

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5

“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.”

In the debate over whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is a created being, or is actually God Incarnated in human flesh, are some firm opinions involving the Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Shema*. All sides can be easily agreed how this exclaim was originally given to Ancient Israel, so that the population would demonstrate exclusive loyalty to the LORD, and that they would love and obey Him, especially as they were entering into a Promised Land occupied by Canaanites which would tempt them to abandon their God, or at least cheat on Him with other gods and goddesses. Israel was to demonstrate its exclusive loyalty and veneration to YHWH.⁹⁶

Deuteronomy 6:4 declares, *Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad* (אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד), “Hearken O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One!” (Fox). From a translation standpoint, there is some discussion on whether the term *echad* (אֶחָד), customarily rendered as “one” in most versions, should be left more literally as “one,” or should instead be translated as “alone” to express Israel’s exclusive allegiance to its God (cf. Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 6:14). The NRSV and NJPS versions render Deuteronomy 6:4 as such: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”⁹⁷ Certainly in later theological and spiritual reflection in Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism, the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema* would serve as a definite foundation to denounce polytheism (cf. Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Kings 8:60; Isaiah 45:5; 46:9). Deuteronomy 4:35, 39 had emphasized, after all, “To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him [*ein od mil’vado, אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ*]...Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other [*ein ‘od, אֵין עוֹד*].”

There are contemporary Jewish examiners of the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema*, who in reflecting upon the term *echad* (אֶחָד), have issued observations and made conclusions, which some of us would not automatically expect to be the initial thoughts expressed. Many of us, who are familiar with the debate over whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is a created being or God Incarnate, are conditioned to think of the *Shema* exclusively as a statement affirming monotheism—and then in relation to such monotheism, we draw conclusions as to what the actual place of the Messiah is. The *ArtScroll Chumash*, however, emphasizes that “HASHEM is our God, HASHEM is the One and Only” (ATS), is a statement affirming God’s unity of character, which stands in stark contrast to ancient pagans who believed in gods or goddesses of love, war, etc. It also stresses the limitations that human beings have in trying to comprehend the Eternal:

“We perceive God in many ways—He is kind, angry, merciful, wise, judgmental—and these apparently contradictory manifestations convinced some ancient and medieval philosophers that there must be many gods, one of mercy, one of judgment, and so on. But the Torah says that Hashem is the *One and Only*—there is an inner harmony for all that He does, though human intelligence cannot comprehend what it is.”⁹⁸

Working from the NJPS rendering of “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone,” Tigay concludes that the point of Deuteronomy 6:4 is to not, actually, affirm monotheism, but instead Israel’s exclusive loyalty to God:

“The present translation indicates that the verse is not a declaration of monotheism, meaning that there is only one God. That point was made in 4:35 and 39, which state that ‘YHVH alone is

⁹⁶ If necessary, do consult the previous analysis provided in this publication, “What Does the Shema Really Mean?”

⁹⁷ The Moffat Bible also has, “Listen, Israel: ‘the Eternal, the Eternal alone, is our God.’”

⁹⁸ Scherman, *Chumash*, 973.

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God.’ The present verse, by adding the word ‘our,’ focuses on the way Israel is to apply that truth: though other peoples worship various beings and things they consider divine...Israel is to recognize YHVH alone.”⁹⁹

Tigay supports his conclusion by making reference to Zechariah 14:9 and 13:2:

“This understanding of the Shema as describing a relationship with God, rather than His nature, has the support of Zechariah 14:9. According to Zechariah, what is now true of Israel will, in the future, be true of all humanity: ‘the LORD will be king over the earth; on that day *the LORD shall be one* and His name one,’ meaning that for all of humanity, YHVH and His name will stand alone, unrivaled; as Zechariah says earlier, ‘I will erase the very names of the idols from the land; they shall not be uttered any more’ (13:2). YHVH will be recognized exclusively and His name alone will be invoked in prayer and oaths. In other words, Deuteronomy and Zechariah both use ‘one’ in the sense of ‘alone,’ ‘exclusively.’”¹⁰⁰

