

**CUSTODIANS OF THE DIVINE UNITY:
A HISTORY OF THE JEWISH INTERPRETATION
OF נרדה AND ונבלה IN GENESIS 11:7**

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the classic Jewish exposition of the plural verbs in Genesis 11:7 which relate to the divine name in Genesis 11:6. The Jewish interpretation of these plural forms recorded in the Targumim, the Babylonian Talmud, the midrashim, and in the writings of ancient and mediaeval Jewish scholars is situated against the Christian reading prevalent in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, theological presuppositions underlying the Jewish and Christian exegeses are identified and studied.

PROLEGOMENA

The present paper examines the Jewish exposition of the plural forms נרדה and ונבלה in Genesis 11:7, situating it against the Christian exegesis prevalent in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Although these plural forms connected to the divine name seem inconspicuous, they acted as a catalyst for exegetical and theological discussions in both traditions. In the present study the history of the interpretation of נרדה and ונבלה in Genesis 11:7 is scrutinised according to the method propounded by Hans-Georg Gadamer (2010). This method is called the “history of the reception” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

In the Hebrew Bible the plural forms related to the divine name occur in several passages and appertain to verbs (Gen 1:26, 11:7, 20:13, 35:7; 2 Sam 7:23; Isa 41:21–26), to pronominal suffixes (Gen 1:26, 3:22; Isa 6:8, 41:21–26) and to adjectives or participles (Deut 4:7, 5:23/26; Joshua 24:19; 1 Sam 17:26; Isa 42:5, 54:5; Jer 10:10, 23:36; Ps 58:12, 149:2; Eccl 12:1; Job 35:10). In antiquity Philo of Alexandria¹

¹ Philo Alexandrinus (1826:12–14, 34–37; 1896:24–25; 1896:90, 134; 1897:261–264; 1898:124–126; 1898:161–163; 1898:37–38).

identified and examined the plural forms referring to the divine in Genesis 1:26, 3:22, and 11:7 relying solely on the Septuagint. On the other hand, the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 38b) detected and elucidated such grammatical forms in Genesis 1:26, 11:7, 35:7, Deuteronomy 4:7, and 2 Samuel 7:23 on the basis of the original text.

Jewish exegetes sought grammatical and literary interpretations of the plural forms in question which would be consistent with the concept of the absolute unity of God, whereas Christian theologians of the pre-Reformation era, who seldom knew any Hebrew, tended to adduce such plural forms, especially those which were reflected in the Septuagint or in the Vulgate, as proof of the presence of the Trinitarian concept within the Hebrew Bible (Justinus 1857:595–606, 617–620). Moreover, some mediaeval polemicists on the Christian side referred to the plural forms related to the divine which appeared only in the original Hebrew text of the Scripture. This implies that those Christian polemicists had some exposure to Hebrew or some knowledge thereof.

It is difficult to encapsulate a standard approach of Jewish literati to the plural grammatical forms related to the divine in the Tanak but certain strategies of interpretation might be identified and described. Encountering such plural forms, Jewish sages situated them against the singular forms connected to the divine in the preceding or following verses, and they perceived such plural forms as the plural of majesty. Those plural forms were also interpreted by Jewish expositors as referring to angels representing God or to the entire heavenly court (פמליא) surrounding God because the concept of the heavenly retinue and the concept of the divine courtroom, which were common in the ancient Middle East (Mermelstein and Holtz 2015), occurred in the Tanak and rose to prominence in the ancient Jewish literature (Targumim, midrashim, Talmudim, etc.).

Since most of the plural grammatical forms touching the divine referred to the generic name of God, the reflection on such forms was a part of the Jewish study of אלוהים and אלוה. From a grammatical and lexical perspective (Ringgren 1974:267–284) the noun אלוהים was plural in terms of parsing and it could denote not only the Lord but also human or angelic agent(s) or even idol(s), depending on the context.

