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DEUTERONOMY 6:4 AND THE TRINITY: HOW CAN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS BOTH EMBRACE THE *ECHAD* OF THE SHEMA?

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Shortly after Jesus' death, a famous rabbi was born: Akiva ben Joseph (AD 40–135). According to the Talmud (a central text of stricter Rabbinic Judaism), this famous rabbi, while dying under torture, uttered the Hebrew word *echad*—the final word of Deuteronomy 6:4—as he breathed his last breath. He immediately received divine approval when a heavenly voice announced, “Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed with the word *echad*.”¹

Enduring Significance. There is no doubt that Deuteronomy 6:4 has held pride of place in Jewish writings and culture throughout history. Named for its first word, the “Shema”² figured predominantly in both public and private worship settings well before the written Talmud. Even to this day, many observant Jews confess and recite the Shema twice a day during morning and evening prayers. Their children are taught it as soon as they learn to speak. They wear it on their hands and foreheads via tefillin and phylacteries. It is written on doorposts of private dwellings (*mezuzah*). All these types of pedagogical tools help them experience these great words in daily, visible forms.

It should come as no surprise, then, to see Jesus, the New Testament writers, and subsequent Christian communities embracing and using this core Jewish creed when articulating their belief in God. For example, Jesus affirms the Shema in Mark 12:29–31, Paul refers to it in 1 Corinthians 8:6, and James alludes to it when addressing his diaspora communities (2:19).

Yet despite the Shema's enduring significance in both Jewish and Christian traditions, its unusual syntax has made any precise translation next to impossible. Some Jewish critics go so far as to say that the Shema precludes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Choices. Deuteronomy 6:4 contains only six simple Hebrew words. Yet in this simplicity lies the complexity. Anyone familiar with the Hebrew language knows that it lacks a present-tense verb meaning "is" to link a subject and predicate. Thus the translator must supply the verb(s), while determining the best English word(s) to convey the meaning. "It is not their meaning or function," states Vladimir Orel, "but their combination that makes the words of the Shema individually transparent but obscure when put together."³

Focusing solely on the last four words, here are ten well-known grammatical, exegetical, and text-critical options available:

1. Yahweh our God is one
2. Our God is one Yahweh
3. Yahweh our God is the Unique
4. Yahweh our God is one Yahweh
5. Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one
6. Our one God is Yahweh, Yahweh
7. Yahweh is our God; Yahweh alone
8. Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one
9. Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is Unique
10. [the term] Yahweh our God [means] Yahweh on its own

This explains why most English Bibles footnote alternative translations. To be sure, some of these options are more creative and exploratory than many readers would feel comfortable embracing. Yet without a clearer indication from the text, all the choices remain open. So how has all this affected the understanding of this verse — especially the last word — throughout history?

History. “No statement in the Hebrew Bible,” writes S. Dean McBride, “has provoked more discussion with less agreement than this one.”⁴ The central question for our purposes is in what sense we should understand the final Hebrew word *echad*. Does it express an absolute singular oneness? Does it denote a composite unity? Does it signify something else? Let’s look at just a few common interpretations that have been offered throughout history.

One explanation is that it is a confession of monotheism; that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a single deity. One major problem with this understanding, however, is that we cannot simply speak about “ancient Jewish monotheism,” since there were many varieties of monotheism.⁵ The kind of monotheism often described in Second Temple Judaism, for instance, was a belief that God was the creator—not, like some of the monotheistic debates today, that Israel’s God was one rather than many or that He was a unipersonal entity instead of a tripersonal entity.⁶ Moreover, it would be pointless to affirm that a person with a proper name was “one,” as if they were normally more or less than one. For these and other reasons, we can confidently say the text was not originally written to address later monotheistic debates.

Another explanation is that it is cryptic on purpose. By leaving it simple and vague, it provides a suitable response to any number of theological controversies, not just one. History does seem replete with examples of its inherent adaptability. Jeffrey Tigay, who wrote the Jewish Publication Society’s Torah commentary on Deuteronomy, provides several helpful illustrations. He writes, “In the face of polytheism it meant that the Divine is one, not many; in the face of Zoroastrian and Gnostic dualism it meant one, not two; in the face of Christian Trinitarianism it meant one, not three; and in the face of atheism, one and not none.”⁷ But without getting into all the details, suffice it to say that these types of illustrations only explain what some Jews at certain points in history used it for, and not what the original writer meant or his initial audience understood it to mean. Therefore, this argument, albeit creative, does not solve the debate.