It is hardly unreasonable to take *Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad*, in the direction of it emphasizing Ancient Israel’s required, exclusive loyalty and devotion to God. The Christian NET Bible, rendering Deuteronomy 6:4 as, “Listen, Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!”, notes the options before the interpreter, and also concurs that Israel’s exclusive loyalty and devotion to God is what was originally intended:

“One option is to translate: ‘The LORD is our God, the LORD alone’ (cf. NAB, NRSV, NLT). This would be an affirmation that the Lord was the sole object of their devotion. This interpretation finds support from the appeals to loyalty that follow (vv. 5, 14). (2) Another option is to translate: ‘The LORD is our God, the LORD is unique.’ In this case the text would be affirming the people’s allegiance to the Lord, as well as the Lord’s superiority to all other gods. It would also imply that he is the only one worthy of their worship. Support for this view comes from parallel texts such as Deut 7:9 and 10:17, as well as the use of ‘one’ in Song 6:8–9, where the starstruck lover declares that his beloved is unique (literally, ‘one,’ that is, ‘one of a kind’) when compared to all other women.”¹⁰¹

While for Ancient Israel preparing to enter into the Promised Land, *Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad*, would serve as a definitive credo for the population to be loyal to its God, loving and serving Him—later application of Deuteronomy 6:4 would see it applied as an affirmation of monotheism. The common Tanach conclusion that idols were considered to be dumb or mute (1 Kings 18:26-29; Habakkuk 2:19-18; Psalm 115:4-8), and that those beings which the world at large considers to be gods are really not gods, is rooted in the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema* of there being only one God. Isaiah 45:4a declares, “I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God [zulati ein elohim, זולתי אין אלהים].” Those who affirm loyalty and fidelity to the Scriptures of Israel, Jews and Christians, will both assert that they are monotheists, and that they both believe that there is only one God.

There is, without dispute, historical disagreement between Judaism and Christianity, not just over the Messiahship of Yeshua of Nazareth, but with how the latter has viewed the relationship of Yeshua (Jesus) to the One God of the Tanach Scriptures. While not always successfully, in affirming the Divinity and uncreated nature of Yeshua, the latter has taken the One God of Israel to possess an internal plurality of oneness, principally demonstrated the via the manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Quite contrary to this, the former has taken “the LORD is one” in an absolute and solitary sense, in that there is a single God, internally monolithic, with no

⁹⁹ Tigay, 76.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *The NET Bible, New English Translation*, 376.

quantitative internal plurality. In his *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, Hertz labels this as “pure monotheism”:

“The belief that God is made up of several personalities, such as the Christian belief in the Trinity, is a departure from the pure conception of the Unity of God. Israel has throughout the ages rejected everything that marred or obscured the conception of pure monotheism it had given the world, and rather than abandon that pure monotheism, rather than admit any weakening of it, Jews were prepared to wander, to suffer, to die.”¹⁰²

Notwithstanding some of the complicated history between the institutions of the Jewish Synagogue and Christian Church, Hertz draws the further conclusion,

“[T]he Shema excludes *the trinity* of the Christian creed as a violation of the Unity of God. Trinitarianism has at times been indistinguishable from tritheism; *i.e.* the belief in three separate gods. To this were added later cults of the Virgin and the saints, all of them quite incompatible with pure monotheism.”¹⁰³

Hertz is proper to mention how throughout much of Christian history, the belief in the Trinity—that the One God manifested as Father, Son, and Spirit—can be indistinguishable from tritheism. The Roman Catholic tradition lamentably has associated with it a great deal of veneration of the Virgin Mary and other saints, which Protestants would properly abhor and reject. Still, even in some Protestant practice—but more frequently in popular thought—a Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit is sometimes thought to be tritheism. While many of today’s evangelical Christian Protestants would make the effort to stand alongside of historical Judaism, and its affirmation of there being only one God, **how much conscious effort has been made on the part of contemporary Believers to recognize the relationship of Father and Son in terms of, and in concert with, the Deuteronomy 6:4 Shema?** To a Jewish examiner like Hertz, a plural Godhead is incompatible with what he considers to be “pure monotheism.” But, to the Hebrew Tanach and to the first Jewish followers of Yeshua the Messiah, monotheism and an affirmation of there being only One True God, need not necessarily mean that the nature of God is solitary and monolithic. Brown makes some useful interjections in his book *The Real Kosher Jesus*, to be considered:

