

What Does the Shema Really Mean?

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“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 has been a cause of considerable debate for both Jewish and Christian theologians over the centuries. While often and rightly considered to be the “watchword” of Biblical faith, theologians and commentators have often examined the *Shema* and made it into something that it was not originally intended to be. This portion of Scripture was originally given to the Ancient Israelites in the Book of Deuteronomy or *Devarim*, also known in Jewish circles as *Mishneh Torah*, meaning “repetition of the Torah,” as they are getting ready to enter into the Promised Land. This admonition—and indeed the entire scope of Deuteronomy 6—is not a debate about the makeup or nature of God, but rather His primacy in the life of His people and our need to follow and obey Him. When the *Shema* was originally given by God to the people of Israel, it was not intended to be given in the context of a debate about what He is, but rather who He is in the hearts and minds of the Israelites.

However, as Biblical history will show, by the period of Second Temple Judaism the *Shema* became the primary proof text for Israel’s monotheistic religion. The statement “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” became the prime basis of all of the liturgical prayers and praises that were developed during this period, and carry well into Judaism to this day. As the *Shema* became the theological basis for Biblical monotheism, and indeed this was repeated by Yeshua as the first of all the commandments (Mark 12:29-30), it is important in our analysis of the Godhead to understand what the *Shema* really means. As it pertains to the nature of our Creator, is the Godhead made manifest in an absolute “one” or in a plural “one”?

Obedience: The Primary Emphasis of the Shema

Before we can go any further, it is proper that we have a handle on the meaning of the word *Shema*. Deuteronomy 6:4 has become known as the *Shema* as it opens up with the words *Shema Yisrael* (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל) or “Hear, O Israel!” All proper analyses of the *Shema* will take this into account *first*, before making this into an analysis of the Godhead, as the primary emphasis of the *Shema* is for God’s people to *hear Him*.

The Hebrew verb *shama* (שָׁמַע) has a much wider variance of meanings than does the English word “hear.” *CHALOT* lists a number of possible usages for *shama* throughout the Hebrew Bible, including: “hear,” “listen to,” “heed,” “hear=understand,” “be heard,” and “be(come) obedient.”¹ *BDB* indicates that it can mean “hear with attention, interest, listen to.”² Any proper handling of the *Shema* must be demonstrated by the willingness of the listener to respond to the words of the Lord. He tells us how He wants us to respond to Him in Deuteronomy 6:5-9:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

The *Shema* requires five things of the Israelites:

1. To love God to the fullest, with one’s complete heart, soul, and resources

¹ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1988), pp 376-377.

² Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 1033.

2. To take to heart the Word of God and His commandments
3. To teach the Word of God and speak about His commandments to one's children during daily affairs
4. To bind the Word of God as a sign upon one's arm and between his eyes
5. To affix the Word of God to the doorposts of the house and upon the gates

The primary emphasis of the *Shema* is not a debate about the makeup of our Creator. It is, rather, His desire for us to make Him first in our lives and for us to obey Him. We evidence our obedience for Him by keeping His commandments. This interpretation is recognized by both Jewish and Christian scholars alike. Jack S. Deere comments that “To love the LORD means to choose Him for an intimate relationship and obey His commands.”³ J.H. Hertz repeats the same sentiment in *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, remarking, “The love of God is the distinctive mark of His true worshippers. The worshipper, as he declares the Unity of God, thereby lovingly and unconditionally surrenders his mind and heart to God’s holy will.”⁴

Any and all proper handling of the *Shema* will recognize the centrality of the Torah in the life of the Believer. This is because as followers of the God of Israel, He desires for us to follow His commandments so that we might be blessed. Our making Him first in our lives—and indeed *hearing* what He has to say—is evidenced by our obedience.

I make important note of this because a fair number of those who deny the Divinity of Yeshua and the plurality of the Godhead are liberal Christian theologians who also believe that the Torah was abolished. Somehow, they feel that it behooves themselves to properly tell us what “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” really means, when denying the *primary emphasis* of the *Shema*, which is obedience to the God of Israel and observance of His commandments. In fact, some of the works that I have seen by these liberal Christians advocate Pauline-only doctrine, inasmuch that the epistles of Paul are the only applicable Scriptures for Believers today. Any analysis from these Christians must be viewed with extreme suspicion by the Messianic community. These people, when telling us that God is an absolute one, would at the same time condemn Messianics for speaking about the commandments of the Torah, wrapping *tefillin*, or having a *mezuzah* on one’s front door—practices that are directly derived from the *Shema*.

