

What Does the Shema Really Mean?

Shema Yisrael, ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, “**Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!**” represents for all Bible readers the most ancient creedal statement of belief. The *Shema* is repeated in the daily, traditional prayers of Judaism as found in the *siddur*, and it is certainly a major feature of synagogue worship on the Sabbath. Even in much of Christianity, the words of the *Shema* are repeated in prayer, song, and worship, as the primacy of the Supreme God over Creation is declared. For myself, I had to declare forth the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, along with Isaiah 6:1-2 and Ephesians 4:11-13, at my commencement ceremony when completing my M.A. in Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

When the *Shema* is invoked, there is intended to be a moment of extreme reverence issued for the God of Israel, as men and women are to focus on His holiness, His omnipotence, and what He requires of His followers. We are to all make sure that the Lord is the One to whom we direct all of our worship, adoration, and veneration—and that we obey His Word and heed His direction for our lives.

While the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 undoubtedly has an imperative for God’s people of worshipping, loving, and serving Him—the *Shema* also has an important place in religious history as it concerns monotheism. When the Ancient Israelites left Egypt, and were preparing themselves to enter into the Promised Land, they would certainly need a “statement of belief,” if you will, by which they would declare their exclusive loyalty to the LORD God, and not any of the other deities of Canaan. The *Shema* enjoined the requirements for God’s commandments to be taught to the people of Israel, and that they were to instruct their children.

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In much of religious studies since, and most especially today, approaches to the *Shema* have gone beyond what was originally intended for the Ancient Israelites. While all who profess the *Shema* claim that their devotion is directed to the God of Israel, there can be a wide difference of approach between how the *Shema* is viewed in Jewish theology and Christian theology—particularly when it comes to the statement “the LORD is one.” In historical Judaism, the Lord being “one” means that God is a single entity. In historical Christianity, being “one” means that God is surely a prime entity, but that He may be composed of multiple elements like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The debate, over whether God’s oneness allows or disallows for a plurality of persons or manifestations, is one which has doubtlessly arisen within the broad Messianic movement. As with too many theological issues Messianics face, the subject matter of the *Shema* has become mired in some rather base human emotions and spiteful rhetoric, with not enough attention given to the Biblical text and the applications of the *Shema* that are encountered within the Scriptural narrative.

This article will analyze what is communicated by the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the issue of oneness in the Bible and whether or not a plural Godhead is allowable, and some key applications of the *Shema* witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures. This article will also consider the current approaches, both positive and negative, witnessed regarding the *Shema* in the Messianic community—and will provide some tentative conclusions on the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 The Shema for Ancient Israel

“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” (NASU).

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is delivered after the Ten Commandments have been repeated to the Ancient Israelites (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). The close association with the *Shema* and the Ten Commandments obviously makes what is to be declared most imperative for the people. Within the Torah itself, the Book of Deuteronomy or *Devarim*, meaning “words,” includes a repetition of much of the Torah’s previous instructions to Israel. Our English term Deuteronomy is derived from its Greek Septuagint designation of *Deuteronomium*, literally meaning “second law.” This is taken from how a king of Israel is told he “shall write for himself a copy of this law” (Deuteronomy 17:18, NASU). The Hebrew of this is *mishneh ha’Torah*, as *mishneh* means “double, copy, second” (BDB).¹ The LXX rendered this as *deuteronomion*. The overall theme and message of the Book of Deuteronomy is that the Ancient Israelites are to be prepared and readied to enter into the Promised Land.

That the word of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is commonly called the *Shema* is most obvious from its opening declaration: *shema Yisrael*. In most Bibles this appears as “Hear O Israel!”, although the implication of the *Shema* goes well beyond people audibly listening to a spoken word. Appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), the Hebrew verb *shama* has a much wider variance of meanings than does the English “hear.” *CHALOT* lists a number of possible usages for *shama* throughout the Hebrew Bible, including: “hear,” “listen to,” “heed,” “hear=understand,” and “be heard.”² *BDB* indicates that it can mean

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 1041.