“[T]he best translation, as noted by the New Jewish Version and some classical rabbinic commentators, is ‘The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.’ But even if we follow the more common rendering, ‘Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one,’ it’s important to understand that the word ‘*echad*’ does not point to absolute unity; it simply means *one*, as in one day, consisting of night and day (Gen. 1:5); or man and woman coming together and becoming one (Gen. 2:24); or all the pieces of the Tabernacle making one unit (Exod. 36:13). In the same way, God is one—a truth explicitly affirmed in the New Testament by Yeshua and Paul and others—but he is complex in his unity, and later Christian theologians, reflecting on these biblical truths, recognized that God revealed himself to us as a tri-unity, Father, Son, and Spirit.”¹⁰⁴

The Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament certainly affirm, in various ways, the truth of the *Shema* (John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; James 2:9). Yeshua the Messiah Himself regarded the *Shema*’s direction to love the Lord God with all of one’s heart, as being the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-30; Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). The first Jewish followers of Yeshua the Messiah were monotheists, and they would have absolutely affirmed the Deuteronomy 6:4 claim that the LORD (YHWH) was to be the only focus of their veneration. However, these same Jewish followers of Yeshua served a Master who would make claims such

¹⁰² Hertz, 770.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 922.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, *The Real Kosher Jesus*, 133.

as, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), then followed by many of their Jewish contemporaries readying themselves to stone Him as a blasphemer (John 10:31). Such a statement suggests a relationship between the Father and Son, which goes far beyond a unity or agreement of purpose.

An evangelical theologian like Brian Edgar, in his book *The Message of the Trinity*, appreciably includes a chapter on Deuteronomy 6:4-9. He understandably has to address the issue of monotheism and how Yeshua Believers need to recognize that their belief in a plural Godhead is rooted within the Shema. He draws the opinion that even though Judaism would widely claim that a Christian view of God being composed of Father, Son, and Spirit is not monotheistic—that a plural Godhead is a further theological and spiritual development per a dynamic of progressive revelation. He summarizes his thoughts:

“...New Testament trinitarianism can be seen to be a development of Old Testament monotheism. Of course it is such an unexpected and radical development, that orthodox Judaism does not think that the Christian doctrine of God can continue to be described as monotheistic. They believe that trinitarian thought goes beyond the boundaries of monotheism...[T]he Trinity is *the* doctrine which makes Christianity unique and priority must be given to New Testament revelation. Nonetheless, there remains a unity between the monotheistic declaration of God as found in the Shema and the trinitarian theology of the New Testament.”¹⁰⁵

Thankfully, Edgar does not leave anyone wondering how First Century, monotheistic Jews, could go from affirming the One God of Israel as supreme to the gods and goddesses of the pagans (which are not gods or goddesses in comparison to Him), to affirming the One God of Israel in the *Shema*, manifested *for sure* as the Father and the Son. The place of 1 Corinthians 8:6 is quite significant: **“yet for us there is *but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.*”** Edgar concludes,

“In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul appears to expound Deuteronomy 6:4 in a manner that is only possible after the more complete revelation of God in Christ...Paul has redefined the Shema Christologically. He has taken the doctrine of the one and only God and applied it to Jesus and the Father. There is no division between them, only the loving unity of the Trinity.”¹⁰⁶

The response to the self-identity of Yeshua of Nazareth—the One who could say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58)—could not, for First Century monotheistic Jews, be to consider Him as a second deity. *That would be polytheism.* Instead, as those who would faithfully declare, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4), the *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים; Grk. *theos, θεός*) recognized would most often be associated with the “Father” (Grk. *patēr, πατήρ*), and the Divine Name YHWH/YHVH (יהוה), rendered in the Greek Septuagint with the title *Kurios* (κύριος) or “Lord,” would most often be associated with Yeshua the Messiah. There would have been First Century Jewish people, as there are Jewish people today, who would have thought that God possessed a monolithic oneness. The Apostles, in contrast, would affirm that the One God of Israel widely makes Himself known via the activity of Father and Son, requiring a Being which has a plural oneness.