Most Jewish analysis of the *Shema*, in contrast, does recognize the centrality of the Torah and the primary emphasis that a follower of the God of Israel should be obeying Him. However, it is notable that much of the Jewish teaching on the *Shema* that exists today is post-Messianic, and dates from well after the life of Yeshua. Much of this has been compiled in reaction to some Christian abuses of the Trinity, which have the Son contradicting the Father, the Spirit contradicting the Father and the Son, and so on. As with all things, our analysis of the *Shema* should seek a prime Scriptural foundation and emphasis, rather than prime conformity with either the Jewish Sages or Church Fathers.

“One” in the Tanach

The Hebrew phrase *ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad* (אֲדֹנָי יְהוֹה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוֹה אֶחָד) has been the cause of considerable controversy when it comes to the Godhead and understanding whether or not it is an absolute one or a composite one. “ADONAI our Elohim is one” has been interpreted a variety of ways over the centuries, all of which pertain to a proper understanding of what “one” means in Biblical terms.

From the Creation week, it is often debated whether or not Elohim is an absolute one or a composite one: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26). Christian commentators have widely viewed this as a conversation that God is having with Himself,

³ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 274.

⁴ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 770.

indicative of a plural Godhead. Jewish commentators, in contrast, have largely interpreted the “Us” as a celestial host representing both the Supreme Being and His angels. This second interpretation can run into a potential problem as Genesis 1:27 says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” The subject of this sentence is God or Elohim, and so the “Us” of v. 26 must be God. From the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, clues are given regarding the plurality of God. This is reemphasized time and time again by the usage of the Hebrew title *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) or “God,” which is plural.

As it relates to “ADONAI our Elohim is one,” there is considerable debate in both Judaism and Christianity as to what the word “one” means. Hebrew, unlike English, has several terms for “one.” The Hebrew word used in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 is *echad* (אֶחָד); it is to be differentiated from the word *yachid* (יָחִיד). As with both words, context will determine their proper usage. But nevertheless, *echad* has a **different** connotation of “one” than *yachid* has.

A notable usage of *echad* appears in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” This text speaks of a husband and wife becoming *basar echad* (בְּשַׂר אֶחָד). This is two people, or two separate entities, becoming one. In a proper marriage, there is a union between a man and a woman; they are one of purpose and one of substance, but there is co-existence of the two.

Echad representing the unity of a group of people is used in Genesis 11:6, speaking of humanity before the Tower of Babel:

“The LORD said, ‘Behold, they are **one people**, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’”

In Numbers 14:15, the assembly of the Israelites is referred to “as one man”:

“Now if You slay this people as **one man**, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say.”

Both references to *am echad* (עַם אֶחָד) and to *ish echad* (אִישׁ אֶחָד) are to composite groups of people as “one.” When Americans recite the Pledge of Allegiance and say “one people under God,” we are referring to a composite, united group, no different than what the Ancient Israelites were to be.

Another notable use seen for *echad* is for “first,” as in Genesis 8:13 it is used as a reference to the first of the month:

“Now it came about in the six hundred and first year, **in the first month**, on the first of the month, the water was dried up from the earth. Then Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the surface of the ground was dried up.”

The Hebrew for “on the first of the month” (NPJS) is *b'echad l'chodesh* (בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ). *Echad*, in addition to being used as representing “one” as in a group, can be used for speaking of something that is first, or *primary*.

Yachid, in contrast, is most often used to refer to something that is singular, or solitary. In Genesis 22:2, God tells Abraham to take his only son to be sacrificed:

“He said, ‘Take now your son, **your only** son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.’”

The Hebrew *yachidcha* (יָחִידְךָ) is rendered as “your only,” representing the fact that Isaac and he alone is the only son of promise given to Abraham.