² William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 376.

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“hear with attention, interest, listen to.”³ The main purpose of the Israelites hearing what is stated in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, is not only that they might listen to the Instruction of God, but also that they would *act upon it*. The information contained in the *Shema* is not just a series of interesting facts and figures about God and what He expects of His people. Those who hear the *Shema* are to pay attention to its message, inculcate its words into their hearts and minds, and live accordingly in obedience. While considered a little antiquated, perhaps the rendering “Hearken O Israel!” better captures the idea of hearing, inculcating, and subsequently following what is stated in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

The *Shema* requires five things to be followed by God’s people:

1. to love God to the fullest, with all of one’s being (Deuteronomy 6:5)
2. to take to heart the Word of God and His commandments (Deuteronomy 6:6)
3. to teach the Word of God, and speak about His commandments to one’s children during daily affairs (Deuteronomy 6:7)
4. to bind the Word of God as a sign upon the arm and between the eyes (Deuteronomy 6:8)
5. to affix the Word of God to the doorposts of the house and upon the gates (Deuteronomy 6:9)

It is obvious, especially in the scope of Jewish interpretations of Deuteronomy 6:8-9, that these instructions were useful in developing the practice of binding *tefillin* or phylacteries, and placing the *mezuzah* on one’s doorframe. Some of these instructions have been viewed as being a bit symbolic by various other readers, though.⁴ The point to be taken, of course, is that no matter how the elongated *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is applied by those who hear it—is that God’s Word, God’s commandments, and God’s activities in the lives of His people are to form their core identity. There is no specific detail regarding how God’s Instruction or His Law is to be taught to people, just that it is to be taught and discussed—even at the family level. The *Shema* is not a place to debate the useful place of later Jewish synagogues, or any sort of religious academies of study. The *Shema* is to instead establish, in a very broad sense, the primacy of God’s care for and involvement in the community of Israel. The *Shema* has theological and practical implications for how God is honored by His people.

³ BDB, 1033.

⁴ Consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “*Tefillin*.”

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What guides the *Shema*, more than anything else, is the requirement: “and you are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart, all your being and all your resources” (Deuteronomy 6:5, CJB), *v’ahavta et ADONAI Elohekha b’kol-l’vavkha u’v’kol-nafshekha u’v’kol-me’odekha*. Out of a love for God, then obedience to His commandments is to naturally come forth, which He is specific about when He states they are to “be on your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5, NASU), *al-l’vavkha*. Biblical history demonstrates that human beings trying to transcribe God’s commandments on their own hearts—even with some useful methods of memorization and implementation possessing significant value—has ultimately been something lacking, as people still fall into various degrees of sinful behavior. This is why the impetus of the New Covenant is that God Himself would not only provide a permanent atonement for sin and forgiveness, but that His Spirit would supernaturally transcribe His Instruction onto the hearts and minds of His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).

The practical importance of the *Shema*, for God’s people, is to be manifested in how all actions performed in relation to Him result from love. This is why Yeshua the Messiah, in His teachings to His followers, enjoined people to remember that the Deuteronomy 6:4-5 command is the foremost of all the Torah’s commandments:

“Yeshua answered, ‘The foremost is, “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”” (Mark 12:29-30, NASU).

“‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matthew 22:36-38, NASU).⁵

Any and all proper handling of the *Shema* will recognize the centrality of God’s place in the lives of His people, and how obedience to His Torah comes forth from the love that we are to have for Him. In the post-resurrection era of the New Covenant (cf. Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17), where Yeshua the Messiah has been sacrificed for human sins, and permanent atonement and forgiveness have been provided—the

⁵ Cf. Luke 10:27-28.

Consult the useful discussion in the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “Leviticus 18:5.”

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Holy Spirit present within the lives of the redeemed is to surely compel them to live forth the essence of the *Shema!*

All readers of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 should be agreed that it enjoins God's people to love Him and obey Him, and it is not surprising at all why the word of Leviticus 19:18—"you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (NASU)—is frequently associated with it.⁶ What all readers of the *Shema* are not agreed upon is what the assertion in Deuteronomy 6:4, *ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad*, actually means.