Today’s broad Messianic movement is a faith community which often finds itself sandwiched between the theological traditions of both Judaism and Christianity, and consequently some of the differences of approach witnessed with the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema*. All of today’s Messianic Believers affirm the truth that the One God of Israel is the Only True God, and that all other so-called gods or goddesses of the pagans are in actuality not (cf. 1

¹⁰⁵ Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), pp 77, 78.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 83-84.

Corinthians 8:5). Historically, Deuteronomy 6:4 has been approached in Judaism as serving as the foundation for not only monotheism, but also with “the LORD is one” being supportive of a monolithic God. With its affirmation that Yeshua the Messiah is God Incarnate, while Christians would affirm that there is only One True God, they would also believe that “the LORD is one” provides a basis for an internal plurality within such oneness. In contrast to some of the historical Christian Trinitarianism—which would widely conclude that God is *only* Father, Son, and Spirit—Messianic people would be more prone to use the terminology “tri-unity,” or perhaps “revealed tri-unity,” allowing for additional and presently unrevealed manifestations of the Godhead to exist.

There are individual people and families one will encounter in today’s Messianic movement, who believe that the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema* does not permit a plural Godhead, and that God is monolithic, per a great deal of historical Jewish thought. They think that if the Messianic movement can back away from Yeshua being uncreated as God and a member of a plural Godhead, and instead would affirm Him as only an exalted supernatural agent of God, but ultimately created, that more Jewish people would consider His Messiahship. Standing against this would be many, including this writer, who while recognizing that there are (many) limitations to the historical Christian doctrine of the Trinity, that the First Century Jewish Apostles did, in fact, integrate Yeshua of Nazareth into the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema* via statements like those witnessed in 1 Corinthians 8:6. They would have been forced to consider Yeshua the Messiah as being a part of the Divine Identity, because of how Yeshua demonstrated Himself to them, and because of actions He performed which only God Himself—and no mere supernatural agent, messenger, or angel—would be permitted.

JOSHUA 5:13-6:2

“Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us or for our adversaries?’ He said, ‘No; rather I indeed come now *as* captain of the host of the LORD.’ And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, ‘What has my lord to say to his servant?’ The captain of the LORD’s host said to Joshua, ‘Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.’ And Joshua did so. Now Jericho was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in. The LORD said to Joshua, ‘See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king *and* the valiant warriors.’”

The conquest of the city Jericho by the Israelites, is commonly regarded by Bible readers as being one of the most significant victories by God’s people in Biblical history. It is hardly a surprise that prior to the assembly of Israel marching around the city (Joshua 6:3-14) before its collapse (Joshua 6:15-21), that Joshua, the leader of Israel and Moses’ successor, would have some supernatural encounter. Significant clues are present within Joshua 5:13-6:2 that Joshua did not encounter just any supernatural intermediary sent from God proper.

It is recorded that as Joshua was looking over Jericho, apparently surveying the ground as it was to be attacked by the Israelites, *v’hinneih-ish omeid l’negdo v’charbo shelufah b’yado* (וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ עֹמֵד לְנִגְדוֹ וְחַרְבּוֹ שֶׁלֹּפֶה בְּיָדוֹ) (Joshua 5:13b, ATS), “and behold!—a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand” (Joshua 5:13b, ATS). Joshua inquires of this figure, “Are you one of us or of our enemies?” (Joshua 5:13c, NJPS). The response he receives is, *lo ki ani sar-tzeva-YHWH* (לֹא כִי אֲנִי שַׂר־צְבָאָה) (Joshua 5:14a, Fox). Being told, “No, for I am the commander of HASHEM’s legion” (ATS), many have concluded that