

## A PRE-MODERN HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE *SHEMA*

Deuteronomy 6:4, here referred to as the *Shema* (for its first Hebrew letter),<sup>1</sup> is a foundational text to both Christian and Jewish faiths. In Judaism it is a prayer and a confession to be recited twice a day, and in Christianity it is part of the “greatest commandment”.<sup>2</sup> Despite its centrality and its apparent simplicity, there is nevertheless not a single dominant interpretation to what it means that “the Lord is one”, but a broad spectrum of various proposals and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Does the text teach monotheism, monolatry, or monism? Is it a positive reinstatement of the first commandment? Can the Trinity be read into the oneness of God? How else has this passage been

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Shema* often refers to both verses Deut 6:4-5 or to the liturgical unit of 6:4-9, or to the recitation of a number of Pentateuchal passages (Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num 15:13-41), but in this paper it is reduced to a single verse.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Talmud, the prescription to recite the *Shema* is biblical (*b. Ber.* 2a), it is the first thing that a child must learn to say and the last words to come out of a believer’s mouth before they die (*m. Suk.* 42a; *m. Ber.* 61a). Although the great commandment pericopes in the synoptics (Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28) have been often reduced to a double command, to love God and love your neighbor, it was first expressed with the introductory formula of Deut 6:4 (cf. Mk 12:29). Even in modern historical-critical scholarship Deut 6:4-5 is crucial to determine *Urdeuteronomium* and the dating of the Pentateuchal sources, since it is associated with Josiah’s reform (cf. 2Ki 23:25). For an excellent introduction to the issues see J. Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> There is still no scholarly consensus as to how to translate the verbless clause of Deut 6:4 or to the specific meaning of the *Shema*, as S. D. McBride, “The Yoke of the Kingdom” *Interpretation* (1973), 291, notes, “after the divine sentence-name in Exodus 3:14 and possibly the opening words of Genesis 1, no statement in the Hebrew Bible has provoked more discussion with less agreement than this one.” E. Borowitz, ed. *Echad: The Many Meanings of God is One* (New York: Shma, 1988) published 26 essays where a wide spectrum of Jewish voices suggests that there is no “one way” of interpreting “one Lord” (e.g. does it mean the Lord is coherent, unique, exclusive, singular, incomparable, comprehensive, primary or all?). The syntactical ambiguity is also reflected in the diversity of translations in Bibles today: (1) Most older English versions (like KJV, WEB, GNV, ASV, YLT, see also Luther’s 1545 German Bible) and a few modern translations (NJB, RSV, as well as Spanish NVI, and most French versions [LSG, TOB, BFC]) render “The LORD our God *is* one LORD”. (2) Other modern versions (NIV, NKJV, HCSB, TNIV, and German *Einheitsübersetzung*) translate “the LORD our God the LORD *is* one” following most Jewish versions (JPS, CJB; see also Spanish *Reina-Valera*). More recently, close to the last four decades, translations read (3) “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (NASB, NIRV, GWNV, NET, and Spanish LBA) or (4) “The LORD *is* our God, the LORD alone” (NAB, NLT, NRSV, JPS TNK 1985 revision, although the German *Schlatter* translated it this way since 1951). These four interpretative options appear in the margin of some versions including the NIV.

interpreted throughout history? Because of its centrality, this text may serve as a foil to discuss how a literal reading of a biblical text in pre-modern times may shift and expand in meaning throughout time. This paper traces the history of interpretation of Deut 6:4 from the dawning of early Christianity in the Second Temple period to the twilight of the late medieval ages in order for the reader to appreciate the persistent centrality of an unchanging doctrine and simultaneously discern fluidity in meaning and application in both Jewish and Christian perspectives.

This study engages Jewish and Christian sources diachronically up to the Medieval era subdivided into three main parts: (1) early Jewish interpretations of the *Shema*; (2) the Church fathers and the *Shema*; and (3) the medieval interpreters and the *Shema*. The discussion is not intended to be comprehensive, neither is it strictly chronological, however it is representative summary from ancient sources that directly quoted Deut 6:4 organized with the intent of illustrating through broad strokes a wider scope of how the *Shema* has been interpreted historically.

### **Early Jewish Interpretations of the Shema**

It is difficult to date the origins of the *Shema* with certainty. Even if it is not regarded as Moses' *ipsissima verba*,<sup>4</sup> critical scholars who date Deuteronomy during the Josianic reformation still recognize that the *Shema* exhibits roots of a deeper liturgical tradition, an ancient confession that found its way to the framework of Deuteronomy's legal core. The rhythmic repetition of the Lord's name in the verbless clause of Deut 6:4b (lit. YHWH – our God – YHWH – one), characteristic of a slogan like confession tucked away within Moses' paraenetic context, gives

---

<sup>4</sup> Bill T. Arnold, "Deuteronomy as the Ipsissima Vox of Moses," *JTI* 4/1 (2010): 53–74, to bridge the gap between faith and critical scholarship, prefers the designation *ipsissima vox* of Moses to refer to Deuteronomy's Mosaic authorship instead of the traditional *impissima verba*.

scholars reason to sustain its preliterate formulation that predates the composition of Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not one sees the *Shema* employed from a previous source, oral or written, the fact remains that the first historical application of the phrase “YHWH our God YHWH is one” is placed in the context of Moses’ *ipsissima vox* as part of the so-called Deuteronomy’s frame (chs. 1-11). But what did it mean?

From a historical-critical perspective, scholars have suggested several original meanings for the *Shema*. It may have been a catchphrase in support of *Monojehism*, a cry to rally around a single manifestation of Yahweh under the Jerusalem sanctuary as opposed to a diversification of his cults.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it was a pledge of allegiance, where Israel vowed “YHWH is our God, YHWH alone!” while recognizing the existence of the “other gods” of the surrounding nations.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, it may have carried pragmatic monotheistic connotations, although not understood in the same philosophical sense implied by post-enlightenment monotheistic ideology.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See T. Veijola, “Hore Israel! Der Sinn und Hintergrund von Deuteronomium vi 4-9” *VT* 42.4 (1992): 530-36.

<sup>6</sup> Support from this idea came from inscriptions that bore the title “Yahweh of Teman” or “Yahweh of Samaria”. See W.F. Bade, “Der Monojehismus des Deuteronomiums” *ZAW* 30 (1910): 81-90; J.A. Emerton, “New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud” *ZAW* 94.1 (1984): 88-93; but this position has been rightly challenged, see McBride, 295; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy יהוה אחד: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 439.

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Mann, *Deuteronomy*, WmBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 55-56. D.I. Block would agree that it is “a cry of allegiance, an affirmation of covenant commitment... a distinguishing mark of the Israelite people [as] those (and only those) who claim YHWH alone as their God.” *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord!* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> Against the polytheistic context implied in Deuteronomy, philosophical monotheism as termed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment refers to the rational denial of the existence of many deities and an intellectual ascent to only one God, see N. MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism*, FAT 2/1 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 5-58; E. Otto, *Deuteronomium 4, 44-11,32*, HThKAT 2 (Herder: Freiburg, 2012), 756-62. Although MacDonald is correct in asserting that other gods are assumed in Deuteronomy as “real temptations for the affections of the Israelites” (77), a deity’s existence in the Ancient Near East, however, was dependent on their function and actions, thus since “Yahweh does not share power, authority or jurisdiction with them, they are not gods in any meaningful sense of the word. The first commandment does not insist that the other gods are nonexistent, but that they are powerless... it leaves them with no status worthy of worship,” J.H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 87-95, 156. This may qualify the *Shema* carrying monotheistic connotations.