In order for Messianic Believers to have an appropriate perspective on the *Shema*, we need to be able to understand what "**the LORD is one**" first communicated for the Ancient Israelites in Deuteronomy. These were people who were being instructed by Moses for one last time, before Joshua would take over and lead them into the Land of Canaan. What would "the LORD is one" mean to them, set against an Ancient Near Eastern background of their immediate forbearers having been delivered from Egypt, and with them preparing to do battle—both physical *and* religious—with the Canaanites?

This is where it needs to be recognized that there is a wide array of interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, who rightfully acknowledge that the issue of *ADONAI Eloheinu, ADONAI echad*, as far as Deuteronomy 6:4 and its original purpose for the Israelites entering into the Promised Land was concerned—was not really the composition or makeup of God—but rather God's supremacy and primacy when set against the multiple gods of Canaan. The chart below has summarized a few opinions:

⁶ Cf. Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

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"the LORD is one"

JEWISH INTERPRETERS

"The Lord, Who is now only *our God* and not of other peoples, will in time to come be acknowledged by all the world as the one and only God."⁷

Soncino Chumash

"He is One, because there is no other God than He; but He is also One, because He is wholly unlike anything else in existence. He is therefore not only One, but the Sole and Unique God."⁸

J.H. Hertz

"At this stage in history, only Israel recognizes Hashem as One, thus He is *our God*; but in time to come, after the final Redemption, all the world will acknowledge that *HASHEM is One (Rashi)*....[T]he Torah says that Hashem is the *One and Only*—there is an inner harmony for all that He does, though human intelligence cannot comprehend what it is. This, too, will be understood at the End of Days, when God's ways are illuminated."⁹

ArtScroll Chumash

CHRISTIAN INTERPRETERS

"[T]he passage is a confession set in opposition to the temptations of the Canaanite cult of Baal; in the other case it is a confession of the oneness of Yahweh in face of the multiplicity of divergent traditions and sanctuaries of Yahweh. Both interpretations can claim support from Deuteronomy."¹⁰

Gerhard Von Rad

"Yahweh was to be the sole object of Israel's worship, allegiance, and affection. The word 'one' or 'alone' implies monotheism, even if it does not state it with all the subtleties of theological formulation. Biblical monotheism was given a practical and existential expression which would lead to the abandonment of such views as monolatry. Even if some in Israel acknowledged the existence of other gods, the

⁷ A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash* (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1983), 1022.

⁸ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 770.

⁹ Nosson Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 973.

¹⁰ Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 63.

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affirmation that Yahweh alone was Sovereign and the sole object of Israel's obedience sounded the death-knell to all views lesser than monotheism."¹¹

J.A. Thompson

"These words, which have been called the fundamental monotheistic dogma of the OT, have both practical and theological implications. The Israelites had already discovered the practical implications when they celebrated the Exodus in song: 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?' (Exod. 15:11), a rhetorical question inviting a negative response—there were no gods like the Lord! In the Exodus, the Israelites had discovered the uniqueness of their God and that the Egyptian 'gods' could do nothing to stop the Lord's people leaving Egypt. It was because they had experienced the living presence of their God in history that the Israelites could call the Lord *our God*. Thus the oneness and reality of the Lord were practical knowledge to the people."¹²

Peter C. Craigie

The implication of *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* in Deuteronomy 6:4, as recognized by an array of commentators, was to establish in the hearts and minds of the Ancient Israelites **the absolute primacy of their God**. In Peter C. Craigie's estimation, "it is possible that 'one' is intended as name or title of God,"¹³ with *echad* or "one" serving as a kind of status which His people would acknowledge of Him. It should not at all be surprising, then, why *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad*—with *echad* relating to a status of being first—has passed into some Bible translations as "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4, NRSV/NJPS) or "HASHEM is our God, HASHEM is the One and Only" (ATS). The *Shema* surely requires God's people to look to Him as their only Source of guidance, protection, and provision. God's people are to worship and venerate Him alone. And with this in mind, the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 would surely stand against any religious pluralism—because if the Lord is to be the sole focus of worship and devotion, then there are *not* multiple paths to the Supreme Being.

