identifies the participant; the second widens the participation.

That is also why the English phrase “Let us make” must be handled carefully. Hebrew expresses “Let us make” with one inflected first-person plural verb; there is no separate pronoun “us” that independently introduces a new group. The verb itself gives a “we,” while the endings in “our image” and “our likeness” keep that plural through the sentence. But the form does not name who, besides the speaker, belongs to the “we.” The surrounding passage must do that work.³

The next verse immediately constrains what the plural can mean. Verse 27 does not say, “and they created.” It repeats the singular divine act three times: God created humanity in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. The repetition does not erase the plural of verse 26. It tells the reader how to distribute the roles: whatever plurality belongs to the making, the Hebrew verb translated “created” remains singular with God as its subject.

³Schmidt and Walton discuss the Hebrew verb translated “create.” In the relevant creation reports of Genesis 1, God is the subject of that verb. The point here is not that no other verb can describe divine action, but that Genesis repeatedly reserves this creation-language for God while still allowing earth or waters to participate in the result. See Werner H. Schmidt, “br’ to create,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1:253–56; John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 127–29.

C. The Pattern Assembled

Now step back and look at what the walk through the chapter has actually shown. When no created producer is named, God gives a direct command: light, expanse, luminaries. When a created medium participates productively, God places that medium inside the command: the earth brings forth vegetation, the waters swarm, the earth brings forth land animals. In each case the narrator still attributes divine making and creation to God. Then verse 26 does something new: the speaker himself enters the grammar of the making—“Let us make.”

Text	Divine speech	Narrator / function
1:3	Let there be light	No created producer; God acts
1:11	Let the earth bring forth vegetation	Earth produces under command
1:20	Let the waters swarm	Waters produce; God creates
1:24	Let the earth bring forth living creatures	Earth produces under command
1:26–27	Let us make man in our image	Plural making; God creates, singular

At this point the reader can ask the three questions the chapter has prepared. Who is the productive participant in God’s immediately preceding speech? The earth. Does anything between that speech and “Let us make” replace it? No. What does Genesis do when the created field really changes? It names the new field, as Day Three already showed us. The continuation-plural reading begins from those observations the reader has just watched unfold.

The earth is not the last candidate left after rival readings are eliminated; it is the positive material and productive participant established before the plural occurs. By verse 24 Genesis has already placed it inside the Day-Six work. Verse 25 does not remove it from that work, and verse

26 names no replacement participant. A rival reading therefore carries a positive burden: it must explain why a participant not introduced in Day Six should be preferred over the created participant already active in the making. The continuation reading does not reach the earth by elimination. It begins with the participant the text has already put in place.

Part Two

The Case for the Continuation-Plural

I. Thesis

Genesis 1:26 is best read as a continuation-plural: the first-person plural “Let us make” includes God, the speaker, with the earth already established as the productive participant in the Day-Six sequence. God alone remains Creator. The singular “image” concerns one human whole, not two independent images.

To explain those unequal roles, this paper uses a whole-and-part analysis. One human being can contain real bodily parts, properties, and relationships that come from different sources without becoming two beings. The body’s material comes from the earth from which humanity is formed. The God-related likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion come from God.

On this reading, “our image” and “our likeness” can describe the one human result without requiring God and earth to contribute the same thing or to relate to the image in the same way. The earth is not the source of God’s image, but earth-derived material is genuinely part of the one human whole that bears that image. Genesis establishes that humanity is materially from the ground. Paul later uses image-language for this inherited earthly side by speaking of “the

image of the earthy.” The plural therefore names a widened making with unequal roles, while verse 27’s three singular uses of “created” reserve creation to God alone.

The thesis therefore depends on a distinction between participation and being the Creator. The earth can truly contribute to the making without becoming another Creator. Genesis has already shown that kind of unequal participation on Day Five: the waters swarm, but God creates. Verse 26 uses the broad Hebrew verb meaning “make” or “do”; verse 27 uses the verb translated “create” with God as its singular subject. The argument does not require those two verbs to be absolute opposites. It depends on how Genesis actually distributes the roles in this scene: created material can participate in the making while creation remains God’s act.⁴

The phrase “our image, our likeness” extends the plural frame through the utterance. The noun “image” remains singular. A plural possessive can relate one thing to more than one participant without requiring every participant to stand in the same kind of relation to it. The grammar therefore keeps the image-and-likeness language inside the plural frame, but it does not tell us that every member of the “we” is the same kind of source. The context must identify the participants and the relation each one has to the human being made.⁵

Dominion shows why the image is defined chiefly by humanity’s relation to God. Humanity belongs materially to the created realm and yet is commissioned to rule within it under God. The earth supplies the embodied creature that belongs to creation; God supplies the

⁴Standard Hebrew grammars classify the expression translated “Let us make” as a first-person plural form used with volitional force. Because of the particular shape of this verb, there is no extra visible ending that by itself says “let us”; the sentence and context establish that force. This supports the grammatical description only. It does not identify who belongs to the “we.” See Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §34.5.1; Joüon–Muraoka, *Grammar*, §§114b–e.

⁵The argument does not depend on treating the Hebrew verbs translated “make” and “create” as absolute lexical opposites. It depends on how Genesis 1 actually uses them in this scene: verse 26 speaks of plural making, while verse 27 repeatedly attributes creation to God alone. See Schmidt, “br’ to create,” 1:253–56.

defining relation and calling by which that creature represents him. The continuation-plural reading therefore does not make earth and God equal sources of one divine image. The earth is the material source of the bearer; God is the defining source of the image and calling.

PLAIN-ENGLISH THESIS. God remains the only Creator. The earth is already the material source and productive medium in the Day-Six work. When the wording widens from “Let the earth bring forth” to “Let us make,” this reading understands God as including that continuing earth in the making of humanity. The earth contributes the material body; God contributes what the earth cannot give from itself: the God-related image and likeness, representative calling, and dominion. These are unequal contributions to one human being, not two creators and not two separate images.

Reader guide. The argument now moves in five steps: what the first-person plural can and cannot tell us; how Genesis distinguishes God’s role from the earth’s; what changes locally at verse 26; what later biblical and historical evidence can support; and how the rival readings compare. Each section closes with a short statement of what that stage adds, so the cumulative logic stays visible without repeating the full argument.

II. The Grammatical Argument

The grammatical argument should be kept within its proper limits. The Hebrew expression translated “Let us make” is first-person plural. Its form tells us that the speaker is included in a plural subject, but it does not by itself identify the other participant or participants.⁶

Genesis 1:26 also does not introduce a separate, free-standing pronoun “we.” The plurality is built into the verb and continues in the endings translated “our image” and “our

⁶For the grammar of plural possessives such as “our,” see Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §16.4; for the divine plurals, see W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness*, 17–21. For the Bible’s use of “image” language, see D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” 53–103. Ramban says the human is “similar to both,” bodily to the earth and in the higher dimension to higher beings; Oseka notes that Ramban did not exclude the bodily side from “our image and our likeness.” Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:3 also show that biblical image-language can be borne by a concrete personal subject rather than by a separately existing pattern.

likeness.” In other words, the verse gives us a real plural, but it does not stop to name a new group.

Hebrew can use an independent first-person pronoun when emphasis calls for it. Genesis 6:17 is an example, where God uses an emphatic “I” as he announces the flood. That comparison does not prove that the earth is the other member of the plural. It shows only that verse 26 itself does not introduce a new plural group; the surrounding context still has to identify who belongs to the “we.”

The examples below are a selected set of clear first-person plural “let us” uses, not a list of every occurrence. Disputed or structurally different passages are not used to prove the pattern. Genesis 11:7 is itself contested. Genesis 3:22 is structurally different: “the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” is a declarative comparison, not a proposal for joint action. It describes the man’s condition in relation to a group that includes the speaker and is characterized here by knowledge of good and evil. The phrase “one of us” does not by itself identify whom God is speaking to, and it cannot determine who belongs to the “we” of Genesis 1:26. Judges 20:9 is kept as a boundary case because the same visible form can mean “what we will do” rather than “let us do.” The purpose is simple: in clear examples, who does the “we” refer to, and how does the surrounding passage make that clear?