However, historical-critical evaluations do not directly respond to the interpretative question of this study; as stated above, the interpretative setting is Moses' paraenesis, therefore a rhetorical analysis within the literary context of its final form is methodologically more sound.<sup>9</sup>

As in the parallel text of Deut 5:6-7, that features the reason why Israel should have no other gods before Yahweh, Deut 6:4 also functions as a motive clause to persuade Israel towards complete allegiance to their God, "with all their heart... being and... abundance" (6:5). What is the theological motivation? Because Yahweh, Israel's God, is unique.<sup>10</sup> This is best regarded as a qualitative, not quantitative, epithetical characterization of Israel's Lawgiver, for it refers to His name (i.e., YHWH), not his nature or title (e.g., Lord or God). J. Kraut may be right in suggesting Deut 6:4 as a case of staircase parallelism which would render this Hebrew verbless clause as, "Yahweh, our God, is unique."<sup>11</sup> This interpretation is consistent with other motive clauses in other structurally related passages of Deuteronomy that describe YHWH's divine character, His covenantal love and faithfulness, which demands Israel's full obedience in response (cf. 10:14-15, 17-18, 21b-22).

In response to the explicit commands that follow the *Shema* (cf. Deut 6:6-9), it was repeated in liturgical settings and twice a day by faithful Jews as a central monotheistic confession, perhaps all the more in their resistance against the syncretistic influence of

---

<sup>9</sup> As it is appropriate for an Adventist audience I may include the following comments by Ellen G. White, "To many the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives." AA 474.

<sup>10</sup> The uniqueness of Yahweh refers to His unparalleled nature: there is no god like Him who is not only "the great, mighty and awesome God" but has condescendingly chosen and loved Israel (Deut 4:37; 7:7-8; 10:17-22). The emphasis is not on Yahweh's ontological nature, but in the qualitative character of Israel's God which is sufficient to demand covenantal love and obedience in return (5:6-7; 6:4-5; cf. 10:12, 19; 11:1, 13, 22; 30:6, etc.).

<sup>11</sup> J. Kraut, "Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deut 6:4" VT 61 (2011): 582-602. E. J. Hidalgo, "The Uniqueness of YHWH: The Most Probable Meaning of the Shema" (unpublished research paper, OT901 Seminar in Old Testament Interpretation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015).

Hellenism.<sup>12</sup> L. Jacobs observes: “The fact that the schools of Hillel and Shammai debated as to how it should be read ... ‘when you lie down and when you get up’ ... (Ber. 1:3)” is evidence for a long-established tradition of reciting the *Shema* as is also attested elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> This may have given opportunity for sustained reflection of this text even by the laity, but only the developments available in the literary tradition are treated here.

In Zech 14:9, the *Shema* is alluded to in an eschatological context: “And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be *the only* one, and His name *the only* one” (NASB). In this passage, Yahweh’s oneness is no longer an epithetical characterization of Deity (i.e., YHWH is unique), but a universal recognition of His sovereignty (i.e., YHWH will be one).

This eschatological interpretation made an indelible mark on Judaism as seen later in the Talmud, but it is probably not as influential as the Greek translation of LXX-Deut 6:4. The Old Greek has significant additions not least of which is the inclusion of the copula (i.e., is) so that it resolves the ambiguity of the verbless clause. But even more significant is the effect of translating κύριος (i.e., Lord, a title) for YHWH (i.e., God’s personal name), ensuing in a grammatical transformation that makes possible to refer to the oneness of YHWH as a numerical oneness. Instead of a character reference (i.e., unique), rendering the phrase “the Lord our God is one *Lord* [or the Lord is one]”, which at the time may have been understood interchangeably with “The Lord our God is one *God* [or God is one].”<sup>14</sup> It is not likely that this interchangeable

---

<sup>12</sup> On the recitation of the *Shema*, see Ps.-Hec.; Pseudo-Orpheus; Philo of Alexandria, *Spec.* 1.30; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.91. The Nash Papyrus and Deut-LXX both attest to an interpretation meaning: “YHWH is one”. F.C. Burkitt, “The Hebrew Papyrus of the Ten Commandments” *JQR* 15 (1903): 392-408; J.W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy*, SCS 39 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 114.

<sup>13</sup> L. Jacobs “*Shema*, Reading of” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. vol. 18 (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 454.

<sup>14</sup> The Old Greek provides the verb “is”, a reading also attested in the Nash Papyrus. Indeed, Patristics seemed to freely quote from memory or from a variant reading Deut 6:4 as saying “the Lord thy God is one God” instead of “one Lord” (e.g. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.2.2; Idem, 5.22.1; Ambrose, *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, 1.3.23; *Recognitions of Clement*, 2.44; etc.).

notion between *Lord* and *God* would have occurred if YHWH, the name of God, would have been retained in the translation.

Afterwards, during the literature of the Second Temple period, one sees Deut 6:4 interpreted as the universal oneness of the Lord as both a future expectation and a present reality. For instance, 2 Macc 7:37 exhibits seven brothers willing to die as martyrs because of their belief in the oneness of God [present], but they also pray that God would “show mercy soon to our nation [future]... to make you confess that He alone is God.” In Add-Dan 3:45 the author stresses: “Let them know that you alone are the Lord God, glorious over the whole world.” But the universal oneness of God does not only appear in an eschatological realization, but as a philosophical reason revealed by God to Moses. The *Letter of Aristeas* for example maintains that through the *Shema* “he [Moses] proved first of all that there is only one God and that his power is manifested throughout the universe” (132). Many more examples could be reproduced, especially from the works of Philo, who repeatedly affirmed the existence of only “one real, and true, and living God.”<sup>15</sup>

The use of the *Shema* by New Testament (NT) writers also affirms early Judaism’s concept of the universal oneness of God (cf. Mark 12:29-30, 32-33; Gal 3:20; Jas 2:19). That Jesus accepted the common understanding of the *Shema* during his day is seen in an evaluation of the Great Commandment pericope in the Synoptics (Mat 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). Jesus quotes the *Shema* as the “first and greatest commandment” in keeping with the tendency among Jewish teachers of his day to search for the central, unifying tenets of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.65; for more references to the universal oneness of God in Second Temple Judaism see also 313, 331-32, 344; 3.29; 4.159; *Virt.* 40, 102; *Praem.* 123; *Opif.* 100, 172; *Leg.* 1.51; 2.1-3; 3.81; *Cher.* 27, 83, 109; *Sacr.* 59; *Gig.* 64; *Conf.* 170-71; *Migr.* 134; *Fug.* 71; *Mos.* 2.168; *Decal.* 65; *Sib. Or.* 3.629; 5.285; *Apoc. Mos.* 13.5; *T. Jos.* 6.5; 8.5; etc.