¹¹ J.A. Thompson, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), pp 121-122.

¹² Peter C. Craigie, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 168.

Does the Shema allow for a plural Godhead?

While it can be recognized that the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 was originally intended to assert the primacy of the LORD God of Israel as the sole Deity of worship and adoration for the Ancient Israelites preparing to enter Canaan—later theological and philosophical reflection upon the *Shema*, indicate that there has been application going beyond the original scope of the *Shema's* intention. By the period of Second Temple Judaism, the declaration “**The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!**” became a prime proof text for affirming Israel’s monotheistic religion, especially set against a Greco-Roman world of polytheism, which was frequently trying to tempt Jewish people to embrace additional systems of worship (as most certainly indicated by the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E.). Many liturgical prayers and praises issued to God, employed the *Shema* as some kind of a basis, and the *Shema* certainly affected the worldview of First Century Jews in terms of their interactions with others in the larger Mediterranean world.

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 has been a place for considerable debate between both Jewish Rabbis and Christian theologians over the centuries, extending to the present day. Some of this has been colored by unfortunate anti-Semitic acts committed by various Christian religious and political authorities,¹⁴ but much of it is also the result of different approaches to the text of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and the relationship of the One God of Israel to Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ). Does the statement of *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* allow for a plural Godhead, with the oneness of *Elohim* being a plurality? Most Jews will answer “No” to this, and most Christians will answer “Yes.”

Among Jewish examiners, Richard Elliot Friedman, interpreting Deuteronomy 6:4, makes some appropriate observations in tune with the Ancient Near Eastern setting of the *Shema*. He states, “In comparing Israel’s monotheism to pagan religion, we must appreciate that the difference between one and many is not the same sort of thing as the difference between two and three or between six and twenty. It is not numerical. It is a different concept of what a god is. A God who is outside of nature, known through acts in history, a creator, unseeable, without a mate, who makes legal covenants with humans, who is one, is a revolution in religious conception.”¹⁵ From this perspective, God

¹⁴ Cf. Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, pp 920-924.

¹⁵ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 586.

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being *echad* should be taken as an insistence upon God's grand uniqueness. The specialized challenge, of course, is recognizing that this God indeed does have multiple components to "Itself." Proverbs 30:4 asks the question, "Who has ascended heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hand? Who has wrapped the waters in his garment? Who has established all the extremities of the earth? What is his name or his son's name, if you know it?" (NJPS). When one sees the question *mah-sh'mo u'mah-shem-beno?*, "What is His name or His son's name?" (NASU), that Yeshua as the Son of God can be integrated into the Godhead along with His Father, does find Tanach support. Those who affirm Yeshua's Messiahship, can also affirm some sort of special relationship that He has as a part of the Godhead as the Eternal Son.

So does "one," as it is used in key places in the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, allow for *Elohim* or God to be a plurality?

"One" in the Hebrew Tanach

From the Creation account, it is often debated whether or not *Elohim* or God is an absolute one or a composite one. We read in the narrative, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'" (Genesis 1:26, NASU). Christians have widely viewed this as a conversation that God is having with Himself, indicative of a plural Godhead. Jewish readers, in contrast, have largely interpreted the "Us" as a Heavenly court or celestial host, representing the Supreme Being and His angels. This second interpretation can run into a potential problem, as Genesis 1:27 further says, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (NASU). The subject of this sentence is clearly *Elohim* or God, with human beings created *b'tzelem Elohim* or in the image of God. Human beings were not made in the image of the angels, requiring that the "Us" of Genesis 1:26 to be God. From the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, clues are given to Bible readers regarding the plurality of God. It should not be taken as a coincidence that the most common Hebrew term for "God," *Elohim*, is the plural of *El*.