Controlled comparison at a glance:

Text	English wording	Who the “we” includes	What controls the meaning
Gen 11:3–4	“let us build”; “let us make a name”	Builders	The group is already identified; same “make” verb as Gen 1:26
Gen 22:5	“we will go”; “we will return”	Abraham + Isaac	The servants are addressed but remain outside the “we”

Text	English wording	Who the “we” includes	What controls the meaning
26:28 Gen	“let us make a covenant”	Philistine delegation	Isaac is separately marked as “you”
31:44 Gen	“let us make a covenant”	Laban + Jacob	The text explicitly says “I and you”
37:27 Gen	“let us sell him”	Judah + brothers	The group is recovered from the ongoing dialogue
20:9 Judg	“what we will do”	Assembly of Israel	Boundary case: the same visible form need not mean “let us do”
6:2 2 Kgs	“let us go”; “let us take”; “let us make”	Sons of the prophets	Elisha is addressed but stands outside their “we”
22:26 Josh	“let us now prepare / make”	Eastern tribes	Collective resolve; same “make” verb as Gen 1:26

The creation-days setting is itself an important control. Genesis 1 is not simply one more later scene in which God happens to use plural language; it is the ordered account of the creative days, with a limited cast and repeated examples of how God’s speech engages the created order. The question is not whether angels existed somewhere in the unseen order at that time; Genesis 1 does not answer that question here. The textual question is whether the chapter has placed angels, a heavenly council, or another divine hearer inside these creative speeches. It has not. Later plural passages in Genesis occur in different narrative settings, after the human story has developed and other agents and conflicts are part of the scene. Their plurals must be read from their own contexts rather than imported backward into the specific Day-Six setting of Genesis 1:26.

Clear first-person plural examples elsewhere show the same principle. The builders of Babel are already an identified group when they say, “Come, let us build.” Laban makes the group explicit when he tells Jacob, “Let us make a covenant, I and you.” Judah proposes to his brothers, “Let us sell him,” and Jonathan says to his armor-bearer, “Let us cross over” (1 Sam.

14:6). In 2 Kings 6:2 the sons of the prophets address Elisha, yet “let us go” and “let us make” refer to the sons, not automatically to the person addressed. Two points follow: a first-person plural refers to an intended group, and the person being addressed is not automatically part of that group. The surrounding scene tells us who belongs to the “we.”

The comparison with Genesis 11:4 is especially useful because the same Hebrew verb translated “make” appears there in first-person plural form: the builders say, “let us make a name.” The verb form does not identify the group; the preceding scene has already identified the builders. Joshua 22:26 and 2 Kings 6:2 work the same way. The recurring principle is simple: the nearest word does not automatically identify the “we”; the surrounding passage does.

The boundary cases show the limits of the form. In Judges 20:9 the same first-person plural form means “what we will do,” not “let us do,” so the visible form alone does not establish a “let us” meaning. Genesis 22:5 and 2 Kings 6:2 show that the person being addressed can stand outside the first-person plural subject. The grammar gives a plural subject; the local narrative still has to identify its members.

That is why the argument for the earth is stronger than saying, “the nearest participant must be included.” The earth is not chosen by a simple nearest-word rule. Several facts in the passage point to it: the earth is already on stage, has twice been made productive, and is the productive participant in the immediately preceding divine speech. Day Six keeps the same material source, verse 25 does not remove it from the work, and verse 26 names no replacement participant.

Classical grammars have proposed self-deliberation for Genesis 1:26, while modern discussions question whether either majesty or self-deliberation is securely established as an

explanation of the form. The important point is that the form alone does not decide among these readings.

The surrounding passage still has to identify who belongs to the “we.”

What this establishes. The “let us make” form includes the speaker in a plural action, but the form itself does not identify the other participant or make another rational person part of the verb’s meaning. Human examples show normal human usage; the local discourse must still identify who else belongs to the “we.”

III. Internal Scriptural Confirmation: How the Roles Fit Together

Genesis 2:7 supplies the material detail compressed in Genesis 1:26–27: the LORD God forms the man from “dust from the ground” and then acts directly upon the formed man by breathing the breath of life. Genesis 1 has already located humanity’s distinctive place in image, likeness, and dominion. Genesis 2:7 supports the two sides the continuation-plural reading expects: the human creature remains materially from the ground, while God acts directly upon that earthly material. The verse therefore supports the material continuity and the direct divine contribution without being asked to identify by itself who belongs to the “we” of verse 26.

Genesis 2:7 also shows why the ground is not the only source involved in making the human. The man is genuinely from the ground, yet God himself forms and acts upon that earthly material. The ground is therefore more than a place from which material is briefly borrowed: its material actually becomes the bodily part of the finished human. That fits the widened Day-Six pattern. The earthly material continues as a real part of embodied humanity, while the God-related likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion require God’s direct contribution.

Genesis 2:7 confirms that two-sided pattern; Genesis 1:26 supplies the image, likeness, and calling that explain why the wording widens.

Genesis strengthens this material connection through its wordplay between “human/man” and “ground.” The Hebrew words are closely linked in sound, and the narrative makes the relationship concrete by forming the human from “dust from the ground.” Genesis 3:19 closes the circle: “dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” The continuation-plural reading therefore does not invent a role for the earth in verse 26 and then search for support. Genesis repeatedly identifies humanity as embodied life that comes materially from the ground. “Dust you are” describes what the body is made from; “to dust you shall return” describes the body returning to that earth-derived material basis. The organization of the body changes, but the material source does not. The ground is therefore not merely a remote source; its material becomes an actual part of the finished human whole. This does not mean the Hebrew word for “man” means “image of earth,” and it does not mean the earth supplies the image of God.

The structure is easiest to state as a whole-and-part analysis. This paper reads the singular “image” in Genesis 1:26–27 concretely: the image-bearer is the one human reality that results, not a separate pattern floating alongside the human. The human being is one whole.⁷

By a “part” or “constituent,” this paper means something real that belongs to what the whole is. Some are physical parts, such as the earth-derived material of the body. Others are real properties or relationships of that same human whole, such as its likeness to God, representative role, calling, and dominion.

⁷These grammars discuss first-person plural forms whose “let us” force is determined by syntax and context. The technical grammar supports the limited point made in the paragraph: the form is plural, but the form alone does not name the other participant. See Waltke and O'Connor, §34.5.1; Joüon–Muraoka, §§114b–e, 790; Garr, *In His Own Image*, 28 n. 35.

When this paper says that a part or feature is “grounded in” a source, it means something simple: that feature comes from that source and is explained by it. The body is grounded materially in the earth because material from the ground becomes the human body and remains part of the finished human. The God-related properties and relationships are grounded in God because God, not the soil, explains humanity’s likeness to him, representative role, calling, and dominion.

Those sources differ in kind, not merely in degree. Distinguishing them does not divide the human into two image-bearers and does not make the earth another Creator. It explains how one human whole can contain real parts and defining relations that come from genuinely different sources.

The source distinction becomes clearer when we ask what is logically required by the image of God. Humanity does not have to be made from dust of the ground in order to bear God’s image. Nothing in the statement “humanity is made in the image of God” by itself tells us what material the image-bearer must be made from. God could, in principle, form a rational and representative creature from some other created material and that creature could still stand in a true image relation to God. Genesis, however, tells us what this human creature actually is: the body is formed from the ground. That earth-derived bodily part therefore contributes real content to the one human whole; it is not simply another name for the relationship to God. The body comes materially from the earth, while the God-related properties and relations come from God.

Paul supplies explicit image-language for the earthly side of this one human reality. In 1 Corinthians 15:45–49 the first man is “of the earth, earthy,” and Paul says that “we have borne the image of the earthy.” The immediate referent of “the earthy” is the earth-derived first man,

not the soil treated as a personal pattern. Paul therefore does not independently prove that the earth is the other member of Genesis 1:26's "our." Genesis supplies the material relation: the first human is formed from the ground, and that ground-derived material becomes the body. Paul's contribution is narrower but important: he gives explicit scriptural warrant for describing the inherited, earth-derived side of humanity in image-language. The earthly side can therefore belong genuinely to the one human image without making the earth the source of the image of God.⁸

The result is not two independent images but one human image-bearing whole with real parts and relations that come from different sources. "Image of the earthy" describes the embodied condition inherited from the first man, who is of the earth. "Image of God" describes the God-related relation by which that same human whole represents God. The bodily part is materially from the earth through the first man; the God-related properties and relations come from God. One human can therefore stand in both relations without being divided into two humans, two creators, or two competing divine images. Paul allows image-language for the earthly side; he does not collapse the two sources into one.

