

The LORD is One

A Brief Examination of the Great Shema in the Light of Traditional Jewish Scholarship

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Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:
Deuteronomy 6:4 (King James Version)

HEAR, O ISRAEL: THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE.
Deuteronomy 6:4 (Jewish Publication Society Version)

This beginning passage of the Shema, the great “O Hear,” the central passage of Jewish theological thought, is not only the cornerstone of Jewish theology, but the foundation of the Apostolic understanding of God as well. Yet it seems that our understanding of this verse, for most Apostolics, is less than it should be—and certainly less than the Jewish understanding. Before you take exception to that statement, let me share with you the essence of Deuteronomy 6:4 as I understand it. I believe that you’ll be praising God for it by the time that I’m done.

The common understanding of this hallmark passage of Scripture is the undeniable declaration that there is but ONE God. The fact that there is but One God is not in dispute amongst Apostolics. We are humbled by the revelation of “the Mighty God in Christ.” We shout over the preaching of the Oneness of God! In the so-called “Christian” world we Apostolics are an anomaly with respect to our Christology and our understanding of the Godhead; but we ARE right. Many Scriptures bear out the fact that there is but one God; He alone is our Creator—and He became our Savior. His name is Jesus! However, this is not what I wish to talk about here; rather, I want to talk about the deeper essence of Deuteronomy 6:4—I want to delve deeper into the great Shema.

“Shema, Yisroel: Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad,” as quoted from the Masoretic text, is the Shema that is on the lips of the Jewish cantor twice each day and has been for thousands of years. (They substitute the spoken “Adonai” for the tetragrammaton, the “Divine Name with Four Letters” [YHVH], as Jewish scholars call it). When spoken in Jewish Synagogues the devout men often repeat the last word, “echad,” over and over again in a thunderous chorus for several minutes: “echad, echad, echad, echad... (one, one, one, one...)” Some trinitarians have argued that the very word used here for “one” is a veritable proof of their doctrine. They tell us that if God wanted to use a word here that meant that the one God was indivisible, He

would have used the Hebrew word “yachid,” which means “single” or “only” instead of “echad,” which, *they say*, does not as strongly express the idea of “one.” (I would disagree.) This, they use in conjunction with their view that the word used for “God” in the very first verse of the Bible (and over 2500 subsequent uses of that word) is a plural noun, “Elohim” (pronounced el-o-heem’). They tell us that here that God used a plural form of the word “El” as a way to express the concept of a plurality of persons within the Godhead. We Apostolics categorically reject that premise.

First, we must understand that the word Elohim, while a plural form of El, is only to be understood in a *plural* sense when it is used with a *plural* verb. It is like the uni-plural nouns of the English language where the context relays whether the word is to be understood in a plural or singular sense. For example, you could say, “I caught a fish,” and we understand the word “fish” is singular. Likewise, you could say, “I caught several fish,” and we can understand from the context that the word “fish” is now to be understood in a plural sense. It’s a uni-plural noun. We have several others in the English language: sheep, moose...you get the idea. Elohim is to be understood in a purely plural sense *only* when it is used with a plural verb structure. In the 2570 times that the word is used in the Old Testament in reference to God it is ALWAYS used with a *singular* verb structure (never plural). Additionally, the word is also used to describe false deities that we know were singular. (Judges 8:33, 11:24, 16:23; I Kings 11:5, II Kings 1:2-3 are all examples).

The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (the standard Hebrew/English text with traditional Rabbinical commentary) states this regarding Genesis 1:1 and the use of the word Elohim:

*Elohim is the general designation of the Divine Being in the Bible, as the fountain and source of all things. Elohim is a plural form, **which is often used in Hebrew** to denote plentitude of might.*

Regarding the word “created” in Genesis 1:1 it states:

*The Heb. Word is in the **singular** thus precluding **any** idea that its subject, Elohim, is to be understood in a plural sense.*

Now let's go back and analyze the trinitarian argument that God would have used the word "yachid" instead of "echad" to describe a Deity that was indivisible. Let me start out by saying that this argument is absurd even on the surface; for the word "echad" is *consistently* used to mean one and *only one*! Here are some examples:

Genesis 1:9	God gathered the waters "unto one (echad) place."	Or was in many places?
Genesis 2:21	God took "one (echad) of his ribs" to make the woman.	Or was it a full rack of ribs?
Genesis 22:2	God told Abraham to take his son Isaac and offer him "on one (echad) of the mountains..."	Was he to offer Isaac on multiple mountains?
Genesis 42:11	Said by the sons of Jacob to Joseph (before he revealed himself): "We are all one (echad) man's sons."	Were they actually the sons of three different men?
Exodus 9:6	Regarding Israel's cattle during the plague, "but of the cattle of Israel...died not one (echad)."	So, how many died?
Leviticus 4:21	"And he shall take one (echad) lamb..."	How many lambs?

I could go through *hundreds* of these from nearly every Old Testament book. Echad means one. One. You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, nor can you squeeze a trinity out of the word echad.

Conversely the word "yachid," which means "only," "singly," and "lonely," while it could be used, I suppose, to declare that God is the "only" God, is clearly NOT what God was trying to tell us in this pivotal verse of Oneness theology. To reduce this verse down to a simple declaration that God is the only God, and there are no other gods *misses the entire point of this verse*. This verse tells us indeed that there is only one God, but it tells us *so much more than that!*

Look at the Hebraic rendering of the verse: "*Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One.*" What is He? He IS *ONE*. That is His **fundamental nature**. See the distinction? It doesn't say that He is one God. It says that this Lord of ours—this God of ours—IS ONE. He is indivisibly, immutably ONE. His "Oneness" (a term often used in Hebrew commentary regarding

God) is His attribute, just as holiness is His attribute—but His Oneness is His MAIN attribute!