Torah.<sup>16</sup> Jesus' affirmation of contemporary Jewish orthodoxy is assumed, as seen especially in the Scribe's response "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him" (Mark 12:32; cf. Deut 4:39; Isa 44:8; 45:5-6, 14, 18, 21; 46:9).<sup>17</sup> In addition, the way Jesus responds, saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v 34), suggests that the Jesus acknowledged the relationship between the *Shema* and the reception of "the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven" as may have been taught during the Tannaitic period.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Mishnah, the *Shema* was supposed to be heard before reading any other passage of Scripture "so that a man may first receive upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven and afterward receive upon himself the yoke of the commandments."<sup>19</sup> This meant that those whose lips would confess the oneness of the Lord accepted His authority as their Suzerain, since He removed their yoke of Egyptian bondage, and as thankful subjects, pledged allegiance to obey His commandments.<sup>20</sup> This may be adduced from the earliest Midrash, *Sifre Deuteronomy*, which relates the words of the *Shema* as a *credo* or confession in the lips of Jacob's children who said to him, "Hear, our father Jacob, just as you do not have in your heart any sort of dispute with him who spoke and brought the world into being, [so we do not have in our heart any sort of dispute with him who spoke and brought the world into being,] but rather:

---

<sup>16</sup> Philo, *Spec. Leg.* i. I; bShab. 31a; Philo, *Hypoth.* 7.6; bMak. 24a, etc. see G. Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 37-45.

<sup>17</sup> See K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew: And its use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 72-76. "Mark stands closest to the LXX with the preposition ἐκ in all manuscripts throughout the passage. Mark alone gives the famous first sentence of the *shema*, there too adhering to the LXX text." (73).

<sup>18</sup> *Mishnah Berakot* 2.2. See McBride, 275-79.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> See discussion in I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the gospels*, Second Series (London: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 4-14; and A. Bucher, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century*, LBS (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1972), 36-118.

‘The Lord, our God, the Lord is one.’<sup>21</sup> As seen in this Midrash, accepting the yoke of the kingdom, the patriarchs vowed to renounce all idolatry.

The practice of confessing the name of God, as seen through rabbinical interpretation, continued to provide identity and ethical direction for Israel and, in light of Zech 14:9, hope of an eschatological realization.<sup>22</sup> In brief, as S. D. McBride states, the prevalent view of early Judaism, like that of NT authors in general, was that the *Shema* “articulated a radical monotheism, a universal divine kingship awaiting historical actualization.”

### **The Patristics and the *Shema***

Much like Christ affirmed Jewish faith in the *Shema* by quoting it as the foremost of the commandments, the early church fathers also acknowledged that the Jewish interpretation of the *Shema* in their days was accurate. Justin Martyr for instance, admitted that what the Jews wrote “in very thin parchment [presumably referring to the *Shema* in their phylacteries]... indeed we consider holy.”<sup>23</sup> Augustine asserts that the commandments that the Jews received were “just and good,” making particular reference to the first commandments positively expressed in Deut 6:4.<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus commended them for adhering to the basic teaching of the *Shema* which was “loudly

---

<sup>21</sup> *Parashat Waethanan, Pisqa 31.1 5C*, trans. by J. Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation*, vol. 1, Brown Judaic Studies 98 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Pisqa 31.4. “‘The Lord, our God’ – for us [in this world]; ‘The Lord is one’ – for everyone in the world [in the world to come]; And so Scripture says, ‘The Lord shall be king over all the earth. In that day shall the Lord be one and his name one’ (Zech 14:9).” Neusner comments: “at this time, God’s name rests in greatest measure upon Israel. But in the age to come, God’s name will achieve that unity that derives from the confession of all humanity.” Ibid. See Paul’s likely appropriation in Rom 3:29f.

<sup>23</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 46. Evidence for this is available from the phylacteries and mezuzot found among the Judean Desert Scrolls (1QPhyl, 4QPhyl A-R, 4QMez G, 8QMez, MurPhyl, 34SePhyl, XHev/SePhyl) which contain the text of Deut 6:4-5 in whole or in part. See A. Lange and M. Weigold, “The Text of the Shema Yisrael in Qumran Literature and Elsewhere” in *Textual Criticism and Dead Sea Scrolls Studies in Honor of Julio Trebolle Barrera*, JSJS 157, edited by A.P. Otero & P.A. Torijano Morales (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> See Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Psalm 55:10-11).

proclaimed” in their liturgical.<sup>25</sup> And Chrysostom is pleased that the Jews have been hearing this “everyday of their lives, and have it sounded in their ears: ‘The Lord your God is one Lord, and besides Him is none other.’”<sup>26</sup>

The Patristic authors were aware of the Jewish devotion to the *Shema* and admired it, which implies that they agreed with their literal interpretation of Deut 6:4 and imitated their steadfastness allegiance to the “one God” assumed as the core doctrine of this text. Chrysostom’s esteem for Jewish martyrs as portrayed in the Apocryphal, and of other noted heroes of the Hebrew Bible who stood against idolatry, and for all law observant Jews in general who “maintained the standard of their knowledge... of the true God,” is connected to his understanding of a plain and literal reading of Deut 6:4.<sup>27</sup> Both Christians and Jews had a shared understanding of the fundamental meaning of the *Shema* in its plain sense and adhered tenaciously to it.

The basic difference between Jews and Christians in their interpretation of the *Shema* was obviously a theological one. The *Shema* was still regarded by Christians as a confession of the one true God, as Jews adhered to, but, as Chrysostom explains, since the coming of Christ, “the knowledge of the one true God” is not sufficient by itself, “there is need also of the knowledge of Christ.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the words “Hear oh Israel” are addressed not only to literal Israel, but to spiritual Israel, those who have confessed Christ as Lord, assuming an inheritance of the Scriptures through Christ. This is demonstrated for example in Tertullian’s commentary on Deut 6:4 with a clear allusion to the prelude of the Decalogue: “these words of God by Moses are

---

<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.* 5.22.1.

<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostle, Homily 1*.

<sup>27</sup> Chrysostom, *Homily 36* (on Mat 11:1-4). Deut 6:4 is quoted.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

applicable certainly to whomsoever the Lord God of Israel may lead forth in like manner from the Egypt of a most superstitious world and from the abode of human slavery.”<sup>29</sup> So, the patristic authors commended the Jewish faith for maintaining the fundamental knowledge of the one God, but their developed Christology became the point of departure of their understanding of the oneness of God.

Below is a summary of how Christians perceived the trinity in the confession of the *Shema* followed by a discussion on the hermeneutics that led them to those conclusions. But there were other ways Christians reflected on the oneness of God, some of which were more akin to Jewish and philosophical thought. These will be discussed first before considering the Trinity in the *Shema*.

### **The Nature of the Oneness of God in Christian Thought**

Christian apologists, contending against the social pressures of Greco-Roman religions, ever had Deut 6:4 at the tip of their tongue or pen, like their Jewish counterparts, to refute the irrational nature of idolatric polytheism. “For it is there [i.e., Deut 6:4],” says Clement of Alexandria, “whence Moses, the man of God, *dissuading from all idolatry* beautifully exclaims, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord.’”<sup>30</sup> It was Augustine’s conviction that God’s purpose was to exterminate idolatry, a task once entrusted to ancient Israel, but fulfilled through the Christian mission:

Who then has effected the demolition of these systems but the God of Israel? For to this people was the announcement made by those divine voices which were addressed to

---

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 2, after quoting Deut 6:4 and a string of other texts from the Pentateuch. Also Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 3.46.1 writes: “Has the divine teaching, which abolishes the godlessness of the heathen or the idols, passed over in silence, and left the race of mankind to go entirely without provision of the knowledge of God? Not so: rather, it anticipates their understanding when it says: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God”.

