

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

WHY DOES THE QURAN SOMETIMES USE THE PLURAL?

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**MY VIEWS ARE EXPRESSED AS A RESPONSE TO AN EMAIL QUESTION RECEIVED WITH REGARDS
THE ABOVE SUBJECT**

Question:

In the Quran and in a lot of places. the plural form is used to denote God. For example in the following verse.

2:34 We said to the angels, "Submit to Adam," so they submitted except for Iblis, he refused and became arrogant, and became of the ingrates.

I have found two explanations:

- 1) The most used explanation by Muslims is by using plural God is using plural of respect or expressing his royal authority
- 2) The plural is used to denote other entities involved to accomplish the task in context. i.e. angels.

Please let me know your view on this point.

[Minor editing to correct spelling errors etc of the original]

Response:

There has always been much discussion on this not only by Jewish scholars but also by Muslim scholars. This is not something which is exclusive to the Arabic Quran, but something also noted in the Hebrew Bible.

I personally think that it is a mixture of a few things. The most important thing is to note (apart from God being ONE, alone in His majesty and His **'authority'**) is when the change of singular / plural / third person is occurring. At times there is a strong indication that despite it being God's command alone, (He being alone in His authority), other entities such as the revelatory spirit (Gibrael) and the angels (with their God ordained decrees) are also being included in the plurality as His appointed agents. Please note the mention of 'mala-i-l-ala' (37:8) which is recognition of an **exalted assembly**. At other times it appears that the address is in the form of Plural Majestatis (as in royalty).

For more intimacy with His creation (Worship Me, I am your Lord etc), warnings, wrath, worship, the singular is used. Sometimes it appears it is the angel's speech that is captured (37:164-166). There is also much use of grammatical shifts and changes of speech from one form to another which is quite an important feature in 'iltifat' in 'balagha' (Rhetoric made in Arabic).

However, the decree is God's alone, **He is the sole 'authority'** and He is One. Whatever form the speech takes, the sole **'authority'** is God.

That is the key.

A fuller analysis would run into a thesis and no doubt, there is already much literature and scholarship on this. However, I have given you my own humble personal perspective.

I think we sometimes are inclined to compartmentalise by saying something is either A, B or C and forget that at times that it can be a mixture of many things. It all depends on the context and the purpose of the narrative.

Just my humble views.

I hope it helps.

Your brother,
Joseph.

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