None of this requires God and earth to possess one common divine image in the same way. The earth's relation to "our image and our likeness" is not that the earth possesses God's image and transmits divinity to humanity. Rather, the phrase describes one human whole whose bodily material and defining relations come from unequal sources. The earth supplies the material that becomes the embodied human. God supplies the God-related likeness,

⁸Gesenius rejects a simple "royal we" explanation of Genesis 1:26 and prefers self-deliberation while acknowledging other possibilities. Garr likewise argues that secure biblical parallels for a majestic plural in pronouns are lacking and notes the difficulty of finding independent biblical examples of self-deliberation. The important point for this paper is modest: the verb form itself does not identify the other member of the "we." See GKC §124g n. 2; Garr, *In His Own Image*, 18–20.

representative role, calling, and rule. Because earth-derived material actually becomes part of the human, the earthward relation belongs to what the embodied human is; it is not merely an outside association. On the continuation reading, the human is bodily like the earth from which the body is made, and that earthward relation can be included within the plural phrase “our likeness.” The grammar by itself, however, does not tell us how the two relations are distributed. “Image” and “likeness” therefore should not be split into two separate nouns, one assigned to earth and the other to God. The phrase as a whole describes the one resulting human reality, while the sources of its parts and relations remain unequal.

Ramban provides a direct historical precedent for this kind of unequal relation. After identifying “Let us make” as God together with “the aforementioned earth,” he explains “our image and our likeness” by saying that the human is “similar to both”: bodily to the earth from which the human is taken and, in the higher dimension, to the higher beings. Oseka likewise notes that Ramban did not exclude the human body from “our image and our likeness.” History does not settle the Hebrew by authority, and this paper does not adopt every feature of Ramban’s account. The important point is that Ramban treats the phrase as a whole, not by assigning one noun to earth and the other to God. His reading shows that unequal relations can be held together without making the earth another divine pattern.

Why Verse 27 Says “Image of God.” A stronger objection asks why verse 27 immediately says “in the image of God” and “his image” if the earth is included in the plural wording of verse 26. Verse 27 names the finished human whole according to its defining relation to God; it does not deny the earth-derived bodily part of that same whole. God is the Creator and the source of the representative relation by which humanity bears his image. The earth is the material source of the body that becomes part of the human creature. Those claims are not rivals

because they answer different source questions within one human reality. Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 repeat the God-related identity, while Genesis 2:7 and 3:19 preserve the earth-derived bodily constitution. Paul later shows that the earthly side inherited from the first man can itself be described in image-language through “the image of the earthy.” Verse 27’s “his image” therefore identifies whose representative image humanity bears; it does not exhaust every real source-relation within the human whole.

The paper does not need to reduce the image of God to a checklist of traits. The narrower point is structural: Genesis does not present an abstract image-bearer to which a body is later attached. The image-bearer is the one embodied human whole. Its dust-derived body comes materially from the earth, while its God-related likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion come from God. These are real features of one human reality, not two separate beings or two competing images. Distinguishing their sources neither divides the human nor makes dust divine; it explains how the one image-bearing human is constituted.

Traditional causal language can help state these unequal roles precisely, but the terms are simpler than they sound. They name different questions about one act of making: Who brings the thing into being? What is it made from? What created means are used? What gives it its defining form? What purpose is it made for?

Efficient cause means the one whose action brings the thing into being. In Genesis, that is God alone, the Creator.

Material cause means what the thing is made from. Humanity’s body is formed from the ground.

Instrumental cause means the created means through which the primary agent works. The earth functions this way when God places it under his command to bring forth and when its material is used in forming the human body.

Formal cause concerns the defining form or character according to which the human is made. The defining God-related image and representative identity come from God; the earth does not supply a second divine form.

Final cause means the end or purpose for which the thing is made. Genesis names that purpose in humanity's dominion and calling to rule within creation under God.

These categories keep the roles unequal. God alone creates and orders the whole. The earth supplies the material of the body and functions as a created means already placed under God's word. God supplies the defining image, likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion. The claim that the body comes materially from the earth does not turn the earth into the source of God's image.⁹

READER CHECKPOINT. The point of this section is not to turn Genesis into a philosophy textbook. The causal terms simply prevent the roles from being blurred. God is the Creator. The earth is the real material source of the body and a created means under God's command. The image, representative identity, and purpose come from God. One making can include all of those truths without making the causes equal.

These roles do not make God and earth equal contributors. A potter remains the maker of a vessel even though the clay is real material and tools may be real means in the work. In the same way, "God created man" identifies the Creator without implying that the human body came

⁹Philosophers sometimes call whole-and-part analysis "mereology." The reader does not need that technical word for the argument. The point is simply that one real whole can have material parts and real defining properties or relations that are not the same kind of thing. Comparable whole-and-part analysis appears in analytic Christology; see Eleonore Stump, "Aquinas' Metaphysics of the Incarnation," 197–218; Brian Leftow, "A Timeless God Incarnate," 273–300; and Oliver D. Crisp, "Compositional Christology without Nestorianism," 45–66.

from no created material. The illustration is deliberately limited to that point: it explains unequal roles in one making; it does not identify the “we.” Genesis itself must supply that further fact, and the argument is that it has already done so by placing the earth in the productive relation before “Let us make” is spoken.

That distinction also clarifies the role of divine speech. God’s Word expresses God’s own wisdom and intention toward what he has made; it is not another creator standing beside God. “Let the earth bring forth” does not merely predict a result. The command directs the created medium toward the action God intends. Scripture can likewise call the heavens “the work of your hands” (Ps 102:25; Heb 1:10) without requiring literal divine hands. In Genesis 1, God’s speech repeatedly directs what already exists: waters are gathered, the earth brings forth vegetation, the waters swarm, and the earth brings forth land animals. Verse 26 continues that same outward movement while widening the making of humanity to include what God himself contributes.

The distinction between the broad verb “make” in verse 26 and the verb “create” in verse 27 therefore fits the narrative logic. “Let us make” can describe the whole productive act in which more than one real contribution is involved. Verse 27 immediately says, three times, that God created. The plural of making does not require plural creators. Genesis itself keeps those claims apart.

The singular “image” likewise names one resulting human whole, not two separate images. The plural possessive “our” keeps the plural frame of the making without requiring every part or defining feature of that whole to come from the same source. The body is materially from the earth; the God-related likeness, representative role, and calling come from

God in a different way. The earth does not possess a divine essence, and God does not become earthy. One human being can therefore contain real parts and properties that come from different sources while remaining one image-bearing reality.

What this adds. The argument now has three steps that should not be collapsed.

First, the singular image concerns one human whole whose bodily part and defining properties can come from different sources. The body comes materially from the earth, while the God-related likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion come from God.

Second, Genesis establishes the earthly side through the direct connection between the human and the ground and through the dust from which the body is formed. That material fact is not automatically contained in the statement that humanity bears God's image; it adds distinct content to what this human creature actually is.

Third, Paul does not independently establish the earth as the other member of Genesis 1:26's "we," but he does supply explicit image-language for the inherited earthly side through "the image of the earthy." The earth can therefore be genuinely constitutive of the one human image-bearing whole without becoming a second Creator or a rival source of the image of God.

IV. Local Narrative: What Changes and What Stays the Same

Two facts from the chapter now come together. First, nothing before Genesis 1:26 stages multiple divine speakers or hearers or presents God as a plural speaker. The same word translated "God" remains the speaker, and the narrator's verbs reporting God's actions remain singular. Genesis has not prepared a conversation within God. Second, Day Six has already placed the earth under God's command as the productive medium, and nothing before verse 26 replaces it.

The earth's role through the chapter makes that continuity concrete. It is present from verse 1, becomes the named dry land in verses 9–10, is commanded in verse 11 to bring forth vegetation, and is recorded in verse 12 as having done so. In verse 24 God again commands the earth to bring forth land animals. By verse 26 the earth is not a guess pulled from a distant noun; it is the productive medium in God's immediately preceding speech. Verse 25 records the first Day-Six result, but it does not say the earth has ceased to matter, name a new material source, or introduce a new hearer.

This lets the chapter itself prepare us for what comes next. By verse 25 the earth is still the material source in the Day-Six work, and Genesis has shown that when the part of creation involved changes, the text names the new one. No replacement is named before verse 26. Humanity, however, requires more than another earth-only “bring forth.” The expected change is therefore not from earth to a new material source, but from the earth acting under command to God joining the continuing earth in the making. The first-person plural fits that change.¹⁰

What Changes on God's Side? God is the source in every creative act in Genesis 1. That does not change at verse 26. Classical Trinitarianism likewise says that Father, Son, and Spirit act together in every outward divine work. If that joint action is present in light, vegetation, animals, and humanity, it cannot by itself explain why only one creative speech becomes first-person plural. The one-time plural still needs a local explanation.

¹⁰For Paul's contrast between the first Adam and the risen Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:45–49, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 199–204; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 312–61; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1281–94. These works provide broader context for Paul's “earthly” and image language; the paper uses Paul for that limited supporting point rather than as the primary proof of who belongs to Genesis 1:26's “we.”