In Psalm 68:6, *yachid* is used to refer to the solitary:

“God makes a home for the **lonely**; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.”

The term used for “the solitary” (ATS) is *yachidim* (יָחִידִים).

As we contemplate the Godhead, and what “ADONAI our Elohim is one” really means, we are forced to conclude that the understanding of Him being *echad*, or one, cannot be in an absolute singular sense, but rather in the plural, oneness of purpose sense. Multiple components or manifestations of Him co-exist, yet are unified similar to how a husband and wife are to be

unified. God is also *echad* in the sense that He is to be primary in our lives and there is to be no other than He. This understanding of *echad* is what is emphasized in *TWOT*:

“In the famous Shema of Deut. 6:4...the question of diversity within unity has theological implications. Some scholars have felt that, though ‘one’ is singular, the usage of the word allows for the doctrine of the Trinity. While it is true that this doctrine is foreshadowed in the OT, the verse concentrates on the fact that there is one God and that Israel owes its exclusive loyalty to him.”⁵

While this commentary describes the plurality of Elohim as the “Trinity,” nevertheless the fact of the matter is clear. *Echad* first and foremost means that the God of Israel was to be the prime emphasis in the life of the Israelites. Perhaps it is for this reason that the NJPS renders Deuteronomy 6:4 as “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”

A common refutation given against the plurality of God is sometimes directed from Zechariah 14:9. We are told that in the Last Days “the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one” (RSV). We are told that since God’s name will be “one,” that this cannot possibly be representative of a plural Godhead. But in understanding that *echad* has a wider array of applications than does the English numeral “1,” we can understand what this text is really saying. Author Michael Brown comments in his book *Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two* that this “is a prophecy of all peoples turning to Yahweh, forsaking their idols and false religions and worshipping him alone. It tells us nothing about the nature of his oneness. All it says is that he, the one true God, will be worshipped by all.”⁶

In the Hebrew Scriptures, *echad* has the dual-meaning of both representing “one” in a composite sense, and representing “one” in a primary sense. Our God is “one” in that He is to be primary in our lives, and He is one in that He manifests Himself by a plurality of entities (i.e., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but yet these entities are all unified similar to how a husband and wife are “one flesh.”

If the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 were truly speaking of Elohim as an absolute unity, then the word *yachid* would have been used instead of *echad* for “one.” Interestingly enough, as Brown comments, this “idea [was] expressed most clearly in the twelfth century by Moses Maimonides, who asserted that the Jewish people must believe that God is *yachid*, an ‘only’ one...the view of Maimonides is reactionary and also goes beyond what is stated in the Scriptures.”⁷ The Bible does not say that the Lord is *yachid*, meaning an absolute, solitary one, but rather that He is *echad*—a primary and composite one.

“One” in the Apostolic Scriptures

A proper understanding of “one” in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures and the nature of God must be understood in light of its Tanach background in the *Shema*. The Hebrew *ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad* was rendered in the Greek Septuagint as *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin* (κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν), “The Lord our God is one Lord” (LXE). The Greek term corresponding to the Hebrew *echad* is *heis* (εἷς). *Heis* has a wider array of connotations than does *echad*, as *echad* in the Septuagint can be rendered as *heis*, but not always. *Heis* is notably used, however, in Yeshua’s repetition of the *Shema* in Mark 12:29:

“Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD.’”

This quotation follows the Septuagint rendering of *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin*.

A notable instance where *heis* is used in reference to Yeshua and the Father is John 10:30 where He says “I and the Father are one.” Modern Hebrew New Testaments render *heis* as *echad*.⁸

⁵ Herbert Wolf, “אחד,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:30.

⁶ Michael L. Brown, *Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume Two: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ תורה נביאים כתובים והברית החדשה (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1991), NT p 132.

A notable instance in the LXX, where we have previously examined how *echad* is used, is Genesis 8:13, *b'echad l'chodesh*, “on the first of the month,” which is rendered as *tou prōtou mēnos* (τοῦ πρώτου μηνός), “in the first month.” The word *prōtos* (πρῶτος) or “first” is employed instead.