As it relates to *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* in Deuteronomy 6:4, there is considerable debate over what the word *echad* or "one" means. We previously discussed how among various examiners today, *echad* has been approached from the perspective of "The LORD is our God, the

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LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NRSV/NJPS), which attests to the primacy of God in the lives of His people. It cannot go unnoticed, though, that Biblical Hebrew has several terms for “one.” The Hebrew word used in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 is *echad*; it is to be differentiated from the word *yachid*. Actual usage and context in various passages will obviously determine their proper meaning, but the Hebrew term *echad* can definitely have different connotations of “one” than *yachid*.

A notable usage of *echad* appears in Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become **one flesh**” (NASU). This speaks of a husband and wife becoming *basar echad* or “one flesh.” This is two people, or two distinct entities, becoming one. In a proper marriage, there is a union between a man and a woman; they are one of purpose and one of substance, yet in being “one” there is co-existence of the two.

Echad representing the unity of a group of people is used in Genesis 11:6, speaking of humanity before the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel: “The LORD said, ‘Behold, they are **one people** [*am echad*], and they all have the same language¹⁶...’” (NASU).¹⁷ Later, in Numbers 14:15, the collective assembly of the Israelites is referred to as one man: “Now if You slay this people as **one man** [*ish echad*], then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say...” (NASU). Both of these references, employing the Hebrew *echad*, are to composite groups of people as “one.” When Americans recite the Pledge of Allegiance and say “one nation under God,” they refer to a composite, united group, no different than what the Ancient Israelites were to be.

The most common usage that a reader of the Hebrew Bible, will actually encounter for the term *echad*, is in seeing it employed as a cardinal number—in the sense of #1, #2, #3, etc.¹⁸ The term *echad* can also be used in an ordinal sense, representing “first,” as in Genesis 8:13 it is used as a reference to the first of the month: “Now it came about in the six hundred and first year, **in the first month** [*b’echad l’chodesh*], on the first of the month, the water was dried up from the earth” (NASU).

¹⁶ Heb. *safah achat*.

It cannot go unnoticed here how there is further flexibility in the Hebrew term *echad*, with it also meaning “**the same**” (*CHALOT*, 133).

¹⁷ Genesis 11:7 further says, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (NASU), which like Genesis 1:27 should be taken as a significant clue of God’s plurality.

¹⁸ C.L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp 268-269; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp 32-35.

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The Hebrew term *yachid*, in contrast to *echad*, is something that widely concerns “only, only one, solitary” (BDB),¹⁹ and in some contexts can mean “**lonely, abandoned**” (CHALOT).²⁰ In Genesis 22:2, God tells Abraham to take his only son to be sacrificed: “He said, ‘Take now your son, **your only son** [et-binekha et-yechidekha], whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (NASU). This is representative of the fact that Isaac, and he alone, was the only son of promise given to Abraham. Later in Psalm 68:6, *yachid* is used to refer to the solitary: “God makes a home for the **lonely** [desolate, RSV; *yechidim*]; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, only the rebellious dwell in a parched land” (NASU).

Can *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* be compatible with the concept that *Elohim* or God is a plurality of persons or manifestations? It is witnessed within the Hebrew Tanach that there are examples of *echad* or “one” representing a collection of multiple entities, and that the “oneness” present is a composite oneness and not an absolute oneness. It has been the conclusion of many Christian interpreters, who affirm the Apostolic Scriptures’ claim that Yeshua the Messiah is indeed the LORD God made manifest in the flesh, that the *Shema* allows for a oneness of *Elohim* of multiple components or manifestations. Such co-existent persons or manifestations would, at the very least, have to involve the Father and the Son.

Originally to the Ancient Israelites, the statement “the LORD is one” would have regarded the primacy of the Lord in the hearts and minds of the people as they were preparing to enter into Canaan. But, we cannot deny that implanted within the assertion *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad*, is the claim that the Godhead is plural—otherwise readers should expect to have seen *yachid* used in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 and not *echad*. *TWOT* describes how “In the famous *Shema* of Deut. 6:4...the question of diversity within unity has theological implications. Some scholars have felt that, though ‘one’ is singular, the usage of the word allows for the doctrine of the Trinity [of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united]. While it is true that this doctrine is foreshadowed in the OT, the verse concentrates on the fact that there is one God and that Israel owes its exclusive loyalty to him.”²¹ The statement that *Elohim* is *echad*, does very much seem to allow for a

¹⁹ BDB, 402.