If “Let us make” is being used as grammatical evidence that Father, Son, and Spirit are acting together, the chapter creates an explanatory burden for that reading: their joint action is supposed to be present in every earlier creative work, but comparable plural grammar does not appear there. Some Trinitarian readings appeal to humanity’s creation as the moment at which personal plurality is revealed. But that proposal does not arise from any newly marked divine participant or change in divine action in the local scene. On classical Trinitarian premises, joint action is already present in every preceding creative work, while Genesis does not introduce a new divine hearer at verse 26. “Revelatory timing” therefore does not explain the grammatical change from the immediate discourse; it supplies a theological rationale after the plural has already been interpreted. The reading still must explain why this particular scene calls for plural speech between divine persons. If the answer is that humanity images the Trinity, that claim must be established independently. “Our image” cannot first be used to establish a tri-personal image and then that inferred image be used to explain why the same phrase says “our.”

The continuation reading does not reason that way. The earth is identified before verse 26 from evidence that does not depend on the plural: verse 24 has already placed the earth in the Day-Six productive role, verse 25 does not remove or replace it, and Day Three has already shown that a real change in the part of creation involved is named. The earth is therefore established first; the plural is then read in light of that already-existing relation.

What Genesis actually changes is the creature being made, not God’s identity or activity. The same earth remains materially active from verse 24, but humanity is now specified by image, likeness, and dominion. The earth can supply the embodied material; it cannot by itself supply the image, likeness, and representative calling that come from God. The one-time change

to “we” appears exactly where the work itself changes in this way: the material source continues, while God now enters the subject of the making.

Day Three supplies the chapter’s own comparison for how a genuine change is signaled. Verse 9 names the waters as the created field whose gathering exposes the dry land; verse 11 then explicitly names the earth when the created role changes and the earth becomes productive. Day Six gives no comparable transition. Verse 24 names the earth, verse 25 gives the narrator’s commentary, and verse 26 introduces no replacement medium at all. Day Five is not a counterexample because it contains one productive decree involving the waters, not two successive productive stages carrying the same material source forward. Day Six alone combines a second productive command with the same already-established material field still standing in the discourse.

That makes the contrast sharper. What is claimed about God is constant; the grammar is not. If the one-time plural is evidence of a three-person action already present in every creative speech, the grammar does not track the alleged cause. On the continuation reading, the grammar does track a local change: the same earth continues, but humanity is now made in image, likeness, and dominion, requiring what comes from God as well as the continuing earthly material.

Why Not “I Will Make Man in My Image”? God plainly could have used singular wording. Genesis 2:18 gives “I will make,” and verse 27 itself speaks of God creating man in “his image.” The sharper question is why the text chose the plural here. “I will make man in my image” would state God’s role as Creator and source of the image, but it would not express the continuing earthly contribution already established in verse 24. “Let the earth bring forth man”

would keep the material source in view, but it would not express humanity's direct relation to God through image, likeness, and dominion. "Let us make" holds both sides in one making. Genesis 2:19 keeps the claim precise: God forms the animals from the ground as well, so what is unique to humanity is not earth plus divine action by itself but that continuing earthly source joined in the wording to image, likeness, and dominion.

A singular statement such as "I made it" normally attributes a work to its principal agent or efficient cause. It can be completely true without naming every material or subordinate contribution involved in the result. Genesis itself can speak this way in verse 27 when it says that God created humanity. But if a speaker chooses instead to include himself together with another participant as the grammatical subject of the productive action, singular "I" no longer expresses that inclusive subject; the subject must be plural, "we." The plural does not make the participants equal causes. It states the productive act from a wider point of view.

Why, then, does God not say "let us" whenever a created medium participates? Because the earlier productive commands are doing the prior work of identifying which created medium is being ordered to act. "Let the earth bring forth" and "Let the waters swarm" place the earth or waters themselves under the command and make their creaturely role explicit. A first-person plural at that point would no longer identify the medium in the same way. The continuation-plural therefore requires the first command first: the created participant must already be established before the speaker can include himself with that participant without naming it again.

Day Six supplies exactly that sequence. Verse 24 has already placed the earth inside the productive work. Verse 25 is the narrator's commentary on the first stage; it does not dismiss the earth, replace the material field, or introduce a new participant. When God speaks again, the

earth therefore does not need to be reintroduced. What is new in verse 26 is the speaker's inclusion in the grammatical subject of the next stage. Ordinary speech can work similarly: after telling someone, "Pick this up," a speaker can continue, "Let's move it over there," without naming that person again. The second instruction widens the subject of an already established action. The comparison shows how an already established participant can remain understood; it does not by itself prove that the other member in Genesis 1:26 is non-personal. That identification still comes from the Day-Six sequence. In Genesis, the movement is from "Let the earth bring forth" to "Let us make." The earth remains the continuing material and productive participant, while humanity is now specified by image, likeness, and dominion, what the earth cannot supply from itself. Verse 26 pluralizes participation; verse 27 singularizes creatorship.

Verse 27 then tells the reader how the plural making is to be understood. It does not say, "they created." Three times it says that God created. Genesis therefore keeps the plural making of verse 26 distinct from creatorship, which remains with God alone. That is exactly what a reading with a creaturely material participant requires: shared participation in the making does not become shared creatorship.

What this establishes. God's role as source does not suddenly change at verse 26; the Day-Six work does. Verse 24 first establishes the earth as the productive participant. Verse 26 then widens the subject of that continuing work as humanity is specified by image, likeness, and dominion. Because singular "I will make" wording was available, the chosen plural still calls for this local explanation.

WHY THIS MATTERS. A successful reading has to explain why the plural appears here and only here. What is constant about God cannot by itself explain a one-time grammatical change. The continuation reading ties that one-time change to a one-time Day-Six arrangement already visible in the text: the same earth remains the material source into a

second creature-making act, while humanity is now specified by image, likeness, and dominion. That is the local feature the plural tracks.

V. Apostolic and Historical Confirmation

The New Testament repeatedly engages Genesis 1–2 but never uses Genesis 1:26 as its proof text for divine plurality. Jesus cites the creation of male and female and speaks of the Creator in the singular. Paul develops the first man’s earthly makeup and the image of God without appealing to “Let us make” as a disclosure of conversation within God. John’s prologue reaches back to “In the beginning” and develops the creative Word, but does not ground that theology in the plural of verse 26. That repeated pattern matters: when New Testament writers discuss creation, the first human, image, and Christ, they build their arguments elsewhere. Genesis 1:26 does not function in their arguments as a disclosure of divine plurality.

Jesus’s use of the creation account is a useful example. In Matthew 19:4 he speaks of the one who “made them from the beginning” and then cites the male-and-female language of Genesis 1:27. He appeals directly to the human-creation text with singular Creator language and does not use the plural of verse 26 to identify the Creator.

John 1 is especially significant because it is the New Testament passage most explicitly concerned with the Word and creation. John reaches for “In the beginning,” for the Word’s relation to God, and for all things coming to be through the Word. He does not explain his creation theology by citing “Let us make.” The apostolic development of creation language does not make Genesis 1:26 carry the weight later dogmatic readings often place on it.

The historical evidence is important for a different reason: an address-to-earth or elements reading is not a modern invention. Jewish interpretation preserved multiple non-

Trinitarian explanations of the verse. Rabbinic traditions often used verse 27's singular "God created" as the controlling safeguard against plural creators.¹¹

The variety of Jewish readings is itself instructive. Some traditions appealed to angels, some to self-address, and some to the works or elements of creation. That diversity shows that the Hebrew plural did not compel one reading of God's inner life. The continuation-plural reading does not claim unanimous ancient support. Its historical claim is narrower: an earth/elements interpretation belongs to the actual history of interpretation and therefore deserves to be tested on textual grounds rather than dismissed as a modern idea projected backward into the text.

Ramban, also known as the medieval Jewish commentator Nachmanides, provides the strongest medieval precedent. He reads God as speaking to the earth regarding the making of humanity: the earth supplies the bodily material, while God supplies the higher contribution to human life. Joseph and David Kimhi also preserve a material-elements reading, but their discussion includes an angelic and spiritual strand as well. Ramban is therefore the cleaner precedent for the specific claim that human bodily makeup can remain inside "our image and our likeness." Ramban himself closes the explanation by saying that he found this plain reading in Rabbi Joseph Kimhi. His value here is precedent: a major Jewish interpreter found the earth/material reading natural enough in grammar and context to adopt it.¹²

¹¹The familiar Aristotelian framework distinguishes efficient, material, formal, and final causes: who brings something about, what it is made from, what gives it its defining form, and what end or purpose it serves. The instrumental label used here is a later scholastic refinement that helps distinguish the principal agent from a means employed by that agent. These categories are used only to keep unequal roles clear. See Aristotle, *Physics* 2.3; *Metaphysics* 5.2; Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Creation*, 102–25.