<sup>30</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 8 (italicized for emphasis). See also *Clementine Homilies*, 1.3.57 and *Recognitions of Clement*, 2.44.

Moses: “Hear, O Israel; The Lord thy God is one God. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything”... but who shall say that Christ and Christians have no connection with Israel? ... For Christ was the seed of Abraham, and the same God (now in Christ) has ordered, promised and exhibited the overthrow of these superstitions.<sup>31</sup>

Another apologetic voice was that of Arnobius who reasoned from the *Shema* that it is illogical for humans to worship more than one God and that multiple syncretistic manifestations of deities “make sport of men’s ignorance.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the rationality of the divine unity expressed in the *Shema*, Arnobius mocked the heathens who placed their faith in multiple gods:

What do you say, you who by the fear of bodily tortures, urge us to worship the gods and constrain us to undertake the service of your deities? We can be easily won, if only something befitting the conception of so great a race be shown to us. Show us Mercury, but only one; give us Bacchus, but only one... for you will never make us believe that there are four Apollos or three Jupiters.<sup>33</sup>

“Since God is one,” contended Athanasius, “it is ridiculous to suppose that there could be still another ‘lord’ of heaven and earth in addition to the Lord who is one. There is simply no room for a second Lord of all if the one true God fills all things in the compass of heaven and earth.”<sup>34</sup> For Athanasius, Deut 6:4 is so plain and logical in its affirmation of such a fundamental belief, that it is “ridiculous” to think anything different.

But the *Shema* was more than a confession or a statement about monotheism or the unity of God among the Church Fathers; Deut 6:4 also became a springboard to praise the nature and character of the one true God, often using philosophical reasoning. Tertullian wrote: “God then is one... air’s Divider, Builder, Author, Sole God perpetual, Power Immortal is He, Him had the

---

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, 1.26.41.

<sup>32</sup> Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, 3.13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 3.17.

<sup>34</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 6.4.

Law the people shown to be One God, whose mighty voice to Moses spake upon the Mount.”<sup>35</sup>

And Ambrose, after quoting Deut 6:4 takes the opportunity to expound on God as

“unchangeable, always abiding in unity of power, always the same and not altered by any accession or diminution.”<sup>36</sup> In such theological reflection, to be *one* means much more than being the only God in existence, it refers to his eternal being as one in a philosophical sense.

These Christian reflections on the theological oneness are akin to Philo’s platonic view of God as the only one who could be One. In his allegorical interpretation of Gen 2:18 he philosophizes:

God is alone: a single being: not a combination: a single nature: but each of us, and every other animal in the world, are compound beings: for instance, I myself am made up of many things, of soul and body... But God is not a compound being, nor one which is made up of many parts, but one which has no mixture with anything else; for whatever could be combined with God must be either superior to him, or inferior to him, or equal to him. But there is nothing equal to God, and nothing superior to him, and nothing is combined with him which is worse than himself; for if it were, he himself would be deteriorated; and if he were to suffer deterioration, he would also become perishable, which it is impious even to imagine. Therefore God exists according to oneness and unity; or we should rather say, that oneness exists according to the one God, for all number is more recent than the world, as is also time. But God is older than the world, and is its Creator.<sup>37</sup>

According to Samuel Sandmel, Philo of Alexandria “is best viewed as representing a relatively self-contained Jewish Hellenism” that lived during a period which was heavily influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy (c. 100 BCE–200 CE; mainly Platonism and Stoicism) which ultimately became the vehicle that carried the gospel “from Palestinian Jewish Christianity to Dispersion Gentile Christianity.”<sup>38</sup> The same kind of middle-stoicism at work in Philo

---

<sup>35</sup> Tertullian, *Five Books in Reply to Marcion*, Appendix, 4. 31-32.

<sup>36</sup> Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit*, 3.15.105.

<sup>37</sup> Philo, *Allegorical Interp.* 2.1.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 301.

influenced the later Christian thinkers in the first century, with a slight shift into Neo-Platonism by the middle of the third century.<sup>39</sup> From this philosophical background, the early Christians branched out into lofty developments of the oneness of God, but unlike Philo, they grappled with the nature of God which would include Christ as one with the Father with the Holy Spirit, and how this could be interpreted back into the *Shema*.

### **The Trinity in the *Shema***

Jews and Christians alike read the *Shema* as a monotheistic statement, among other things they shared in common, but, where Jews saw the “one” referring only to the Lord their God, Christians believed this oneness represented a unity of three co-eternal persons: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Speaking of Thomas’ confession when he declared Jesus to be “my Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28), Hilary of Poitiers wonders “how did the faith of the apostle become unmindful of the principal commandment [Deut 6:4 quoted], so that he confessed Christ as God, since we are to live in the confession of the one God?”<sup>41</sup> This last phrase, “to live in the confession of the one God” connects the traditional practice of repeating the *Shema* as a confession, so prevalent among Second Temple Judaism, with the Christian faith, thus affirming its basic doctrine of monotheism. However, Hilary goes on to explain that after having heard Christ’s statements of his oneness with the Father (Jn 10:30; 16:15; 14:11; quoted) Thomas “perceived the faith of the entire mystery through the power of the resurrection [so that he could]

---

<sup>39</sup> George Boys-Stone, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001), v.

<sup>40</sup> Tertullian interprets “one God” in Deut 6:4 a reference to “the Son being one with the Father,” and thus declares “one must convict Jews also of not genuinely attending to the Scriptures”. *Against the Heathen*, 3.46.1. See also Augustin, *Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, 9.16 and *On the Trinity*, 5.11.12.

<sup>41</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 7.12. Augustine also appeals to Thomas’ confession in Jn 20:28 to include the Trinity in the *Shema*. See Augustine, *Letter*, 238.

now confess the name of the nature without endangering the faith.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, while Jews held on to a single God confessed in the *Shema*, after the Christ event, a new understanding of this same Deity was being acknowledged.

Chrysostom too attributed this ontological difference in understanding Deity to the revelation of God through Christ. When commenting on John 1:18, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him” he asks, “What hath he declared? That... ‘God is one’? But this all the prophets testify, and Moses continually explains, ‘The Lord thy God is one Lord.’”<sup>43</sup> People already knew God was one through the *Shema*, but Christ came to declare some new knowledge about God, “that Christ is the only begotten, that God is Spirit,” and other teachings peculiar to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere Chrysostom speaking of the divinity of Christ from Mat 22:44, “where he made mention of ‘the Lord’ and ‘my Lord,’” acknowledged that the *Shema* “said nothing of this kind [quoting Deut 6:4]” but still defends the divinity of Christ from other passages, which are just as valid.<sup>45</sup> So, according to Chrysostom, the *Shema* in a literal sense only teaches monotheism, and by itself it would not acknowledge the Trinity, but when read through the hermeneutics of Christ, through his expansion or reinterpretation of the law, it gains new meaning. This is evidenced through Chrysostom’s comments on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

Why did Jesus begin expounding on “thou shalt not kill” instead of the first “The Lord thy God is one Lord.”? Because, had He begun thence, He must have *enlarged* it also and have brought in Himself together with His Father. But it was not as yet time to teach any such thing about Himself. [They would have considered Jesus a madman] if he opened

---

<sup>42</sup> Hilary, *Trinity*, 7.12.