This is the Jewish understanding of this verse—and it is more profound than the understanding of the typical Apostolic regarding this verse. We tend to think that this verse says that the LORD is the only God; but, in fact, this verse tells us more than that. It tells us that the main attribute of our LORD is that He is ONE. This is the singular fact that He wanted drilled into every Jewish child throughout all ages.

To accentuate the point, let's look at some Jewish commentary on the central verse of their theology:

*'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.' These words enshrine Judaism's greatest contribution to the religious thought of mankind. They constitute the primal confession of Faith in the religion of the Synagogue, **declaring that the Holy God worshipped and proclaimed by Israel is One; and that He alone is God...** That opening sentence of the Shema rightly occupies the central place in Jewish religious thought; for every other Jewish belief turns upon it: all goes back to it; all flows from it."¹*

This understanding of the Shema was not merely an understanding of the fact that there is one God (monotheism), but that the nature of God is One. He is indivisible. They call this the “Divine Unity” and the “Unity of God.”²

Jews throughout the ages have clung to this basic understanding. Sometimes it was all that they had to cling to—for everything else was gone. It has been said that, “*through every persecution and massacre, from the time of the Crusades to the wholesale slaughter of the Jewish population in the Ukraine in the years 1919 to 1921, Shema Yisroel has been the last sound on the lips of victims.*” Again, “*the Shema became the first prayer of innocent childhood, and the last utterance of the dying...it was the watchword of the myriads of martyrs who agonized and died for the Unity.*”³

¹ Pentateuch and Haftorahs; Second Edition, Soncino Press; pg 920

² Ibid; pg 923

³ Ibid; pg 922

One 11th century rabbinical poet, Kalonymos ben Yehudaj, wrote this in a poem that was once sung in many a Synagogue:

*Though they curse, and bind, and kill.
The living God is with us still.
We still are Thine, though limbs are torn;
Better death than life forsworn.
From dying lips the accents swell,
“Thy God is One, O Israel.”*

The Shema excludes the possibility of polytheism (the belief in more than one deity) being right, paganism (the deification of any thing or being), dualism (the mystic belief of two rival powers of Good and Evil, Light and Darkness and the universe as the arena for this contest), pantheism (the belief that everything is divine in some sense), and as Jewish scholarship has long said—“*the 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.*”⁴

The Shema proclaims “*the oneness of God*” and what early twentieth-century Rabbinical Scholar, Dr. J.H. Hertz called “*the fundamental truth of the Unity of God.*” He said that it proclaims that “*the LORD is our God, and He is One.*”⁵

Brethren, this is not mere semantics. There is a clear *distinction* to be drawn between saying that there is only one God and saying that the LORD God is One in His essence. Again Hertz says, “*In the opening v. of the Shema we have a third revelation of God’s being. In Gen xvii, He is made known to us as Almighty; in Exod. vi, as Eternal; and now as One.*” He goes on to say, “*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.*”⁶ Jesus, of course, had His own human will that was distinct from the will of the eternal Spirit of God that dwelt in Him without measure (John 3:34; 5:30; Luke 22:42). Trinitarians would suppose that these separate wills were between personalities within the Godhead—but that

⁴ Ibid; pg 921

⁵ Ibid; pg 769

⁶ Ibid; pg 770

would violate the Oneness of God as He revealed it through Moses. It would violate the Unity of God.

I believe that the Unity of God—His essential Oneness—is something that is understood *by* His creation, *through* His creation. While the understanding of “God in Christ Jesus” is clearly given by revelation (Luke 10:22)—“His eternal power and Godhead” are “clearly seen,” ever since the creation, “in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20 KJV/ESV). His Godhead (Gk.: theiotés) or “Divine nature” is clearly understood through the siren song of the creation. This is NOT a *theological* understanding, but a revelation of sorts of the nature of God’s being. While, as Hertz tells us, God revealed somewhat of His nature through direct revelation to Moses for inclusion in the holy Writ—namely, that He is **Almighty**, that He is **Eternal**, and that He is **One** (see previous paragraph), God has also revealed these things through His creation.

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.
Psalms 19:1-3

The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory.
Psalms 97:6 KJV

Therefore, according to Paul’s epistle to the church at Rome, people who sin “are without excuse.” Creation reveals some things about the nature or essence of God’s being. We can see, through seeing the things that are made, His great and eternal power (that He is *Almighty*). What heathen child has not stared into the heavens and contemplated the creation, in all its enormity and splendor, and wondered about its source and the magnificence of its beginning? Surely the God that made all of this *must* be Almighty! That same child would surely be gripped—because of the scope of the expanse and the thought of what must be beyond the stars—by the thought that Whoever set this all in motion must be *Eternal*. As Plato intoned, there must be some sort of “Prime Mover” that set it all in motion. There must be Someone who always was who started it all.

Just as the heathen child would understand these things about God, I believe that his essential Oneness is also revealed through creation. This is why when you discuss the Godhead with the average member of a trinitarian church, their basic understanding of Christology, or at least the nature of

God, more closely resembles Oneness thought than trinitarian thought. They cannot articulate it, but when you explain Oneness Christology vs. trinitarian Christology they invariably shake their heads and distance themselves from trinity doctrine.

By looking at His creation, in all of its balance and harmony—in the great symbiotic nature of His creation—the average person of any age, language or tribe can see that this was not produced by a committee. This came from One great Mind. This stemmed from One Creator. There is no division in Him, there is no separation of Him. His nature and essence is One. *“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is **One!**”*