In Psalm 68:6, where *yachid* is used to refer to “the solitary” (NJPS) or “the lonely,” the LXX uses *monotropos* (μονότροπος), “the solitary” (LXE). If God in the *Shema* were to be considered an absolute one, rather than using the words *heis*, or even *prōtos* in the Greek, *monos* (μόνος) would have been used instead. However, what the Septuagint Rabbis did in rendering *ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad* as *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin*, “The Lord our God is one Lord,” is that they were affirming that the God of Israel is the one and only God. While the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 does pertain to the Godhead, its primary meaning is clear: **the supremacy of the Lord over all other objects of worship.**

Whenever *heis* is used, context determines its proper usage. However, we can to an extent carry the meaning of *echad* over into *heis* where *heis* is employed in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Heis*, just like *echad*, is used of speaking of a composite one and not an absolute one.

The Need for Multiple Witnesses

In the Torah we are told that a person cannot be executed without two or three witnesses being present to have witnessed the crime:

“If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death at the evidence of witnesses, but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness” (Numbers 35:30).

“On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness” (Deuteronomy 17:6).

The Torah further states in Deuteronomy 19:15 that all matters are to be confirmed by two or three witnesses:

“A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.”

This principle of having multiple witnesses carries over into the Apostolic Scriptures, reemphasized by both Yeshua and the Apostle Paul:

“But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED” (Matthew 18:16).

“This is the third time I am coming to you. EVERY FACT IS TO BE CONFIRMED BY THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES” (2 Corinthians 13:1).

“Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses” (1 Timothy 5:19).

It is a plain attestation of both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures that there must be multiple witnesses for anything to be made a fact or be confirmed. Multiple witnesses are required if someone guilty of a high crime is to be executed, they are required in a court case where a matter is to be decided, and they are required in the *ekklēsia* when disputes are being resolved. The same precedent holds true when agreements are made among parties.

In Hebrews 6:13, we are told that “when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself.” In other words, when the Lord made His eternal covenant with Abraham to multiply his seed exponentially, He could only swear it by Himself and be its guarantor. How is this possible if there must be *multiple witnesses* for a matter to be confirmed? How can God’s covenant be confirmed if the only witness to it is God Himself?

The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:19-20, “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only one*.”

In commenting on the full giving of “the legal part of the *Torah*” (CJB) by God Himself, Paul makes the remark that God was the Mediator who delivered the *Torah* to the people. He also says that “an intermediary implies more than one” (RSV), and then says that *Theos heis estin* (θεὸς εἷς ἐστιν) or “God is one.” Modern Hebrew New Testaments have *Elohim hu echad* (אֱלֹהִים הוּא־אֶחָד)

(אלהים הוּא).⁹ If God is the Mediator, but is one—yet it is required by the Torah and Apostolic Scriptures for there to be multiple witnesses for matters to be confirmed—God can only be a witness to Himself if He is a plurality. If not, then God cannot be a Mediator, could not swear to Abraham, and has broken His own Word.

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 has two primary connotations. It is first a declaration of Biblical monotheism, that the Lord is the One True God and that He is the prime focus of the lives of the people of Israel. It is secondly a declaration of God's plurality and that there can co-exist multiple manifestations, all being part of the same one God, yet having a oneness of purpose and substance. In this unity, **which is something that our finite human brains are incapable of fully comprehending**, the revealed manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit never contradict themselves. Thus, the Son in His Earthly ministry never contradicts the Father's words or His ethos, and the Spirit never contradicts either the Son or the Father.

There has been some abuse with the *Shema* in recent days, as there are Messianics who have adopted some Jewish interpretations of it, which are largely reactionary to some Christian abuses of a rigid "Trinitarian" Godhead where Father, Son, and Spirit contradict one another left and right. However, the *Shema* does allow for a plurality of Elohim, as opposed to an absolute oneness, but allows for it in a much more "fluidic" way than the "Trinity" doctrine often depicts it among various Christian traditions. But first and foremost, the *Shema* is an admonition to make the Lord first in our lives, and to obey Him. So, any liberal Christian interpretation of the *Shema*, that denies the relevance of the commandments of the Torah for the Believer, can be easily put aside—because in order to truly follow the *Shema* you **must** obey God.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

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⁹ Ibid., 241.