<sup>43</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, Homily 15 (on John 1:18).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Chrysostom, *Homily* 72.

his ministry saying “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old, ‘I am the Lord thy God, and there is none other but me.’ But I say unto you, worship me even as Him.”<sup>46</sup>

This “expanded sense” became normative through the rite of baptism where the believer confessed “the holy and ineffable Trinity” as the “one God concerning whom it is said in Deuteronomy, ‘Hear, o Israel, the Lord your God is one God.’”<sup>47</sup> The relationship between baptism and the confession of the Trinity as one God, which has support in Mt 28:19-20 (“baptizing in the Name [singular] of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit [three Persons]”) is clearly seen in Origen’s exhortation below:

When you decide to keep the command of this precept and reject all other gods and lords, and have no other god or lord except the one God and Lord, you have declared war on all others without treaty. When, therefore, we come to the grace of baptism, renouncing all other gods and lords, we confess the only God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>48</sup>

But for the Church Fathers, this theological proposition is tricky, for one must not confuse “the person of the Father [to be] the same as either the Son or the Holy Spirit” or much less, to confuse each member of the Godhead as three individual Gods.<sup>49</sup> For doctrinal and theological reasons then, the “one” in Deut 6:4 is seen as a unity with a plurality of subjects, which is explained with technical terms such as *Godhead* or *Persons*. Gregory of Nyssa, after quoting the *Shema* comments: “By the word *Godhead* it proclaims too the only-begotten God and does not divide the unity into a duality so as to call the Father and the Son two gods, although each is called God by holy writers.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Augustine focuses on the term

---

<sup>46</sup> *St. Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 17* (on Mat 5:27-28). Italicized for emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Fulgentius, *To Peter on the Faith*, 1.3.

<sup>48</sup> Origen, *On Exodus, Homily 8.4*.

<sup>49</sup> Fulgentius, *To Peter*, 1.3.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Not Three Gods*, in *The Library of Christian Classic*, vol. 3, ed. by j. Baillie et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 265-66.

*persons*: “whereas if we were to say three Gods, Scripture would contradict it, which says “Hear O Israel: the Lord thy God is one God” therefore, out of the “mere necessity of speaking and reasoning, to say three persons” is more convenient.<sup>51</sup>

### **Christian Hermeneutics for the *Shema***

It is appropriate to pause at this juncture in order to identify the kind of interpretation that is applied to Deut 6:4 and understand how the Trinity is here implied. In the *Conferences of John Cassian*, Abbot Serenus explains that Scripture is like a field that produces a wide variety of food, some passages need to be cooked up “by an allegorical interpretation” while others “shine forth clear and bright in their literal sense... [and still] furnish abundant food and nourishment in the simple sounds of the words, to the hearers, [then he goes on to quote as prime example] this passage: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord; and you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’”<sup>52</sup> This simple passage, while it has “no need of any higher interpretation,” according to the Abbot,<sup>53</sup> is nevertheless in need of exposition or *expansion* according to Chrysostom (as seen above). It is not interpreted spiritually, in an allegorical sense, but neither is the passage left to the letter, or plain sense alone, for that would fix its meaning with the Jews, strictly prohibiting polytheism, syncretism and idolatry to those under the yoke of the kingdom. So, what term can be used to describe this dialectic?

---

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *Trinity* 7.4.8. See also Ambrose, *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, 1.3.23 for a similar argument to maintain “the unity of operation and of name”.

<sup>52</sup> *The Conferences of John Cassian*, 1.8.3, in NPNF 2, 11:376.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

There seems to be a “dynamic and fruitful tension,” as L. Stone suggests, “between the proximity and remoteness” with which the patristic exegetes approached the *Shema*.<sup>54</sup> Its remote meaning or literal sense was the same as the Jews of the Second Temple and early Tannaim period who understood the passage as a confession of the one God. This sense alone would be enough to appropriate its nearness, but in order to apply the confession of Christ as one with the Father in this passage, it needs to be re-interpreted in a higher sense, perhaps through a mimesis of the divinity of Christ and his unity with the Father to give it an *expanded* meaning. Without taking flight into an allegorical interpretation, neither resorting to typology, the *Shema* acquires this expanded meaning on its *gramma* or literal sense theologically. Two questions remain, where did this expanded mimesis originate? And how was this view maintained biblically?

There are many texts that the church fathers cite in order to affirm the unity of the Godhead in the confession of the *Shema*, but the most explicit ones, as quoted above, are from the gospel of John.<sup>55</sup> According to McBride, from all NT texts from which the patristic authors based their theology, the origins for the reinterpretation of the *Shema* to include “the God who is one with the exalted Christ,” can be traced to “the Johannine formulation”.<sup>56</sup> Although the gospel of John does not contain the Great Commandment pericope (where the *Shema* is cited), it

---

<sup>54</sup> L. Stone suggests that the patristic exegetes recognized the “Remoteness or pastness” of the whole Bible and still confessed that it “participated integrally in lived Christian reality”. Class Notes for BS 905: History of Biblical Interpretation (Wilmore: Asbury Theological Seminary, Fall 2015).

<sup>55</sup> “Paul shows that the trinity is one God, when he says, ‘to him be glory;’ and in the OT it is said, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God.’ Augustine, *Morals of the Catholic Church*, 16.29. “The government of the Father and the Son is One (1Tim 1:1; Eph 5:5).” It is therefore one kingdom, one Godhead according to Ambrose, “oneness in Godhead the Law hath proved, which speaks of one God.” And “if the fullness of the Godhead bodily is in Christ, then must the Father and the Son be confessed to be of one Godhead.” Ambrose, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 3.12.102. “This is why He has equality with the Father by title expressive of unity, and what is said of the Father is said of the Son also... for the Son Himself said [something]... and the Father says [the same thing]... And of the Father it is written, ‘The Lord thy God is One Lord,’ and, ‘The God of gods, the Lord, hath spoken and called the earth’ and of the Son, ‘The Lord God hath shined upon us,’ and, ‘The God of gods shall be seen in Sion.’”

<sup>56</sup> McBride, “Yoke”, 287.

embodies its teaching to love God and one's neighbor as a summary and fulfillment of the law in its ethical principle of loving one another as Christ loved them, and replaces the confession of the oneness of Yahweh with "a declaration of the immutable 'unity' of God."<sup>57</sup> After John, the confession of Christ's oneness with the Father, as the new yoke of the kingdom, is progressively developed into a full scale theology of the Trinity, which is read into the *Shema*. Thus, it is affirmed: "When we hear it said... 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord,'... we understand nothing else than the very simple, and blessed, and incomprehensible essence itself of Him that is, and if the Son is from God... He is from the 'essence' of the Father."<sup>58</sup>

But Deut 6:4 was not seen in support of the unity of the Godhead by all Christians, rather, in the hands of the Arians it became an argument against the divinity of Christ: "It is written" they would challenge, "and they cannot deny it, that 'there is one Lord,' what then do they think of Christ? – That He is Lord, or that He is not Lord at all?"<sup>59</sup> In Basil's fourth book *Against Eunomius*, Deut 6:4 is quoted among "the chief passages of Scripture which were relied on by the Arian disputants."<sup>60</sup> Athanasius valiantly opposed such "irreligious men, [referring to the Arians, who] alleging such passages... reproached us saying... if He were God, He had not said, 'I Alone', nor 'God is one.'"<sup>61</sup> Since in this theological debate both parties make use of the same text (i.e. Deut 6:4), the defenders of the divinity of Christ search other parts of the Scripture to

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. "This development can be traced through the Patristic period. See particularly Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 93, where the 'double love commandment' is used as the text for an incredible polemic against the Jews. Cf. (without the polemical overtones) 2 Clement 13:14; Didache 1:2; Barnabas 19:5."