A third explanation is that the Shema is describing Yahweh as a composite unity, such as elsewhere in the Old Testament where the word *echad* is used to describe *one* cluster of grapes (Num. 13:23) or a man and woman becoming *one* flesh (Gen. 2:24). One obvious problem, though, is that the Shema lacks such additional qualifiers, such as the grapes or people found in these examples (cf. John 17:11). In addition, *echad* rarely ever carries this meaning. Thus, while this interpretation should not automatically be ruled out, it is next to impossible to prove. Therefore, we should not overstate what this verse was originally meant to deliver.

While some of these arguments are more convincing than others, a consensus is not yet in sight. As the debates go back and forth, what are we to do? Wait for a consensus? Arbitrarily pick one?

Assessment. During his keynote address at the fifty-year anniversary celebration of the commissioning of the NIV, Douglas Moo stated this major principle of modern linguistics: “Meaning is found not in individual words, as vital as they are, but in larger clusters: phrases, clauses, sentences, discourses. To be sure, there is a lively debate among linguists over the degree to which individual words carry meaning. But there is general agreement over the basic principle that words in themselves are not the final arbiters of meaning.”⁸ How, then, can we tell which definition is operative when studying a verse such as this, where *echad* alone is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament? The short answer is context, which is always determinative.

Turning back to Deuteronomy 6:4, the overall context of this verse is the covenant between Yahweh and His people. In fact, starting here and running at least through 8:20, the phrases “Yahweh your God” and “Yahweh our God” are used at least once in every two verses. By emphasizing and describing the proper relationship between Yahweh and His covenant people, the communal nature of the Shema is meant to anchor a united Israelite community (cf. Jer. 32:38–41; Zech. 14:9). At the very least, then, the Shema is describing a covenant relationship between one God and one community.

In the New Testament, perhaps no text is as clear as 1 Corinthians 8:6 regarding the Shema and the New Covenant. As in the Hebrew text, no verbs are supplied in the Greek. As in Deuteronomy 6:4, no further explanation, qualification, or justification is given. Yet the major shock in the New Testament is that when Paul defines “one,” it includes Jesus (cf. Rom. 3:29–30). Connecting this with the phrase in verse 4, “no God but one,” it seems that Paul is pointing to the unity of one God—which includes the crucified and risen Messiah—as a means of grounding the unity of one covenant community.

The Shema in both testaments, then, is about a covenant relationship with one God inside of one covenant community. This individual and corporate cry of allegiance naturally brings about one focus, one purpose, one hope, and one calling. Taken this way, there is no contradiction between the one God in the Old Testament and the one God in the New Testament, though our understanding of the inner nature of this one God is clearer, sharper, and more precise in light of the New Testament.

Devotion. If *echad* were our final word to a dying world in the twenty-first century, as it was for Rabbi Akiva in the first century, what should we hope it evokes? The deep reality of this verse and word ought to evoke a deep response of devotion. Surrounded by all sorts of temptations, it is a prayer of loyalty. The covenant implications, both then and now, beg the question, “Who or what has the greatest influence over your life?” Is it money, success, status, peers, job, career, family, country, or race? Is it some compulsion, craving, fear, doubt, or concern? Or is it, as it was for Moses, Jesus, Paul, and many others in the Holy Scriptures, the one unique God of the Shema, and Him alone?

There is no room for divided loyalties here. To pray the Shema is to embrace the yoke of God’s covenant (e.g. Acts 15:10–11), and affirm the call to be His covenant people. It is not concerned with an analysis of the inner nature of the one God (although it has relevance to such a study), but rather the outward relationship between Him and His people. Thus, it is still a central, decisive, and powerful prayer, which includes Jesus at its very core. —*Brian J. Wright*

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NOTES

- 1 Babylonian Talmud, or Berakhot, jBer. 61b, available at http://halakhah.com/berakoth/berakoth_61.html. Cf. the Palestinian Talmud jBer. 9:14b.
- 2 I follow the common acceptance that the Shema is 6:4–9, and not 6:4 alone or the more expansive forms found in 11:13–21 (with the curses and blessings) and Numbers 15:37–41 (regarding tassels on the corners of prayer shawls).
- 3 “The Words on the Doorpost,” *ZAW* 109, 4 (1997): 614.
- 4 “The Yoke of the Kingdom,” *Interpretation* 27 (1993): 291.
- 5 Among others, see Larry W. Hurtado, “‘Ancient Jewish Monotheism’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” in *JAJ* 4, 3 (2013): 379–400
- 6 Cf. other Second Temple Judaism writings such as Psalms of Solomon 18:10; 4 Ezra 6:55–9; Joseph and Aseneth 11:7–11; Judith 9:11–14.
- 7 Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 440.

- 8 Douglas Moo, *We Still Don't Get It: Evangelicals and Bible Translation Fifty Years after James Barr* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 9.