¹²The change in wording at humanity's creation is widely noticed. Nahum Sarna describes the movement from the earlier impersonal commands to a more personal resolve, and Garr likewise emphasizes the shift from third-person wording to first-person agency. See Garr, *In His Own Image*, 3, citing Sarna, *Genesis*, 11.

The earlier Kimhi formulation still matters. Oseka summarizes Joseph and David Kimhi as hearing God say, in effect, “Let us, namely, me and you,” meaning God and the material elements with the powers God had already given them, “carry it out.” On that account God uses what he has already made to fashion the human body while remaining the sole Maker. Their account is not identical to this paper’s reading, because they also use an angelic and spiritual line in explaining the image language. Its value here is narrower: it shows that created material and its powers could be understood as genuinely participating in the making while God remained the sole Maker. Ramban then provides the more direct precedent for including human bodily makeup within “our image and our likeness.”¹³

The ancient Aramaic translation tradition, usually called the Targums, points to the same basic fact: the plural itself does not name the other participant. Targum Onkelos preserves the plural without identifying that participant; Pseudo-Jonathan explicitly supplies angels. The difference is instructive. Because the Hebrew form itself does not name who else belongs to the “we,” interpreters still had to identify that participant from the surrounding text or from their broader reading. That is precisely why the local Genesis 1 context must be given priority.

Justin Martyr gives earlier evidence that such a reading circulated among Jewish interpreters in the second century. In *Dialogue with Trypho* 62 he explicitly answers teachers who said either that God spoke to himself or that God addressed the elements, including the earth, from which humanity was formed. Justin rejects those readings because he argues for a

¹³Genesis Rabbah 8 and Babylonian Sanhedrin 38b preserve early Jewish discussion of the plural and commonly protect monotheism by emphasizing the singular wording of verse 27. See H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, ad loc. For the broader history of Jewish debate about divine plurality, see Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, 108–13.

Christological interpretation, but his refutation demonstrates that the earth/elements reading was already a live interpretive option.¹⁴

Justin also shows how the dispute worked. He does not answer the earth/elements reading by showing that the Hebrew verb form makes such an address impossible. He answers it by giving a different theological identification of the participant from his wider Christological reading of Scripture. His argument against the earth/elements reading therefore confirms two facts at once: the reading was intelligible enough to require refutation, and the verb form itself did not settle who belonged to the “we.” The dispute turned on which participant the larger textual argument identified.¹⁵

The historical evidence establishes two facts: ancient readers disagreed about the other participant, and an earth/elements reading is genuinely old. History does not identify the local “we” by itself, but it shows that this reading is neither modern nor grammatically unimaginable.

What this contributes. The New Testament and historical witnesses support parts of the reading, but the local identity of the “we” still comes from Genesis 1–2.

VI. Rival Readings

A. Intra-Trinitarian Speech

The intra-Trinitarian reading first faces a local identification problem. Genesis 1 never introduces Father, Son, and Spirit as separate speakers or hearers within the scene. Every creative

¹⁴Nachmanides (Moses ben Nahman, Ramban), commenting on Genesis 1:26, explicitly connects the human body with the earth and says that he found this “plain meaning” in Rabbi Joseph Kimhi. See Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, Gen. 1:26, n. 206 in Chavel’s translation; Matthew Oseka, “History of the Jewish Interpretation of Genesis 1:26, 3:5, 3:22 in the Middle Ages,” 17–19.

¹⁵For the fuller medieval Jewish discussion of this earth/material reading and its relation to the image-language, see Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, Gen. 1:26; Oseka, “History,” 17–19.

speech is introduced by the same words, “and God said,” and the same singular speaker remains in view. The other speeches move outward toward creation. Reading verse 26 as an inward conversation therefore asks that repeated formula to change direction at the one verse where the chapter does not mark such a change.

That repeated phrase, “and God said,” makes the problem clearer. It introduces the commands before verse 26 and continues after it. The narrator does not change the speaker to “the Father,” identify a Son as hearer, or announce a council. The formula has already trained the reader to hear the one God speaking outward into creation. Later theology can be brought to the verse, but the repeated formula itself does not identify those participants.

Later biblical texts can inform theology, but they cannot do the local work of identifying who belongs to the “we” in this sentence. A participant drawn from later Genesis, Job, Isaiah, or the New Testament must still be shown to be present in this scene or to have replaced the participant Genesis 1 has already activated. The local question remains: who is actually in view when this particular utterance is spoken?

The subject also remains textually continuous. The same word translated “God” is the speaker at light, expanse, waters, earth, luminaries, animals, humanity, blessing, and provision. Verse 26 does not fragment the grammatical subject into several speakers. The plural occurs inside what the same singular speaker says. That makes the interpretive question “who is included with the speaker?” rather than “which divine person has suddenly become the speaker?”

The classical teaching that Father, Son, and Spirit act together in every outward work means that joint action is constant throughout Genesis 1. A constant feature of divine action cannot by itself explain why the grammar changes to “we” only once. Some Trinitarian readings

appeal to revelatory timing at humanity's creation, but the local scene marks no new divine participant, no new divine hearer, and no change in the joint divine action already claimed for the preceding works. That appeal therefore does not identify a contextual cause for the grammatical shift. The continuation reading does: it ties the one-time plural to a one-time local arrangement the chapter itself marks, where the same earth continues into a second creature-making act and humanity is newly specified by image, likeness, and dominion.

Waters swarm while God creates in verse 21, and earth brings forth while God makes in verse 25. "God plus a created medium" is therefore not enough by itself to explain verse 26. The difference is narrower: the same material source continues into another creature-making stage, no replacement is named, and the second product is defined by an image and representative rule that come from God. The once-only plural is tied to that once-only arrangement.

The Word-and-Hearer Burden. Scripture normally presents creation as occurring by or through God's Word. If the Son is the eternal Word through whom the creative act proceeds, that role remains in force at Genesis 1:26. The same intra-Trinitarian reading also treats the Son as a hearer of "Let us make." The local text therefore has to establish this added hearer role. Pointing to the plural cannot settle the question because the membership of the plural is exactly what is under dispute.

The question is simple. If the Son is the Word through whom the earlier creative acts proceed, that remains true at verse 26. If the Son is also the hearer at verse 26, what feature of Genesis 1 identifies him in that added role? The local narrative still has to make him the best reading of this speech.

The issue is what “and God said” is doing in this creation narrative. Throughout the chapter, the speech is directed toward the created order or places created realities under God’s command. The continuation-plural reading keeps that outward movement. An intra-divine hearer requires the text to mark a different kind of scene, and Genesis 1 does not do so.

Technical descriptions of personal distinction and undivided divine action do not identify a hearer in Genesis 1 or explain why the chapter changes to plural grammar only here. The local textual problem remains.

If Genesis 1:26 is offered as grammatical evidence for intra-divine plurality, the reading must explain why what is claimed about God remains constant while the plural appears once, and it must identify the hearer from the local scene. Genesis gives a more immediate explanation for the one-time change: the continuing earth and the widened Day-Six act.

B. Divine Council

The divine-council reading is stronger than majesty because councils are real biblical scenes. Isaiah 6, 1 Kings 22, Job 1–2, and Psalm 82 provide genuine council imagery. In those passages, however, the assembly is staged. Genesis 1 introduces no sons of God, angels, seraphim, or heavenly host before verse 26. A council reading must therefore supply its other participant from elsewhere rather than recover that participant from the local scene.¹⁶

Genuine council scenes show what staging looks like. First Kings 22 presents the LORD enthroned with the host of heaven standing around him before the consultation begins. Job 1–2 introduces the sons of God before the exchange. Isaiah 6 gives the throne scene and attendants.

¹⁶Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 62, reports and rejects interpretations in which God speaks to himself or to the elements from which humanity was formed. The value of the passage here is historical: it shows that an address-to-elements reading was already known in the second century. See also Oseka, “History,” 11–12.

Job 38:7 may place heavenly beings present when the earth's foundations were laid, but presence at creation is not the same as participation in Genesis 1:26. The local narrative gives no comparable council staging here. Whether heavenly beings existed during creation week is therefore a different question from whether Genesis 1 makes them participants in this speech. It does not.

It also faces a question about its role in the making. The earth has an identifiable role: it supplies material and has already been commanded to produce living things. The angels have no such role in Genesis 1 or Genesis 2:7. Verse 27 attributes creation to God. A council may be an audience in other passages; here Genesis gives it neither a place in the scene nor a role in the making.