<sup>58</sup> *De Synodis, Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.35.

<sup>59</sup> *A Treatise of Novation Concerning the Trinity*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Basil, "Prolegomena, Sketch of the Life and Works of St. Basil" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. 8, ed. by P. Schaff et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), xliii.

<sup>61</sup> Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 3.23-24. "...the Arians are contending with God!" continues Athanasius, there is no rivalry between the Father and the Son, "instead the Son reveals and glorifies the Father... saying 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord.'"

explain the oneness or unity of the Godhead as expressed in the *Shema*.<sup>62</sup> Ambrose, for example, stresses that “the teaching of the Law, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord’” is an affirmation that the Lordship of the Father and the Son is one, as is evidenced by the multiple uses of the word “Lord” in the Bible to refer to different Persons (e.g. Gen 19:24; 2Tim 1:18; Psa 110:1; cf. Mt 22:43-45) yet “the Lord is not divided... nor is there a separation... but in each case the oneness of the Lordship is expressed.”<sup>63</sup> And Augustine writes:

“Consider now for a while the passages of Scripture which force us to confess that the Lord is one God... Certainly it is written, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord.’ Of whom do you think that this is said? If it is said only of the Father, then our Lord Jesus Christ is not God. Why did those words come to Thomas when he touched Christ and cried out, ‘My Lord and my God,’ which Christ did not reprove but approved, saying ‘Because you have seen, you have believed’?”<sup>64</sup>

It is out of respect for the whole of Scriptures as entirely harmonious and authoritative, never contradicting itself or incongruous, that the patristic exegetes compare Scripture with Scripture to produce a *theological* interpretation of a *literal* reading of the *Shema*. Hilary of Poitiers reasons that “the same one who authorizes us to confess the Son of God as God justifies us in proclaiming the one God.”<sup>65</sup> The Trinity is seen in Deut 6:4 not by conducting a word study or by appealing to its immediate literary context, but by positioning the text within its canonical context, where latter revelations of God, such as the Divinity of Christ or the members of the Godhead, inform the theology of this passage.

---

<sup>62</sup> *De Synodis, Councils of ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.49; Agustin, *Morals of the Catholic Church*, 9.14; Ambrose, *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, 3.12.102.

<sup>63</sup> Ambrose, *Three Books on the Holy Spirit*, 3.15.105.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *Letter*, 238.

<sup>65</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 5.1-2.

## The Medieval Interpreters and the *Shema*

### Christian Medievalists and the *Shema*: Thomas Aquinas

Although much can be said about how Deut 6:5 was uniquely interpreted during the medieval ages as a mystical love (i.e., an experiential union with God), or as a direction towards friendship with God, or the like, most of the interpretations on Deut 6:4 were repetitions of how the church fathers engaged with the text concerning the Trinity, as discussed above.<sup>66</sup> The chief Christian exponent on the doctrine of God during this time was Thomas Aquinas, however, he does cite his predecessor Bernard of Clairvaux as an authority who wrote about the oneness of God in these words: “among all things called one, the unity of the Divine Trinity holds the first place.”<sup>67</sup> Reflection on the word “one” as found in Deut 6:4 continues with Aquinas’ use of Aristotelian philosophy in his *Summa Theologica*: “there can only be ‘one’ principle of perfection according to the ancient philosopher, and that is God. [...] The first [principle] which reduces all [else] into one order should be only one... God.”<sup>68</sup>

In discussing whether the world is governed by one, Aquinas demonstrates his knowledge of Aristotle by judging the cause by the effect, and argues that “movement is the act

---

<sup>66</sup> For instance, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Hadewijch (c. 1220), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) and others are representative writers who reflected on the commandment to love God with all the heart as a transformation of the consciousness that lead into a sense of nearness to God. For Thomas Aquinas this kind of love (or *Caritas*) was a principally a friendship of man for God, a movement towards union with and enjoyment of God. See B.V. Brady, *Christian Love: How Christians through the Ages Have Understood Love* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 125-50, 164-79. Mystical love and union with God is implied by Ambrose early in 377 when he quotes Deut 6:5 in reference to the virgins who would take the vow of virginity, see *Three Books Concerning Virgins*, 2. There seems to be a mystical interpretation of the love. Other Christian medieval authors who interpreted Deut 6:5 include the Venerable Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, 2.22; *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. by L. Doyle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 32; and Richard of St. Victor, *Sermon 88*, “to love God is to serve God”; idem, *On the Four Degrees of Violent Love* 3.23, “to love with the entire heart, with the entire soul, and with all of one’s strength is to expend one’s every effort, every desire, every exercise on this one thing.” See H. Feiss, *On Love: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St Victor*, VTT 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 49, 266, 284-85.

<sup>67</sup> Bernard, *De Consid.* 5 in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.11.3.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.11.3.

of a thing moved, caused by the Mover” who governs the order he set in motion. He quotes “the philosopher (Metaph. xii., Did. Xi. 10) [who] expressed: ‘Things refuse to be ill governed, and multiplicity of authorities is a bad thing, therefore there should be one ruler.’”<sup>69</sup> To which he adds a Christian perspective: “we confess our belief in one God and one Lord (1Cor 8:6): to us there is but one God, the Father... and one Lord: and both of these [titles] pertain to government... Therefore, the world is governed by one.”<sup>70</sup>

Aquinas makes a distinction between a “mathematical one” and “one” as a “metaphysical entity” or being.<sup>71</sup> The objection was posed, that “a thing is said to be more *one* according as it is indivisible. Therefore, God is not more *one* than unity is *one* and a point is *one*,” to which Aquinas replies: “A point, and unity which is the principle of number, are not supremely being, inasmuch as they have being only in some subject. Hence, neither of them can be supremely *one*.”<sup>72</sup> For Aquinas, Deut 6:4 does not merely state that there is one God, but that God is one in essence, substantively and not adjectively, therefore, the names for the Trinity may be predicated in the singular:

Divine essence is signified by way of a form... simple and supremely one... so names which signify the divine essence in a substantive manner are predicated of the three Persons in the singular, and not in the plural. This then is the reason why we say that Socrates, Plato, and Cicero are three men; whereas we do not say the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are three Gods, but one God; forasmuch as in the three *supposita* of human nature there are three humanities, whereas in the three divine Persons there is but one divine essence.