Furthermore, irrespective of its meaning, אֱלֹהִים might be linked to singular or plural verbal, imperatival, adjectival, participial, or pronominal forms (Gesenius 1966:398–399, 428–429, 463), albeit אֱלֹהִים signifying the Lord occurred predominantly with singular forms. Jewish scholars² recognised that in the Scripture אֱלֹהִים was invested with complex shades of meaning, and they argued that in the case of the divine denotation of אֱלֹהִים, אֱלֹהִים itself as plural in terms of parsing and all plural forms (verbal, imperatival, adjectival, participial, or pronominal) related to אֱלֹהִים were meant to bear testimony to the divine glory. This way of amplifying a sense of majesty was, according to the Jewish literati, characteristic of Hebrew and applicable to human authority as well (Gesenius 1966:398–399, 428–429, 463). Nonetheless, in Genesis 11:7 the plural forms נִרְדָּה and וּנְבִלָה were connected not to the generic name of God but rather to God's very name (י) attested in Genesis 11:6. Therefore, both plural forms registered in Genesis 11:7 are noteworthy.

The historical-critical commentaries on the book of Genesis³ noticed the parallelism between Genesis 11:4 (הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה לָנוּ) and Genesis 11:7 (הִבֵּה נִרְדָּה וּנְבִלָה) which was of grammatical (*qal* imperfect plus the cohortative suffix ה) and literary (הִבֵּה) nature. Accordingly, people said “let us build for ourselves ...”, while God said “let us go down and confuse ...”. Modern commentators suggested that the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 might imply that God was accompanied by his heavenly court (von Rad 1961:145) or by his angels (Wenham 1998:240–241). On the other hand, these forms could also be a trace of primordial polytheism (von Rad 1961:145; Driver 1904:136).

The literature on the origin of Jewish⁴ and Christian⁵ Hebrew studies and on the patristic Trinitarian and Christological interpretation of the Tanak⁶ is immense;

² Albo (1870:25r–29v, 92v–95r); Ben Asher (1852:7r–7v); Ibn Ezra (1970–1971:4); Ben Daud Halevi (1852:24–26, 78–87, 104–118); Halevi (1905:198–212); Maimonides (1923:221–239; 1924:53–63); Nahmanides (1970–1971:6); Sforzo (1970–1971:2–4).

³ Keil (1878:142); Westermann (1984:552); Wenham (1998:240–241); Driver (1904:136); von Rad 1961:145.

⁴ Bacher (1882; 1892a; 1892b; 1895; 1897; 1905); Geiger (1870).

⁵ Bunte (1994); Burnett (2012); Friedman (1983); Hailperin (1963); Klepper (2007); Visscher (2014).

⁶ Lebreton (1919:507–512); Westermann (1984:147–148); Armstrong (1962).

however, the comparison of Jewish and Christian exegesis of the aforementioned plural forms prevalent in antiquity and in the Middle Ages still awaits further scrutiny, especially in light of the historical development of both traditions.

GENESIS 11:7: A STUDY OF THE TEXT AND OF ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS

The Masoretic Text of Genesis 11:7 was stable and consistent with the Samaritan Pentateuch (Blayne 1790:22). A complete version of the Masoretic apparatus concerning Genesis 11:7 was published in the first (Pratensis 1516–1517:[34]) and second (Ben Hayyim 1524–1525:[34]) edition of the Rabbinic Bible and it was also reprinted in the Lemberg Rabbinic Bible of 1869 in a more legible form (ספר בראשית 1869:81r). The Masorah magna (מסורה גדולה) on Genesis 11:7 made reference to Genesis 43:4 (נרדה) and to 1 Samuel 14:36 (נרדה) where the same form of the verb (i.e., נרדה) occurred.

The *Targum Onqelos* (Berliner 1884:10) to Genesis 11:7 translated both plural Hebrew forms by means of the corresponding Aramaic forms which were plural. The same was true of the *Samaritan Targum* (Brüll 1875:11). The Palestinian (Western) Targum to the Pentateuch known as the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (Walton 1657:19) interpreted Genesis 11:7 in a way which obviated the difficulty of the plural forms in question. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* read that the Lord said to seventy angels facing him “let us go down and confuse ...”. Accordingly, the plural forms indicate that the Lord was to be accompanied by the angels as he carried out his agenda.