²⁰ CHALOT, 133.

²¹ Herbert Wolf, “*echad*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:30.

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plural Godhead—similar to how husband and wife are to be “one flesh,” or humanity at large is to be considered “one people.” This conclusion, of *Elohim* being a composite oneness and *not* an absolute oneness, is not one that has been present in most of historical Judaism.

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Earl S. Kalland explains some of the differences between Jewish and Christian approaches to *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* in Deuteronomy 6:4. In the event that some of you have never seen the differences of approach, this summary should prove to be a bit useful:

“To the Jews v.4 is not only an assertion of monotheism, it is also an assertion of the numerical oneness of God contradictory to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity of the Godhead. This kind of oneness, however, runs contrary to the use of... (*‘ehād*) in the sense of a unity made up of several parts. In Exod 26:6, 11, the fifty gold clasps are used to hold the curtains together so that the tent would be a unit (*‘ehād*). Ezekiel said that the Lord directed him to join two sticks to represent Judah and Ephraim, for he was going to make the two kingdoms one, i.e., a single nation made of two parts (Ezek 37:17, 19, 22). This Jewish view of oneness also contradicts those statements in Scripture that show that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The verse declares the unity of the Godhead, viz., one God in three persons—though the Trinity of the Godhead is not taught in this passage.”²²

Obviously, the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity developed much later than the original giving of the *Shema* to the Ancient Israelites preparing to enter into the Promised Land. And, such a doctrine would certainly claim evidence from testimonies of God’s composition that are witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament, in support of a plural Godhead. Yet, it can be affirmed that the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, with *Elohim* being *echad* or a composite one, laid the groundwork for later specification on what such a composite oneness of a plural Godhead would involve.

A common refutation, given against the plurality of the Godhead, is sometimes directed from Zechariah 14:9. It is prophesied that in the Last Days, “the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one” (RSV). We are told *b’yom ha’hu yiyeh ADONAI echad u’sh’mo echad*. This is actually an important place where the Hebrew *echad*, relating to primacy, is doubtlessly in view. The LORD God of Israel will be the only Deity that all of humankind will

²² Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 2:65.

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look to when His Kingdom comes to Earth, as Zechariah 13:2 has previously stated, "'It will come about in that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered; and I will also remove the prophets and the unclean spirit from the land'" (NASU). Commenting on Deuteronomy 6:4; Zechariah 13:12; 14:9, Jewish commentator Jeffrey H. Tigay observes, "Deuteronomy and Zechariah both use 'one' in the sense of 'alone,' 'exclusively.'"²³ In his estimation, this will mean "that for all of humanity, YHVH and His name will stand alone, unrivaled....YHVH will be recognized exclusively and His name alone will be invoked in prayer and oaths."²⁴

Opponents of a plural Godhead claim that since God's name will be "one," that this cannot possibly be representative of a plurality of *Elohim*. But in recognizing that *echad* has a wider array of applications than does the English #1, we can understand what this text is really saying. Michael Brown rightly concludes in his *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 2* that this "is a prophecy of all peoples turning to Yahweh, forsaking their idols and false religions and worshipping him alone. It tells us nothing about the nature of his oneness. All it says is that he, the one true God, will be worshipped by all."²⁵

In the Hebrew Tanach, *echad* has the dual meaning of both representing "one" in a composite sense, and representing "one" in a primary sense. Our God is "one" in that He is to be primary in our lives. Our God is one in that He manifests Himself by a plurality of entities (i.e., the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but yet these components of the Godhead are all unified similar to how a husband and wife are "one flesh."