But when not discussing philosophy, the *Shema* for Aquinas was also rhetorically analyzed in its context, which he called the Old Law. If a moral duty is expressed by precept it

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 1.103.3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 1.11.3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 1.11.4.

needs to be done, he explains, but two considerations are ordained to motivate its fulfillment: (1) the authority of the lawgiver; and (2) the benefit derived from the fulfillment – whether it is to attain some good or avoid some evil.<sup>73</sup> “Hence,” for Aquinas, “it was necessary that in the Old Law certain things should be set forth to indicate the authority of God the lawgiver: e.g. Deut 6:4 [quoted].”<sup>74</sup> Modern rhetorical analysts of Hebrew law define these “grammatically subordinate sentences in which the motivation for the commandment is given” as motive clauses,<sup>75</sup> which may be formulated asyndetically to the law(s) it precedes.<sup>76</sup> For Aquinas, Deut 6:4 functions as a motive clause (as in the quote above) that characterizes Israel’s lawgiver much like the preamble to the Decalogue (e.g. Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6):<sup>77</sup>

A master does not impose laws on others than his subjects; wherefore the precepts of a law presuppose that everyone who receives the law is subject to the giver of the law. Now the primary subjection of man to God by faith [Heb 11:6 quoted]. Hence, faith is presupposed to the precepts of the law. For which reason that which is of faith, is set down before the legal precepts [Exod 20:2 quoted], likewise (Deut 6:4), the words Hear O Israel, the Lord your God (vul. Our God) is one, precede the recording of the precepts.

Aquinas careful analysis of the *Shema* and the “Hebrew Law” not only places Deut 6:4 parallel to Exod 20:2/Deut 5:6 as a motive clause, but it assumes that the *Shema* sets down faith prior to any command. This is quite similar to Jewish Medieval interpreters following the Talmud who ranked first and second, out of 613 laws, both Exod 20:2/Deut 5:6 and Deut 6:4 as

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid 1/2.99.6.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> B. Gemser, “The Importance of the Motive Clause in the Old Testament Law,” in *Congress Volume: Copenhagen*, edited by G. W. Anderson and others, VTSup. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), 50-66 [50].

<sup>76</sup> See S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 39; R. Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law*, SBLDS 45 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 75, 92-93.

<sup>77</sup> See J.W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 89. “The power to command depends on the identities of both speaker and hearer, and the nature of their relationship... the characterization of the law-giver plays a vital role in persuading hearers and readers to accept law and in motivating them to obey it.”

positive commands that affirm the existence of one God and the necessity of faith. Attention to these Jewish interpreters is in order.

### **Jewish Medievalists and the *Shema*: Maimonides and Others**

Another giant of the medieval age, like Thomas Aquinas, that interprets the *Shema* with the influence of Aristotelian philosophy, but from a Jewish perspective, is Moses Maimonides (c. 1135-1204). Like other Jewish interpreters of the medieval era who were naturally at pains to oppose the Christian interpretation of the Trinity in Deut 6:4, Maimonides too sensed a contradiction in calling the subject one yet predicating a plurality, but his interpretation took a unique perspective from his predecessors.<sup>78</sup> He elaborates his views of the metaphysical unity of one God in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, which he describes as an exegetical work, “only to elucidate the difficult points of the law and to make manifest the true realities of its hidden meanings,”<sup>79</sup> but as S. Klein-Braslavy observes,

the *Guide* [has] two basic presuppositions... (1) Maimonides assumes that the biblical text professes philosophical ideas—those elaborated in the Aristotelian school, mainly by the Arabic philosophers Alfarabi, Avicenna and Ibn Bajja— and (2) [since] the Bible uses diverse techniques of hiding/revealing the philosophical notions, hence, it is the interpreter’s task to decipher the texts and understand them.<sup>80</sup>

For Maimonides, to recite the *Shema* was to proclaim the immutable oneness, a statement that blurs the distinction between monotheism and monism:

If you have a desire to rise to a higher state... truly to hold the conviction that God is One and possesses true unity, without admitting plurality or divisibility in any sense whatever, you must understand that God has no essential attribute in any form or in any sense whatever, and that the rejection of corporeality implies the rejection of essential attributes. Those who believe that God is One, and that He has many attributes, declare the unity with their lips, and assume plurality in their thoughts. This is like the doctrine of

---

<sup>78</sup> See *Da’at Zekenim and Baha ibn Asher* to Deut 6:4; and Leon de Modena, *Magen va-Herev*, ed. by S. Simonsohn (1960), 31-32 in Louis Jacobs, “Shema”, 455.

<sup>79</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1904), 176.

<sup>80</sup> S. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides as Biblical Interpreter* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 8.

the Christians, who say that He is one and He is three, and that the three are one. Of the same character is the doctrine of those who say that God is One, but that He has many attributes; and that He with His attributes is One, although they deny corporeality and affirm His most absolute freedom from matter; as if our object were to seek forms of expression, not subjects of belief.

From the quote above, one may note that Maimonides is not contending against a Trinitarian view of this passage alone, but he also opposes the Zohar, which in itself is strongly anti-Christian, whose reference to the three divine names in Deut 6:4 represent the unity of three powers in the Godhead.<sup>81</sup> Maimonides' view of God is that He is one and nothing else, that He has no attributes that would amount to many, as M. Wyscogrod summarizes, "that He is indivisible, and nothing can be said about him other than that he is one," so it follows in the heels of Parmenides, that God is "the indescribable, impersonal absolute of the Philosophers... [which is] not the point of Deuteronomy."<sup>82</sup> "For there is no oneness at all" expressed Maimonides, "except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplication of notions."<sup>83</sup>

After the death of Maimonides, his son Abraham Maimonides (1186-1237) assumed the leadership of Egyptian Jewry and propagated "a form of pietism whose ethical concepts and ritual practices were largely inspired by Islamic mysticism."<sup>84</sup> This revivalist movement gave rise to several pietist exegetes who reinterpreted Jewish traditions in light of the Sufi traditions.

---

<sup>81</sup> Zohar, 1:18b; 3:263a. The three powers of the Godhead symbolized by white, red and great are either Lovingkindness (*Hesed*), Judgment (*Gevurah*), and Beauty (*Tiferet*) or Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), Understanding (*Binah*), and Beauty (*Tiferet*), depending on the *Sefirot*.

<sup>82</sup> M. Wyscogrod, in *Echad: The Many Meanings of God is One*, ed. by E. Borowitz (New York: Shma, 1988), 96.

<sup>83</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 43.

<sup>84</sup> P.B. Fenton, "The Post-Maimonidean Schools of Exegesis in the East: Abraham Maimonides, the Pietists, Tanhum ha-yarusalmi and the Yemenite School" in *HBOT 1/2* ed. by M. Saebo (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000), 434.

Abu Sulayman Abrahm ibn Abir r-Rabi'a he-Hasid (d. 1223) was one of these pietists who read into the *Shema* the mystical notion of *fana'* in the following quote:<sup>85</sup>

It behoves the devotee to meditate on his greatness and to recall his name to the point where love is impressed in his heart by which he turns to Him until he attains the state of unity, that is the annihilation (*fana'*) of humanity and the manifestation of divinity. This is the true unity in which is attained the goal expressed in the verse: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One" (Deut 6:4-5) and the verse: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart." Whereupon the heart will be filled with light... through the bliss of contemplating the Divine Beauty and Majesty.<sup>86</sup>

During the Medieval period, Jews were prolific, not only as observed in the writings of *Midrash* or *Kabbalah*, but in the textual work of the Masoretes. The carefully copied Hebrew text has ever since magnified the last letters of the first and last word of Deut 6:4, *ayin* and *dalet*, spelling the word for "witness". Abudraham comments that this was intentionally done so Jews who would address each other in their confession, "Hear O Israel", would "witness" or testify, together as one, that God is one.<sup>87</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

Throughout history, the *Shema* has remained a central and fundamental passage for both Christian and Jewish faiths about who God is. In its deuteronomistic context, Deut 6:4 serves as an epithetical characterization stressing the uniqueness of YHWH, Israel's God, that must be confessed under covenantal terms before one is bound to Him in supreme loyalty (6:5). Since no god is like Yahweh, after the exile Israel would not recognize other gods in the same terms as their God, instead expected all nations to one day universally recognize the sovereignty of

---

<sup>85</sup> *Fana'* or obliteration of self-consciousness is a central tenet of Sufi doctrine which leads to a mystical "intuition of existential Unity," Ibid, 446.