While translating Genesis 11:7, the Septuagint (Swete 1887:17) adjusted simple Hebrew syntax to standard Greek syntax. Therefore, in place of two verbs, the LXX employed the main verb (συγχέωμεν) modified by the circumstantial (adverbial) participle (καταβάντες). Thus, the LXX stated: “While going down, let us confuse ...”. Consequently, the plural form of the verb related to the Lord, who was mentioned in Genesis 11:6, was preserved by the Septuagint. In Aquila’s revision (Field 1875:28) the main verb was changed from συγχέωμεν to ἀναμίξωμεν but the plural number was retained.

The Vulgate (Tischendorf and Heyse 1873:9) upheld both plural forms attested in the Hebrew original of Genesis 11:7 and followed literally the Hebrew syntax. Similarly, Syriac (Walton 1653:42), Coptic (Wilkins 1731:24), and Persian (Walton 1657:19) translations rendered both plural forms as plural, while the Arabic version (Walton 1653:43) resorted to the singular form. *Graecus Venetus* (Gebhardt 1875:19), which was a late mediaeval Jewish translation of the Pentateuch and of several other biblical books into vernacular Greek and which was independent of the Septuagint, kept both plural forms and imitated the Hebrew syntax, leading to the interpretation “let us go down, let us confuse” (καταβῶμεν συγχέωμεν).

THE JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 11:7

Genesis 11:7 was examined in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 38b) along with other passages containing plural grammatical forms related to the divine. The Talmud proposed two strategies of interpretation, treating them as complementary. First, the plural forms evidenced in Genesis 11:7 were juxtaposed with the singular form in Genesis 11:5. Thus, the same Lord, to whom Genesis 11:7 assigned the words “let us go down (נרדה) and let us confuse (ונבלה)”, was said to come down in Genesis 11:5: “And the Lord went down (וירד)”. Secondly, for the talmudic sages, it was arguable that such plural forms could be explained by the fact that in the Scripture God was pictured as the one who did nothing without consulting his heavenly court (פמליא).

Although the tractate *Megillah* (*Meg.* 9a) and the minor tractate *Soferim* look alike and refer to the same passages (*videlicet* Genesis 1:26–27, 11:7), those documents ought to be interpreted separately. While discussing the legitimacy of translating the Hebrew Bible into foreign languages, the *Megillah* observed that the Septuagint translators were able to capture an accurate meaning of the challenging passages which contained the plural grammatical forms concerning the divinity (i.e., Genesis 1:26–27, 11:7). The difficulty is that following a legend of the LXX origin, the *Megillah* states that in Genesis 11:7 those translators “wrote” (וכתבו) for king Ptolemy “let me go down (ארדה) and let me confuse (ואבלה)”. Since no extant ancient Greek

version of the Tanak contains such singular forms, it appears that the *Megillah* treated of the translators' proper understanding of those loci, emphasising that they realised and responded to a challenge posed by the Hebrew original. Certainly, the *Megillah* never suggested that the Hebrew text of Genesis 11:7 was altered or rectified.

The tractate *Soferim* belongs to the minor tractates which are appended to the Talmud but considered less authoritative than the major tractates. This tractate alleged that the Septuagint translators altered (שינו) the text, replacing in Genesis 11:7 נרדה with ארדה and ונבלה with ואבלה. The same assertion was registered in the grand *Midrash* on the book of Genesis (Theodor and Albeck 1912:359–360). From a contemporary perspective, this statement is inexplicable because both the LXX and the Masoretic Text testified for the plural forms in Genesis 11:7. Notwithstanding unanswered questions mentioned above, it is evident that the talmudic sages tried to elucidate the plural forms connected to the divine and they opted for such interpretations of those forms which would not undermine the concept of the absolute unity of God.

The *Great Midrash* (מדרש הגדול) observed that in Genesis 11:7 the plural forms might imply that God was consulting his court or his angels (Schechter 1902:185). On the other hand, the *Midrash* טוב טולקא Genesis 11:7 (Buber 1880:54) contended that the plural number could be used to convey a sense of authority and lordship. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber 1885:27r–27v) juxtaposed the people's declaration in Genesis 11:4 (“let us build for ourselves”) with God's announcement from Genesis 11:7 (“let us go down and confuse”) by which the Lord communicated “I will go down (ארד)”.