C. Majesty and Self-Deliberation

The plural of majesty has little grammatical support as an explanation of Genesis 1:26. Hebrew can use nouns that look plural in form but refer to one individual, including the ordinary word translated "God" when it refers to Israel's God. But that fact does not establish a royal first-person plural verb used by God. Genesis 1 itself gives a control only three verses later: God says, "I have given you every plant," using first-person singular self-reference. If plural were simply a stylistic register of divine speech, its one-time appearance is difficult to explain. The singular of verse 29 does not count against the continuation-plural reading, because verse 29 is a provision speech to the completed humans, not another productive making in which the earth's material contribution must be carried into the grammatical subject.¹⁷

¹⁷Justin's response is theological rather than a demonstration that the Hebrew grammar makes an earth/elements reading impossible. That is why his discussion is relevant to the limited historical point made here. See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 62; Oseka, "History," 11–12.

Self-deliberation has been proposed by classical grammarians, but its problem is contextual. Genesis depicts divine self-reference elsewhere with singular forms, while verse 26 sustains the plural through “our image” and “our likeness.” More importantly, the Day-Six sequence has already established a productive participant and has not displaced it. A self-deliberative reading must therefore explain why the chapter abandons that outward productive relation for an unmarked inward plural at precisely this point. Justin’s report shows that self-address was an interpretation in circulation; it does not supply an independent Hebrew example in which one solitary speaker unquestionably uses a first-person plural for himself alone.

D. Can the Earth Be a Commanded Participant?

The objection that the earth cannot participate because it has no mind does not fit Genesis 1’s own way of speaking. God already commands the earth to bring forth vegetation and animals, and he commands the waters to swarm. Divine creative speech does not require a human-style conversational partner. The earth is a created medium acting under God’s effective word. The continuation-plural reading does not make the earth a rational counselor; it carries forward a role Genesis has already given it.

The human comparisons must therefore be kept within their proper limits. Even if the clearest human examples of “let us” involve other people, that shows how human speakers normally use first-person plural speech; it does not prove that personhood is built into the form itself. Human beings normally propose joint action with other human agents because those are the participants available within ordinary human experience. The grammar includes the speaker with another participant, but it does not by itself tell us that the other participant must be another rational mind or independent will. The surrounding scene still has to identify who belongs to the “we.” This paper does not claim an exact biblical parallel in which a first-person plural includes

a non-personal created medium; the warrant for that identification is the Day-Six discourse itself, not the human examples.

God does not need a different grammar for that to be true. The grammar remains ordinary; the speaker's relation to creation is different. Human speech is limited in what it can accomplish. We do not ordinarily command the earth to bring forth life and expect creation itself to fulfill the command. Genesis already depicts God doing exactly that: the earth brings forth vegetation and land animals, and the waters swarm under his effective word. Human examples therefore cannot be turned into a grammatical rule requiring every participant in divine creative speech to be another rational person. Genesis itself must identify the participant, and on Day Six the earth is already standing inside the productive action.

The rival readings face different local problems. Council and intra-Trinitarian readings propose participants that Genesis 1 does not stage. Majesty lacks a secure chapter-wide pattern for a royal verbal "we." Self-deliberation has been proposed, but it must explain why the established outward productive relation is abandoned without notice. The continuation-plural reading works with the speaker, the earth, and the productive relation already visible in the scene.

What the comparison shows. Each rival reading must supply something the local scene does not: an unstaged hearer or council, a secure majesty pattern, or a reason to replace the established outward relation with self-deliberation. The continuation reading begins with the speaker, the earth, and the productive relation already present in the Day-Six work.

VII. Conclusion

THE CASE IN ONE PASS. Genesis 1 presents one God as speaker, while the narrator repeatedly reports God's creative acts with singular agency. The chapter sometimes gives no created producer, but at other points it places the earth or waters inside the productive action. On Day Six the earth is the productive participant in verse 24; verse 25 reports the result but does not replace that participant; verse 26 then widens the wording to "Let us make." Genesis 2:7 confirms that the human body is materially from the ground, while verse 27 repeatedly reserves "created" for God. Later Scripture and historical interpretation support parts of this reading, but the identity of the continuing participant is argued from Genesis 1–2 itself.

Genesis 1:26 is often treated as though the plural arrives in an empty room. The chapter does not present it that way. Within the creation-week setting, Genesis has already established one God as the singular speaker. It has distinguished simple creative commands from commands that use created media, traced a chain of named sources through earth, waters, and earth again, and shown that a real change in the part of creation involved is normally named. Day Six then places the earth under command in verse 24, records the result in verse 25, and moves immediately to a second productive speech without naming a replacement or staging a new audience.

The grammatical shift fits that sequence. "Let us make" includes the speaker in a first-person plural act, while "our image" and "our likeness" keep the plural wording through the sentence. Grammar does not by itself name the other member of the "we"; the surrounding passage must tell us who else belongs to it. Genesis supplies the earth as the continuing material participant. Genesis 2:7 and the deliberate word-link between "human/man" and "ground" establish the bodily side of the relation: the human is materially from the ground because the ground's material becomes an actual part of the one human whole. Paul later supplies image-language for that inherited earthly side by speaking of "the image of the earthy." Verse 27 uses the singular verb "created" with God as subject and calls the finished human "his image,"

naming the whole according to its relation to God without canceling its earth-derived body. The earth therefore belongs to the making and materially supplies a real part of the human image-bearing whole without becoming another Creator or the source of God's image.

The explanation also accounts for the uniqueness of the form. God is the source throughout the chapter; on classical Trinitarian premises, Father, Son, and Spirit are likewise active throughout. Neither constant explains by itself why the grammar changes to "we" only once. Day Six, however, presents a local change the text actually marks: the same productive earth continues into a second act, while humanity is newly defined by image, likeness, and dominion. The earth supplies the material that becomes the human bearer and thus constitutes man's earthly makeup; God supplies the God-related image, likeness, and calling.

The wording therefore widens from "Let the earth bring forth" to "Let us make."

On this reading, Genesis 1:26 is not a disclosure of multiple divine minds or creators. It is the grammatical expression of one God carrying a previously established created medium into the making of one human image-bearing whole. The claim is not that the Hebrew word for "man" means "earth-image." It does not. The claim is about sources and whole-part composition: the body comes materially from the ground and remains part of the completed human, while the God-related likeness, representative role, calling, and dominion come from God in a different way. Genesis 3:19 confirms the continuing earth-derived basis of the body even as the organized body returns to dust. Paul later supplies explicit image-language for the inherited earthly side through "the image of the earthy," but Genesis itself supplies the earth-human material relation. The narrator can therefore say "our image" in the widened making and then say "his image" when naming the finished human according to the relation to God that defines its representative

identity. The sources differ in kind, but both are real within the one human whole. God alone remains Creator.

VIII. Questions for Trinitarians Who Use Genesis 1:26 as a Proof Text

Genesis 1:26 is often quoted as though the conclusion were already sitting inside the pronouns: God says, “Let us make man,” therefore one divine person must be speaking to other divine persons. But that conclusion assumes a great deal about what a divine person is, what divine speech is, what it means for one divine person to address another, and what classical Trinitarianism actually allows. If the verse is going to function as a Trinitarian proof text, those assumptions have to be stated and defended rather than hidden inside the word “us.”

This section therefore asks a prior question before asking who belongs to the plural: what must be true for the alleged conversation to exist at all? A real act of speech has an intentional source, meaningful content, an expression of that content, and a direction or target. If the claim is that one divine person speaks to another divine person, the interpretation must also explain what makes them genuinely distinct as speaker and hearer in the very act being described.

Classical Trinitarianism places strict limits on that explanation. It does not teach three divine minds, three independent divine wills, or three separate divine acts of creation. It teaches one divine intellect, one divine will, and one undivided outward divine operation. It also teaches an order of origin: the Father is personally from no one, while the Son is from the Father. Those commitments matter. A Trinitarian reading cannot borrow the ordinary picture of three human minds discussing a plan and then return to one intellect, one will, and one operation when the unity of God is defended.¹⁸

¹⁸For biblical divine-council scenes and their textual staging, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 39–46; E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*; and Ellen White, *Yahweh’s Council*. Garr, *In His Own Image*, 45–49, argues for attendant beings at Genesis 1:26. These works show that council scenes are a real biblical category; the local question in this paper is whether Genesis 1 actually stages one before verse 26.