<sup>86</sup> Abraham He-Hasid, in P.B. Fenton, "A Mystical Treatise on Prayer and the Spiritual Quest from the Pietist Circle", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 16 (1993): 137-75.

<sup>87</sup> See L. Jacobs, "Shema", 455-56. Referenced: Dov Baer of Lubavitch, *Kunteres ha-Hitpa'alut*, in *Likkutel Be'urim* (1868), 54a.

Israel's God (Zech 14:9). With the pressure to conform to Hellenistic syncretism (multiple manifestations of the same deity across cultures) and a polytheistic worldview, faithful Jews more tenaciously rallied under the *Shema* as a positive confession that rejected idolatry, polytheism, or syncretism. The way the NT appropriates Deut 6:4 is not fundamentally different than how ancient Judaism had maintained the *Shema* as the first and central commandment of the Torah, the yoke of God's kingdom, and a basic acknowledgment of the oneness of God. Later Christian authors, however, maintained upon theological grounds that Christ must be confessed within this oneness, even if they still considered the Jewish understanding to be the plain sense of the text, over against the pagan concept of deity. The doctrine of the Trinity was then read into Deut 6:4, and apologetically explained against Arianism and against the Jewish denial of Christ's divinity. The medieval period experienced a renaissance of Aristotelian philosophy and mysticism among both Christian and Jewish authors, so that the unity of God was perceived in more complex terms, as an absolute unity, a first principle, or a transcendental oneness that could be experienced through mystical disciplines.

This brief summary of the historical interpretation of Deut 6:4 in premodern times suggests that despite the centrality and undisputed nature of this core statement (or perhaps precisely because of it) there have been at times shifts in emphases or revisions of meaning, often not denying previous theological thought, but building upon it. For example, the shift from the uniqueness of Yahweh to the monotheistic confession of one God after the exile does not deny that Yahweh is unique to His covenant people, rather it clarifies that He is universally the only God in existence. Also, the Christian concept of the Trinity read into Deut 6:4 is not a return to a pagan syncretistic or polytheistic concept of God, instead it is an expansion of the meaning of "one" to include Christ and the Holy Spirit in divine unity. On the other hand, to ascribe a

type of monism to this text, as Maimonides does, is both a determined opposition not only against the oneness of the Trinity, but against anything that can be ascribed to God concerning Yahweh's uniqueness, which is contrary to the intended meaning in its Deuteronomistic context. The *Shema* will continue to be a central text for Christians and Jews in its plain or literal sense, but as interpreters and theologians inquire about the concept of God's oneness it would be well to remember the history of interpretation of Deut 6:4 and evaluate whether modern theses and propositions upon this text would tend to deconstruct or edify upon previous interpretations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahams, I. *Studies in Pharisaism and the gospels*. Second Series. London: Cambridge University Press, 1924.
- Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*. Mahwah: Panlist, 1946.
- Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologica*. American Edition. Vols. 1-3. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946.
- Bade, W. F. "Der Monojehwismus des Deuteronomiums" *ZAW* 30 (1910): 81-90.
- Baillie, J., et al, ed. *The Library of Christian Classic*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953.
- Bede the Venerable. *Homilies on the Gospels*. Vol 1-2. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990.
- Block, D. I. *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord!* Eugene: Cascade, 2011.
- Boys-Stone, George. *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2001.
- Borowitz, E. ed. *Echad: The Many Meanings of God is One*. New York: Shma, 1988.
- Brady, B. V. *Christian Love: How Christians through the Ages Have Understood Love*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003.
- Bucher, A. *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century*. LBS. New York: KTAV Publishing, 1972.
- Burkitt, F. C. "The Hebrew Papyrus of the Ten Commandments" *JQR* 15 (1903): 392-408.
- Doyle L. trans. *The Rule of St. Benedict*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001.
- Emerton, J. A. "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud" *ZAW* 94.1 (1984): 88-93.
- Fathers of the church: A New Translation*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1947.
- Feiss, H. ed. *On Love: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St Victor*, VTT 2. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011.

- Fenton, P. B. "A Mystical Treatise on Prayer and the Spiritual Quest from the Pietist Circle". *JSAI* 16 (1993): 137-75.
- Gemser, B. "The Importance of the Motive Clause in the Old Testament Law". *Congress Volume: Copenhagen*. G. W. Anderson et al. eds. VTSup 1. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953.
- Hidalgo, E. J. "The Uniqueness of YHWH: The Most Probable Meaning of the Shema" [Unpublished research paper. OT901 Seminar in Old Testament Interpretation. Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015].
- Jacobs, L. "Shema, Reading of" *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Second Edition. Jerusalem: Keter, 2007. 18:451-54.
- Klein-Braslavy, S. *Maimonides as Biblical Interpreter*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011.
- Kraut, J. "Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deut 6:4" *VT* 61 (2011): 582-602.
- Lange A. and M. Weigold. "The Text of the Shema Yisrael in Qumran Literature and Elsewhere". *Textual Criticism and Dead Sea Scrolls Studies in Honor of Julio Trebolle Barrera*. JSJS 157. A.P. Otero & P.A. Torijano Morales, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- MacDonald, N. *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism*. FAT 2/1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.
- Maimonides, M. *Guide to the Perplexed*. London: Routledge & Kegan, 1904.
- Mann, T. W. *Deuteronomy*. WmBC. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995.
- McBride, S. D. "The Yoke of the Kingdom" *Interpretation* (1973),
- Neusner, J. *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation*. Vol. 1. BJS 98. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.
- Otto, E. *Deuteronomium 4, 44-11,32*. HThKAT 2. Herder: Freiburg, 2012.
- Paul, S. M. *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970.
- Saebo, M. *Hebrew Bible Old / Testament Testament: The History of Interpretation*. Vol. 1/2: The Middle Ages. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000.
- Sandmel, S. "Hellenistic Judaism" in *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*. New York: Oxford, 1978. Pp. 255-301.
- Schaff, P. et al., eds. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 2 series. Vols. 1-14 each. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952-1956.
- Ska, J. *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006.

- Sonsino, R. *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law*. SBLDS 45. Chico: Scholars Press, 1980.
- Stendahl, K. *The School of St. Matthew: And its use of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968.
- Stone, L. "BS 905: History of Biblical Interpretation". Class Notes. Wilmore: Asbury Theological Seminary, Fall 2015.
- Tigay, J. *Deuteronomy* *הדברים: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. JPSTC. Philadelphia: JPS, 1996.
- Veijola, T. "Hore Israel! Der Sinn und Hintergrund von Deuteronomium vi 4-9" *VT* 42.4 (1992): 530-36.
- Walton, J. H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Watts, J. W. *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999.
- Wevers, J. W. *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy*. SCS 39. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.