The *Pirqe* attributed to Rabbi Eliezer (פרקי רבי אליעזר 1874:44–45) adopted the interpretation enshrined in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (Walton 1657:19) and maintained that in Genesis 11:7 the Lord said to seventy angels surrounding him “let us go down and confuse ...”, inviting them to join him in going down and in confusing the language. The *Pirqe* attempted to interpret those plural forms within the limits of the plural נרדה (Gen 11:7) and the singular וירד (Gen 11:5). According to the *Pirqe*, God did not go down alone because the text of Genesis 11:7 read נרדה, not ארדה, whereas God really went down in view of וירד from Genesis 11:5. Thus, the

proposition that God went down along with his angels allowed the *Pirque* to expound the plural forms within the parameters of the narrative.

Analysing the plural forms in Genesis 11:7, Philo of Alexandria (1897:261–262) relied on the LXX and associated them with the plural forms related to the divine found in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22. Again, Philo’s exegesis did not offer a simple and definitive explanation for why such plural forms occurred and what was meant by them. Rather, Philo affirmed that the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 might indicate that the Lord was talking to his co-workers (συνεργοῖς) which, in his opinion, did not have to endanger the concept of one God who alone was worthy of all honour and who alone was the maker and ruler of the universe.

Commenting upon Genesis 11:7, Saadia Gaon (1959–1960:12) asserted that both plural forms actually functioned as singular, while in the context of that verse נרדה could be equated with the singular *hip’il* form of ירד which, in his opinion, denoted “I will send” (אשלח). In his commentary on Genesis 11:3–7, Rashi (Berliner 1905:21) wrote that in the Tanak הבה expressed the idea of pulling oneself together, that is, of (self-)exhortation. For Rashi, הבה, which occurred in both Genesis 11:3 and Genesis 11:7, communicated: “let us prepare ourselves, let us work together, let us deliberate together, let us cope [with this] together”. As far as Genesis 11:7 was concerned, Rashi taught that the plural number was caused by the fact that due to his humility the Lord had a consultation with his heavenly court. From Rashi’s point of view, God’s humble utterance “let us go down and confuse” (הבה נרדה ונבלה) from Genesis 11:7 was the divine response to people’s boasting “let us build for ourselves” (הבה נבנה לנו) from Genesis 11:4 which was highlighted by the same literary and grammatical features of both statements.

Expounding Genesis 11:7, Abraham ibn Ezra (1970–1971:137) admitted that the Lord said to the angels “let us go down and confuse” which, in his opinion, explained the plural form of both verbs.⁷ Moreover, Abraham ibn Ezra gave an account of certain grammarians who parsed ונבלה as *nip’al* (either perfect 3 sg. or participle). For

⁷ The interpretation espoused by Abraham ibn Ezra was later epitomised by Samuel ibn Seneh Zarza (1559:12r) and by Isaac Karo (1877:31).

Abraham ibn Ezra, וּנְבִלָה was a plural form of the verb in the active⁸ voice (i.e., in *qal*) in the same way as נַעֲשֶׂה in Genesis 1:26. Commenting upon Genesis 1:26, Abraham ibn Ezra (1970–1971:26–30) recalled that according to some expositors, נַעֲשֶׂה in Genesis 1:26 was a *nip'al* participle like נַעֲשֶׂה in Nehemiah 5:18. Although the same vocalised form (הַנְעִשֵׂ) could be parsed either as *qal* imperfect (“Let us make [man]”) or as *nip'al* participle (“Let [man] be made”), Abraham ibn Ezra preferred the former interpretation (i.e., *qal* imperfect) in light of the context.

In the case of Genesis 11:7, Abraham ibn Ezra reasoned that if וּנְבִלָה was *nip'al* (“let us go down and their language will be confused”), the language would be confused solely through the action of going down. Such a proposition was unacceptable to Abraham ibn Ezra who argued that talking to the angels, the Lord announced two actions (“to go down” and “to confuse”), while Genesis 11:9 read that the Lord indeed confused the language (ׁׁ בַּלֵּל). Thus, the action of confusing the language could not be treated as identical with the action of going down but rather the action of confusing was a follow-up to the action of going down. In other words, the Lord with his angels went down in order to confuse the language.

