

The Shema: The Creed of Jesus

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A few weeks ago I taught on “The Shema.” In preparation for this teaching I researched the various Jewish traditions surrounding the central creed of Israel. But before we go any further, do you know what “the Shema” is? The word “Shema” is the imperative form of a Hebrew word meaning “hear” or “listen,” and it is the first word in Deuteronomy 6.4. Here is the section from the Bible:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6.4-9).

The first point is that “**the LORD is our God.**” The words “the LORD” are how most translations indicate the name of God — Yahweh, as opposed to “the Lord,” which is a title, not God’s personal name. Because of sensitivity to the Jewish people who believe the name should not be pronounced (though I have never found their arguments convincing) the translators of nearly all English Bibles translate God’s name — Yahweh — as “the LORD” with all capitals. So this is step one: Yahweh is *our* God, not Apis, Hathor, Ra, Nut, Set, Issis, Baal, Asherah, Dagon, Chemosh, nor even Jesus, but Yahweh. Yahweh is the only God for Israel — there are no other Gods for us other than Yahweh “our God.” Paul, the Rabbi confirms this when he says:

“Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that **there is no God but one.** For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet **for us there is but one God, the Father,** from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through him” (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

In other words, there may be other “so-called gods” but *for us* there is only one God — the Father. Furthermore, there is one lord — Jesus the Messiah. Thus, Paul appends *alongside* the Shema a statement about Jesus, but not in such a way that it infringes upon the simple declaration of Yahweh’s oneness as our God. The lord Jesus has a separate office — lord. It is quite clear that we have **one God** and one lord. Our one God is the Father and our lord is Jesus the Messiah.

Back to the Shema. The second point is equally simple: “**The LORD is one!**” Yahweh is one. Yahweh is indivisible. He is a singular being who cannot be fragmented. When Jesus quoted the Shema he said, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29). Many theologians have tried for many years to make the word “one” mean “three” unsuccessfully. Fortunately, the word “one” is not at all a fuzzy word, for it is the cardinal number — the word that someone would start with when counting. Yahweh is one, not two, not three. This simple irrefutable point is highlighted by the tens of thousands of singular pronouns and verbs used of God. God is a “he,” not a “they.” When he speaks he does not say “we” but “I.” This point is emphatic in Deuteronomy and Isaiah:

“To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him...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” (Deut. 4:35, 39).

“Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, ‘I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone’” (Isa. 44:24).

“I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these...For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited), ‘I am the LORD, and there is none else’” (Isaiah 45:5-7, 18).

“Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me” (Isaiah 46:9).

The Scriptures are unmistakably clear on this point (and there are many more verses which could be quoted to demonstrate the case). Yahweh alone is God. He is an “I,” not a “We” and He is very particular to get this point across to his people. He wants them to know “I am Yahweh, and there is none else.” But the Shema does no

end in Deuteronomy 6:4; it continues to verse 5 which says: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5).

Just as Deuteronomy 6:4 tells us who our God is and how many He is, verse 5 tells us what our proper action is towards Him. We are to love Him with *everything*. Not just our heart and strength but with our very lives! We love Yahweh our God with our emotions, our actions, our entire beings. In fact, this second part of the Shema is *impossible* without the first part. For if there are three who are God then we can never love any of them with everything. At best we could love each of them equally (one third to each). However, the advantage of *strict* monotheism is that we can fix our single-hearted focus on Yahweh and love Him single-mindedly — with every fiber of our being.

In my research into the Shema and how the Hebrew people have clung to this simple, central creed, I came across an incredible story about a second-century Jewish martyr. His name was Rabbi Akiva, and he may be familiar to you because he hailed Simon Bar Kokhba as the Messiah in the second Jewish revolt which ended in disaster in AD 135.

Well, anyhow, after the failed revolution of the Jews against Rome, the policy was set that the Torah (the Law) could no longer be taught on pain of death. Rabbi Akiva loved God so much that he taught Torah despite the Roman law forbidding it. When the Romans found out, they sentenced him to a painful death. They took a large iron comb and began to scrape off his 90-year-old flesh. When Rufus condemned the venerable Akiva to the hand of the executioner, it was just the time of day to recite the Shema. Full of devotion, Akiva recited his prayers calmly, though suffering agonies; and when Rufus asked him whether he was a sorcerer, since he felt no pain, Akiva replied, “I am no sorcerer; but I rejoice at the opportunity now given to me to love my God ‘with all my life,’ seeing that I have hitherto been able to love Him only ‘with all my means’ and ‘with all my might,’” and with the word ‘One!’ he expired” (Yer. Ber. ix. 14b, and somewhat modified in Bab. 61b). Akiva wanted to be able to love God with everything, which included the idea of loving God to the point of pouring out his soul to death.

Jewish Encyclopedia of 1906: “It [the Shema] is the last word of the dying in his confession of faith. It was on the lips of those who suffered and were tortured for the sake of the Law. R. Akiva patiently endured while his flesh was being torn with iron combs, and died reciting the ‘Shema.’ He pronounced the last word of the sentence, ‘Echad’ (one) with his last breath (Ber. 61b). During every persecution and massacre, from the time of the Inquisition to the slaughter of Kishinef, ‘Shema’Yisrael’ have been the last words on the lips of the dying.”

Indeed, the Shema is the precious confession of faith that Yahweh is our God, that He is one, and that we are to love Him with everything even if faced with torture and death.

But, that's not all! The Jewish understanding of the Shema includes not only Deuteronomy 6:4-5 but also verses 6-9: "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut. 6:6-9).

The Shema is to be on the Israelites' hearts; it is to be taught to their children. In fact, Jewish children are taught the Shema as soon as they can learn it. Furthermore, the Shema is said at least twice daily, in the morning and in the evening. The Shema is contained in the tefillin which are black leather boxes worn on the head and arm during prayer. In this way the commandments are bound as a sign. Lastly, the Shema is written on a scroll and placed in the mezuzah which is installed on the doorpost of the house.

Suffice it to say, the Shema was and is the central creed of Judaism. But, then what about us? Should Christians adopt the creed of Israel as our own creed? I have two responses to this question: one from Jesus and one from Paul.

In Mark 12:28-34 we find a scribe asking Jesus a serious question, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus replied by quoting the Shema, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Jesus then added to the Shema a second commandment (from Leviticus 19:18) when he said, "The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The Shema is the central creed for Jesus! This should not be too shocking after all, because Jesus was a Jew who lived the commandments contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. If the Shema is the creed of Judaism then of course Jesus would adopt it as his own personal creed. So, if the Shema was Jesus' central creed and Jesus is our lord and example, should we not adopt it as our own creed? Shouldn't we worship the same God whom Jesus worshiped? We may adopt other truths in addition to the creed of Jesus and Israel, but we may not contradict the truth contained within the Shema. In other words, we may not say God is three since the Shema asserts that our God is one individual — Yahweh — but we may add *alongside* the Shema, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 8:6, that Jesus is our lord Messiah.

The second response to the question of whether or not we should adopt the Shema as *our* foundational creed concerning God can be aptly summed up by these words: "Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one" (Rom. 3:29-30).

If the God of the Shema — the God of the Jews — is our God then we do well to believe the way the Jews and Jesus have, regarding His identity, oneness, and our love of Him. If we are the people of God, then we worship the same God as the Jews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed He is also the God of Jesus who worshiped Him alone. May we be like our master.