The questions below do not ask the reader to master technical philosophy. Each group first explains the rule being tested in ordinary language. The point is simple: if a Trinitarian interpretation depends on a metaphysical feature that classical Trinitarianism itself denies, the interpretation cannot use that feature to prove the Trinity from Genesis 1:26. And if the classical doctrine is kept intact, the interpreter must show what positive reality remains to make the verse an interpersonal divine conversation.

A. The First Limit: One Divine Intellect, Not Three Divine Minds

An intellect is the power by which a rational subject knows. When classical Trinitarianism says there is one divine intellect, it is not saying that the Father has one divine mind, the Son has another, and the Spirit has a third, all perfectly agreeing. It means the divine act of knowing is one. The persons do not have three private streams of divine thought.

That immediately limits how “Let us make” can be pictured. The Father cannot be imagined as first forming an idea in one divine mind and then informing the Son of that idea in another divine mind. If the Son knows by the same divine intellect, the Son does not receive previously unknown divine information from the Father. The one divine knowledge is already fully divine knowledge.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. The Father and Son are still distinct persons who each possess the one divine intellect. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** That repeats the personal distinction, but it does not explain the alleged conversation. If the act of divine knowing is one, the interpretation still has to tell us what is communicated from one to the other, what is received, and what positive reality makes one the speaker and the other the hearer in this particular speech event.

- 1. Who exactly is speaking when Genesis says, “And God said”?** Is the speaker the Father personally, the whole Trinity collectively, or something else? The interpretation must identify the speaker before it can use the “us” to identify an audience.
- 2. Does an essence speak, or does a personal subject speak?** A divine nature explains what God is and the power proper to deity, but thought, intention, command, and speech still require a subject who owns the act. Who owns this particular act of speech?
- 3. If the Father is the speaker, what makes the Son a separate hearer?** The answer cannot stop at “because the Son is another person.” It must explain what in the one divine act of knowing makes the Son the recipient of the Father’s expressed intention.
- 4. Does the Son have a second divine intellect with which He receives the Father’s thought?** Classical Trinitarianism says no. If there is one divine intellect, what exactly is received from one divine knower by another?
- 5. If Father and Son know by the same divine act of knowing, what information passes between them?** A real informational exchange normally distinguishes what one knower expresses from what another knower receives. What is the corresponding distinction here if the divine cognition is numerically one?

B. The Second Limit: One Divine Will, Not Three Divine Decisions

The same restriction applies to willing. Classical Trinitarianism does not teach three divine wills that separately consider a proposal and then agree. The divine will is one. Therefore the familiar picture of the Father saying, in effect, “I propose that we make humanity,” followed by the Son and Spirit agreeing, cannot simply be assumed. That picture requires several acts of rational response unless the word “agreement” is being used in a very different sense.

This is especially important because the wording “Let us make” can sound, in ordinary human speech, like a group decision. But classical Trinitarianism cannot explain the verse by importing the ordinary human psychology of several decision makers. If the willing is one, then whatever the personal distinctions mean, they do not amount to three separate divine choices converging on a common plan.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. The persons will the same thing according to their distinct personal relations or modes. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** A distinct personal mode of the one willing is not a second act of consent, a second determination, or a second originating intention. If no second willing is added, the interpretation still has to explain why “Let us make” should be pictured as interpersonal deliberation rather than the expression of the one divine will.

6. Does the Son independently consider the proposal “Let us make man”? If yes, the reading appears to require a distinct rational deliberation. If no, what makes the scene a consultation rather than the expression of one divine intention?

7. Does the Son exercise another divine act of consent? If the Father proposes and the Son agrees by a second divine act of will, the one-will doctrine has been left behind. If there is no second act of consent, what is the interpersonal force of the proposal-and-agreement picture?

8. If there is one divine willing, what does “Let us” mean as a joint decision among persons? The ordinary human meaning of several people deciding together cannot be carried into God without explaining what corresponds to the several acts of decision.

9. What new intentional content does the Son contribute to the decision? If the Son adds no new information, no additional purpose, no second determination of will, and no new divine deliberation, what makes Him a second originating participant in the counsel?

10. If the Son contributes no additional divine intention, why should the verse be read as a conversation between two intentional sources? A distinction of persons must do more than be named. It must explain the work the interpretation assigns to the persons in this sentence.

C. The Third Limit: Relations of Origin Do Not Automatically Create Another Mind

Classical Trinitarianism normally distinguishes the Father and Son by relation of origin. The Father is personally from no one. The Son is eternally from the Father. That distinction is important within the system, but its explanatory job must be kept clear. “From the Father” answers a question about origin and relation. It does not by itself mean “has another divine intellect,” “has another divine will,” or “originates another act of divine thought.”

This article therefore draws a necessary distinction between being personally distinct and supplying the psychological features required by an interpersonal conversation. A relation may distinguish who is from whom while the act of knowing and willing remains one. If Genesis 1:26 is being used to prove literal divine dialogue, the interpreter must show how the relation of origin supplies a genuine speaker-hearer structure without quietly adding a second divine mind or will.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. A divine person is not reducible to a separate mind or will, so the persons can be really distinct without three divine consciousnesses. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** That answer removes the very three-mind picture often used to make “Let us make” sound like an obvious conversation. If the personal distinctions are not three divine psychologies, the interpreter must positively explain what “one divine person speaking to another” means when there is only one divine act of knowing and willing.

- 11. What does being “from the Father” add to this particular speech event?** Eternal generation may identify the Son as from the Father, but being from another does not itself create another thought, another decision, or another response to a proposal.
- 12. Can a relation of origin by itself hear a sentence?** Paternity and filiation describe personal order. What positive reality turns that order into a second recipient of divine speech?
- 13. If the Son personally possesses the one divine intellect, how does that one intellect create two sides of a conversation?** Saying that two persons possess the one cognition does not yet explain how one and the same cognition becomes communication from one to the other.
- 14. What makes the Son another first-person center in the alleged conversation?** If there is no distinct divine intellect, no distinct divine will, no distinct operation, and no independently originating intentional content, what supplies the kind of “otherness” required by the interpretation?
- 15. If a distinct divine center of consciousness is added to solve the problem, has the model changed?** A model with several divine consciousness-centers is no longer the same strict classical account that uses one intellect and one will to protect divine unity. The proof-text cannot move between those models as needed.

D. The Fourth Limit: One Outward Divine Operation, Not a Committee of Creators

Classical Trinitarianism also teaches that God’s outward works are undivided. Creation is not three separate divine acts, one performed by the Father, another by the Son, and another by the Spirit. It is one divine operation. Personal order may be described within that operation, but the creative act itself is not multiplied into three independent acts.

That matters directly for Genesis 1. If Father, Son, and Spirit are equally involved in every outward creative work, their presence is constant throughout the chapter. But the first-

person plural is not constant. It appears at verse 26. A constant metaphysical fact cannot by itself explain a one-time grammatical change. The Trinitarian reading therefore needs a verse-specific reason for the plural.

The pressure becomes even stronger when the claim is stated specifically in terms of divine speech. If the Trinitarian explanation is that “Let us make” reflects the personal structure of God’s own communicative act, then that structure should remain consistent wherever God speaks. The Father does not become source only at verse 26; the Son does not become the Word only at verse 26; and the Spirit does not become operative only at verse 26. On the classical account, the same one divine intellect, will, Word, Spirit, and undivided operation stand behind every divine fiat in the chapter. If the economic structure of divine speech is consistently from the Father, through the Word, and in the Spirit, then every “God said” already contains that same personal order. That stable structure cannot by itself explain why the earlier commands remain singular while this one command alone widens to “us.” If the plural is supposed to reveal the Trinity’s ordinary structure of divine speech, the reading must explain why that structure is not grammaticalized the same way whenever God speaks.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. One common divine work can be spoken of according to a particular person or relation, a move commonly called appropriation. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** Appropriation does not explain why the grammar changes only here. If the same one operation and the same personal relations are present at every creative command, the reader still needs a verse-specific reason for the one-time shift to “we.”

16. If the outward work of creation is one indivisible divine operation, what does each

person separately do in “Let us make”? The plural cannot mean three independent creative acts if inseparable operations is retained.

- 17. If every divine speech-act expresses the same one divine will through the same Word and Spirit, why do the other creative commands remain singular?** If “Let us make” is supposed to grammaticalize the Trinity’s ordinary structure of divine communication, consistency would require an explanation for why that same structure is not expressed as “we” or “us” whenever God speaks.
- 18. What changes in the divine communication at verse 26?** The Father remains the source, the Word remains the means of expression, the Spirit remains operative, and the divine intellect, will, power, and operation remain one. If nothing in that divine communicative structure changes, what accounts for the sudden change from singular speech to “us” at this one point?
- 19. Why does verse 27 immediately return to singular agency?** Verse 26 says “Let us make,” but the narrator reports that God created humanity. The text does not say “they created.”
- 20. Is the plural supposed to reveal several efficient creators?** If yes, that conflicts with the classical doctrine of one divine efficient operation. If no, what precise feature of the Trinity is the plural supposed to reveal, and why is that feature grammaticalized only here?