In his commentary on Genesis 11:3–7 David Kimhi (1842:44r–44v) ascertained that in Hebrew הִבֵּה functioned as a word of appeal or deliberation which expressed the idea of taking counsel with others or with oneself (self-deliberation) and of combining forces with the intention of doing something. Therefore, הִבֵּה should be viewed as a word of appeal, not as a word of command. Kimhi supposed that in the Hebrew Bible הִבֵּה usually entailed a plural form of the verb with the cohortative suffix ה.⁹ As a matter of fact, הִבֵּה occurred in Genesis (11:3, 11:4, 11:7, 29:21, 30:1, 38:16, 47:15), Exodus (1:10), Judges (1:15), 1 Samuel (14:41), and Psalms (60:13, 108:13). In Genesis 11:3–7 and in Exodus 1:10 הִבֵּה was used in the same function and it was followed by a plural form of the verb with the cohortative ה. Explaining the plural forms in Genesis 11:7, Kimhi taught that the Lord was speaking to the angels on

⁸ Abraham ibn Ezra depicted it as הפעיל which in this instance simply conveyed a sense of being active instead of denoting *hiphil* as a grammatical category.

⁹ For lack of a proper grammatical terminology Kimhi called the cohortative suffix the “mark of the feminine gender” on the basis that most feminine nouns in Hebrew ended with ה.

the stipulation that God did not seek their advice or consent but rather employed and commissioned them as his agents. Consequently, the angels were engaged in conversation because they were supposed to carry out God's decree, yet they, as God's creatures, were not allowed to tell their creator what to do.

Processing נרדה in Genesis 11:7, Meyuhas ben Elijah (1909:33) clarified that in the context of that passage the plural נרדה was equivalent to the singular ארדה ("let me go down") granted that in the Tanak the plural number was characteristic of the solemn statements pertinent to the divine. Thus, in his opinion, נרדה was an example of the plural of majesty as evidenced by Genesis 1:26 and 3:22, not an indication that the Lord consulted anyone. Similarly, Aaron ben Joseph of Constantinople (1835:35v) explicated נרדה as God's response to the people's arrogant words "let us build for ourselves" from Genesis 11:4 and pointed to Genesis 11:5 which confirmed that the Lord truly went down (וירד).

In his commentary on Genesis 11:7 Aaron ben Elijah (1866:41r) professed that the plural נרדה communicated that the Lord was accompanied by celestial beings. Moreover, Aaron ben Elijah discussed whether ונבלה ought to be parsed as *qal* imperfect or *nip'al* (perfect 3 sg. or participle).

Expounding the plural forms in Genesis 11:7, Isaac Abravanel (1963–1964:180–181) taught that those forms were legitimate and intelligible because according to Genesis 11:5, the Lord went down, while in Genesis 11:7 the Lord said "let us ..." to his heavenly court, thus inviting members thereof to join him in going down with the intention of confusing the language. Consequently, Genesis 11:5 affirmed that the Lord went down, whereas Genesis 11:7 added that the Lord was accompanied by his saints, namely, by his heavenly retinue. Thus, in Abravanel's opinion, the statement that the Lord went down (Gen 11:5) and the Lord's utterance "let us ..." (Gen 11:7) should be viewed not as conflicting but rather as complementary within the framework of the same narrative. Furthermore, Abravanel summarised the interpretation offered in the *Pirque* attributed to Rabbi Eliezer (פרקי רבי אליעזר 1874:44–45). Finally, commenting upon Genesis 11:7, Elijah Mizrahi (1706:16r) studied both plural forms and weighed up arguments for parsing ונבלה either as *qal* or as *nip'al*. He also

contended that according to the talmudic lore (*Soferim*), these forms should be interpreted as singular in terms of their signification.

THE PATRISTIC AND MEDIAEVAL CHRISTIAN READING OF GENESIS 11:7

The Trinitarian interpretation of the plural forms found in Genesis 11:7 was widespread among the ancient Greek, Oriental and Latin church fathers. In the fourth century Ephrem the Syrian (1737:58–59; 1743:214) explicated the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 in Trinitarian terms as if the Father, the Son and the Spirit, viewed as one God, said to one another “let us ...”.

Similarly, Didymus the Blind (1858:347–348) maintained that these plural forms revealed the doctrine of the Trinity which, in his opinion, resembled the mature patristic concept of the Trinity. Thus, for Didymus, the aforementioned plural forms communicated that three persons shared the same indivisible divinity and enjoyed equal divine status. The same reasoning was presented in the treatise attributed to Gregory of Nyssa (1863:197–198).

Cyril of Alexandria (1863:803–806), on the one hand, advocated the Trinitarian exposition of the plural forms in Genesis 11:7; on the other hand, he described and disapproved of another interpretation according to which the Lord was accompanied and assisted by his angels¹⁰ while going down to confuse the language. The interpretation rejected by Cyril conformed to the prevailing Jewish reading of Genesis 11:7 and it was denounced by him for undermining God’s sovereignty and for precluding the Trinitarian exposition of that verse. From Cyril’s perspective, the plural forms of the verbs proved beyond doubt that the divine action of going down was undertaken by God, to wit, by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in unison. Consequently, these three, thought of as one God, encouraged one another by saying “let us ...”.

¹⁰ Cyril referred to God’s angels and to the other “rational powers” (δυνάμεισι λογικαῖς) by which all celestial or intangible beings were plausibly meant.

Expounding Genesis 11:7, Procopius of Gaza (1865:311–314) avowed that the words “let us ...” were said by God, the Father, to God, the Son, and to God, the Spirit. Furthermore, Procopius dismissed the proposition that these words could be said by the Lord to his angels, alleging that angels had no power to elicit or to confuse any language because they were God’s creatures, not the very creator of the universe. For Procopius, the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 could be adduced as proof of the Trinitarian concept to the same extent as those in Genesis 1:26 and they were to be regarded as incontrovertible evidence of the Trinitarian idea being present in the Hebrew Bible.

Theodoret of Cyrus (1864:845–848) wrote that Genesis 11:7 unveiled the doctrine of the Trinity with the same accuracy as the “council fathers” who espoused the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. In his opinion, the fact that the Father did not say “let me go down” and did not command the Son or the Spirit to “go down” but rather that God, as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, said “let us ...”, demonstrated the equal dignity and divinity of all three persons of the Trinity to the same extent as Genesis 1:26. The same argumentation was adopted and advanced by other Byzantine literati¹¹ and thus entered the mainstream of Eastern (i.e., Orthodox and Oriental) Christian theology.

The Latin church fathers often put a Christological or Trinitarian construction upon the plural forms in Genesis 11:7. Novatian (1886:945–946) explicated Genesis 11:7 in Christological terms, arguing that God, the Father, could not go down because he had no flesh and thus could not move. In his opinion, angels could not undertake this task because they had no authority over human beings. Therefore, Novatian concluded that Jesus, who was viewed by him as God in flesh, must go down in order to confuse the language on the Father’s behalf. Consequently, the phrase “let us ...” would illustrate a dialogue between the Father and the Son. The same argumentation was presented later by Ambrose (1845:668).

Nonetheless, Augustine (1845a:552; 1845b:483–484; 1902:2246) proposed a more balanced explanation of Genesis 11:7, realising that in light of the context it was

¹¹ As exemplified by Cosmas Indicopleustes (1864:309–312), Athanasius of Corinth (1863:1021–1022) and Euthymius Zigabenus (1865:261–262).

conceivable that the Lord said to the angels as to his agents “let us ...”. Thus, in Augustine’s opinion, since the Lord as the incorporeal one could not move anywhere on his own, he sent the angels to represent him and to go down on his behalf in order to confuse the language. Accordingly, the Lord went down, as stated in Genesis 11:5, in the sense that his angels went down in his place to carry out his divine orders. For Augustine, the angels’ descent was truly the Lord’s descent because the Lord was acting through his angels who ministered in his stead. Therefore, the Lord did not command the angels “go down ...” but rather spoke of his action and of their representation as of the joint venture (“let us ...”). Although Augustine hesitated to embrace the Trinitarian exposition of the plural forms in Genesis 11:7, he ardently interpreted Genesis 1:26 in Trinitarian terms. Consequently, Augustine claimed that the plural form of the verb (“let us make”) and the plural forms of the possessive pronouns¹² (“our image” and “our likeness”) in Genesis 1:26 ought to be situated against the singular form of the verb (“God created”) and of the possessive pronoun (“in his image”) recorded in Genesis 1:27. From this juxtaposition Augustine drew an inference that in Genesis 1:26 God could not speak to his angels, who could not join him in the work of creation and in whose image nothing could be created, but rather spoke as God in his plurality, that is, as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Subsequently, Augustine’s reasoning was epitomised in the commentary on the book of Genesis which was attributed to Eucherius (1846:940), and it was adopted by Gregory the Great (1902:559), Freulf (1864:939–940), Bruno Signiensis (1854:186), and Bede the Venerable (1862a:124–126), albeit that in another work attributed to Bede (1862b:299) the Trinitarian explanation was recorded as well. Commenting upon Genesis 11:7, Nicolaus de Lyra (1545:59r) admitted that the plural forms of the verbs implied that the Lord was speaking to the angels as to his agents who were commissioned to carry out the divine judgement by confusing the language.