E. The Fifth Limit: The Word Is God’s Expression and Creative Means

The biblical pattern of creation also places God’s Word on the side of expression and means. God creates by His Word. John says all things came to be through the Word. Hebrews speaks of creation through the Son, and Paul distinguishes the Father as the one from whom all things are and Christ as the one through whom all things are. The repeated direction is source through expression or means toward the created effect.

This creates a special problem for the Trinitarian reading of Genesis 1:26. If the Son is the Word through whom the Father’s creative speech is expressed, then the Son is already

functioning on the expression side of the speech act. To say that the Father is also speaking to the Son makes the same Son both the Word through whom the speech goes out and the hearer toward whom that speech is directed.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. The Son can be the Word in one respect and the Son addressed by the Father in another respect. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** Naming two respects does not show that Genesis is using both roles in this one speech act. The narrator gives the same formula, “God said,” and never marks a switch in which the creative Word becomes the audience of the creative Word. That second role has to be demonstrated from the text, not supplied after the fact.

21. If the Son is the divine Word through whom God creates, what is His role in the act of speech? Is He the expression or means through which the creative intention proceeds, the audience receiving that intention, or both? The reading must explain the roles rather than merely name the Son.

22. How can the Son be both the Word through whom the Father speaks and the person to whom the Father speaks in the same speech act? The interpretation needs a positive account of how expression and audience are distinguished within this one sentence.

23. If the answer is “He is Word in one respect and Son in another,” where does Genesis mark that change of role? The text simply says “God said.” It never tells the reader that the Word who mediates creative speech has now become its recipient.

24. Does “God speaks” automatically mean that every divine person is personally the speaker? Shared deity does not by itself identify the personal source of a speech act. Moving from “God does this” to “therefore the Son personally originates this” requires an argument, not merely the statement that the Son is divine.

F. The Sixth Limit: The Father Is the Unoriginated Source of Divine Intention

The classical order of origin places a hard limit on the proof-text reading. The Father is personally from no one: He is the unbegotten source or “principle without principle.” The Son is Son precisely because He is eternally from the Father. In plain language, “originative” means source, not merely active. Eternal generation makes the Son’s fromness eternal; it does not make the Son another source from no source. Classical Trinitarianism therefore does not present Father and Son as two coordinate beginnings of divine thought, will, or action.

Now combine that source-order with the classical claims of one divine intellect and one divine will. The Son has no independent divine mind or will beside the Father from which an additional divine counsel could originate. He may be described as possessing, expressing, mediating, or manifesting the one divine act according to the Trinitarian model, but no second divine thought, purpose, or determination begins in the Son as another originative source. If a second origin of divine intention is added in order to make Genesis 1:26 a consultation, the model has changed.

Scripture repeatedly uses the same source-and-means pattern. First Corinthians 8:6 names the Father as the one from whom are all things and Jesus Christ as the one through whom are all things. Ephesians 1 begins with the God and Father of Jesus Christ and keeps that subject through choosing, predestining, purposing, making known, and working all things according to the counsel of His will. Christ is repeatedly the one in whom and through whom that purpose is realized, while the Spirit appears as the seal and operative completion. John 14:10 and 14:24 preserve the same source pattern in the incarnation: Jesus identifies the Father dwelling in Him as the one doing the works and identifies the word heard through Him as the Father’s. Source and means are not interchangeable roles.

COMMON TRINITARIAN REPLY. Because the divine action is common, every person truly performs the one work. **WHY THAT DOES NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** Common operation does not create another unoriginated source of intention. The issue is not whether the Son is active in the one divine work. The issue is whether any distinct divine thought, will, counsel, or purpose originates in the Son as Son so that He can function as a second party in a divine consultation. If none does, the Father-to-Son consultation picture has lost the distinct intentional acts that normally make consultation intelligible.

25. What originates in the Son as Son that could make Him a second source of counsel in

“Let us make”? If no distinct divine thought, will, purpose, or determination originates in Him, what originative role does He play in the alleged consultation? If such a distinct act does originate in Him, how is the one-intellect and one-will framework still being preserved?

26. Why does Paul distinguish the Father as the one from whom all things are and Christ as

the one through whom all things are if source and means are interchangeable? If they are not interchangeable, the creative role of the Word does not make the Word another origin of the divine intention.

27. Why does Ephesians 1 place counsel, purpose, will, choosing, and working with the

Father while Christ is repeatedly the in-whom and through-whom realization? Why does John 14 likewise identify the Father as the source of the words and works manifested in Christ? What warrants turning that ordered source-pattern into several divine subjects jointly originating the creative counsel of Genesis 1:26?

G. The Final Limit: The Interpretation Still Has to Come From Genesis

The metaphysical limits above force the interpretation back into the local text. A theological system cannot identify an unnamed participant merely because that participant exists

somewhere in the system. Genesis itself must give the reader a reason to identify the members of this plural in this particular sentence. Metaphysical labels cannot replace textual identification.

The local sequence matters. On Day Six God has just commanded the earth to bring forth living creatures. The narrator then reports the result. No new interlocutor is introduced before “Let us make.” The continuation reading therefore begins with a participant already present in the productive sequence. The Trinitarian reading asks the reader to replace that local participant with divine hearers who are not introduced in the scene.

The apostolic use of Genesis strengthens this problem. New Testament writers repeatedly return to creation, Adam, image, the Word, and Christ, yet they do not use Genesis 1:26 as their proof that several divine persons spoke together in creation. When Jesus cites the creation of humanity, He preserves singular Creator language. The apostolic pattern therefore gives no precedent for treating “Let us make” as an obvious disclosure of an intra-divine conversation.

28. What textual feature tells us that God’s speech has suddenly changed direction? Earlier creative speech moves outward toward the created order or places created things under God’s command. What in verse 26 marks a turn inward into divine conversation?

29. Where does Genesis introduce the Son or Spirit as an audience? They are not named as hearers, no intra-divine council is staged, and no response from them is recorded.

30. Why should an unmentioned divine hearer replace the participant already active in the Day-Six sequence? The earth has just been commanded to bring forth living creatures, and verse 25 reports that command’s result. No new participant is introduced before verse 26.

31. If ordinary human speech requires a conscious hearer, why impose that limitation on divine creative speech? Genesis has already shown God speaking effectively to light, waters,

earth, and living creation. The chapter itself establishes that divine command can enlist non-conscious creation without turning creation into another mind.

32. If humanity's uniqueness explains the plural, why does uniqueness specifically require an intra-divine conversation? Image, likeness, and dominion explain why humanity is different. They do not by themselves identify Father, Son, and Spirit as the participants in the "us."

33. What does each divine person distinctly contribute to "our image"? If the divine essence, knowledge, will, power, and operation are one, what Father-specific, Son-specific, and Spirit-specific content explains the plural possessive rather than merely being assumed from later doctrine?

34. Why does the New Testament never use Genesis 1:26 as its proof of divine personal plurality? The New Testament repeatedly uses Genesis 1 and 2 in creation and Christological arguments, yet it does not make "Let us make" its anchor for several divine persons.

35. When Jesus appeals to the creation of humanity, why does He preserve singular Creator language? His appeal to the creation account speaks of the one who made humanity rather than presenting humanity as the product of several divine creators.

36. After every later theological assumption is removed, what inside Genesis 1 identifies the members of "us" as Father, Son, and Spirit? This is the final test. Not what later theology says is possible, and not what a creed says God must be. What does the immediate creation narrative itself supply?

The Metaphysical Control Rule in One Paragraph

A Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:26 must remain inside the metaphysics it claims to defend. One divine intellect means the verse cannot be explained by three divine minds

exchanging thoughts. One divine will means it cannot be explained by three separate divine decisions reaching agreement. One undivided outward operation means it cannot be explained by three independent creative acts. Relations of origin distinguish Father from Son, but they do not by themselves create another act of thought, will, hearing, or response. The Father is the unoriginated personal source, while the Son is eternally from the Father; eternal generation does not turn the Son into another source without source. And if the Son is the Word through whom God creates, the interpretation must explain how that same Word becomes the audience of the speech. The Trinitarian proof-text claim therefore has to establish both the metaphysical reality of the alleged speaker-hearer relation and the textual identity of its participants. Genesis cannot be made to prove an interpersonal divine structure that has already been assumed in order to interpret the plural.

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