Fulgentius (1847:500) referred to Genesis 11:7 among other passages taken out of the Hebrew Bible which, in his opinion, were supposed to vindicate the presence of the concept of the Trinity in the Tanak. Furthermore, Heterius and Beatus (1862:916)

¹² To be precise, in Hebrew those forms were the plural forms of the pronominal suffixes serving as the possessive pronouns.

acknowledged that God, the Father, really went down to confuse the language but while saying “let us ...”, the Father was speaking to the Son and to the Spirit. Examining Genesis 11:7, Alcuin (1863:533) argued the plurality within the Godhead from the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 and the unity of the Godhead from the singular form in Genesis 11:5. The same strategy of interpretation was embraced by Rabanus Maurus (1864:530) in his commentary on Genesis 11:7. On the other hand, Angelomus of Luxeuil (1881:167) recapitulated both interpretations by quoting Gregory the Great (1902:559) and by repeating Alcuin’s (1863:533) Trinitarian reading. Later, Denis the Carthusian (1548:121–122) did likewise.

The Trinitarian interpretation of the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 was fortified by many mediaeval theologians of the Western church. For example, it was endorsed in the pseudo-Isidorian decretals (Isidorus Mercator 1880:214) and defended by Remigius Altissiodorensis (1884:81), Peter Damian (1853:42–43), Rupertus Tuitiensis (1854:366), Peter Abelard (1855a:999; 1855b:1128; 1855c:1707), and Hugo Eterianus (1855:250).

CONCLUSION

The Jewish tradition responded to a challenge of the plural grammatical forms connected to the divine, resorting to its own exegetical legacy. Undoubtedly, such plural forms were challenging in theological and exegetical terms. Thus, the Jewish interpretation of the plural verbs in Genesis 11:7 relied on the Targumim which were treasured in Judaism as authoritative translations and elucidations of Scripture. As far as the Pentateuch was concerned, the *Targum Onqelos* rose to prominence and was held in high esteem but at times, certain threads from the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, which was regarded as less authoritative and which was less widespread, penetrated into the mainstream of the Jewish tradition. This was true of the angelic reference in the rendition of Genesis 11:7 which occurred in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* but was missing from the *Targum Onqelos*.

The plural forms in Genesis 11:7 were explicated by the Jewish exegetes in light of the narrative and in view of the other passages in which, from a Jewish perspective, the plural number was used to highlight God's majesty. The Jewish reading of the Tanak, including Genesis 11:7, was based on the supposition that the Lord was absolutely one. Therefore, no Jewish interpretation of the Scripture could accept any assertion which could undermine this bedrock of Jewish faith and life.

The ancient and mediaeval Christian exposition of the plural verbs in Genesis 11:7 tended to put a trinitarian or christological construction on those forms though two approaches might be identified. The Greek church fathers enforced the trinitarian reading as the only legitimate interpretation, while among the Latin church fathers the angelic explanation was tolerated. For Augustine, the proposition, that the plural verbs in Genesis 11:7 indicated that the Lord was speaking to the angels, was admissible and some mediaeval exegetes of Western church adopted this reading. Although in the Middle Ages certain Western Christian theologians included both interpretations, it appears that the angelic explanation of the plural forms in Genesis 11:7 was put on the defensive and was gradually side-lined.

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