If the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 were truly speaking of *Elohim* or God as an absolute unity of a single person or entity, then the word *yachid* would have been used, instead of *echad*, for "one." Interestingly enough, as Brown informs us, this "idea [was] expressed most clearly in the twelfth century by Moses Maimonides, who asserted that the Jewish people must believe that God is *yachid*, an 'only' one...the view of Maimonides is reactionary and also goes beyond what is stated in the

²³ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 2: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 11.

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Scriptures.”²⁶ The Hebrew Tanach, though, does not say that the Lord is *yachid*, meaning an absolute, solitary one—but rather that He is *echad*, a primary and composite one (cf. Proverbs 30:4).

“One” in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures

A proper understanding of “one” in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures and the nature of God must be understood in light of its Tanach background in the *Shema*. The Hebrew *ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad* was rendered in the Greek Septuagint as *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin*, “The Lord our God is one Lord” (LXE; cf. Mark 12:29). The Greek term corresponding to the Hebrew *echad* is *heis*. The Greek *heis* has a wider array of connotations than does the Hebrew *echad*, as *echad* can be rendered as *heis* by the Septuagint, but not always. The Greek *heis* is much closer to the English term “one,” with a range of meanings. “It usually means ‘single,’ ‘once-for-all,’ ‘unique,’ ‘unanimous,’ ‘one of many,’ or ‘only one’” (TDNT).²⁷ This requires a reader to evaluate specific uses of *heis*, to determine what it actually means.

(Do be aware how the Greek language has three genders—masculine, feminine, and neuter—and is case driven, meaning that the forms of nouns, pronouns, and adjectives all change form and number given their function in a sentence or clause.²⁸ In the nominative case [indicating subject], the three main forms are the masculine *heis*; feminine *mia*; and neuter *hen*. When we speak of the Greek term for “one” here, *heis* will be referred to, even though specific verses or clauses may have other forms used.)

In the examples referenced above from the Hebrew Tanach, where *echad* is employed to denote a oneness in plurality, the Greek Septuagint rendered *am echad* in Genesis 11:6 as *genos hen* or “one race” (LXE), and *ish echad* in Numbers 14:15 as *anthrōpon hena* or “one man” (LXE). Both of these verses employ *heis* for one, indicating how *heis* can be used to represent composite groups of people as “one.”

In the references provided by Kalland previously noted, we see how *echad* is rendered with *heis*. *Ha’mishkan echad* in Exodus 26:6 is rendered by the LXX as *hē skēnē mia*, and *v’hayah echad* in Exodus 26:11 is rendered by the LXX as *kai estai hen*. Further, we see that *etz echad* in

²⁶ Ibid., 4; cf. Tigay, 440 and his reference to *yihud* in Jewish theology.

²⁷ E. Stauffer, “*heis*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 215.

²⁸ For a general review, consult David Alan Black, *It’s Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

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Ezekiel 37:17, 19 is rendered by the LXX as *hrabdon mian*, and *goy echad* in Ezekiel 37:22 is rendered by the LXX as *ethnos hen*.

Just like the Hebrew *echad*, the usage of the Greek *heis*, in specific instances, will determine whether or not it represents composite groups of "one." In Romans 12:5, we definitely see *heis* used to denote a composite group of one, as Paul says, "so we, who are many, are **one body** in Messiah, and individually members **one of another**" (NASU). *hen sōma esmen en Christō, to de kath' heis allēlōn melē*. The Body of Messiah is made up of individual people, who are to serve one another in unity, and this unity is obviously a plurality of persons.

It is also to be noted that with Biblical Greek possessing a wider vocabulary than Biblical Hebrew, the Septuagint does not always translate *echad* as *heis*. A notable instance in the LXX, where we have previously examined where *echad* is used, is Genesis 8:13, *b'echad l'chodesh*, "on the first of the month." This is rendered as *tou prōtou mēnos*, "in the first month" (LXE), with the word *prōtos* or "first" employed.

In Psalm 68:6, where *yachid* is used to refer to "the solitary" (NJPS) or "the lonely" (NASU), the LXX uses *monotropos*, "the solitary" (LXE). If God in the *Shema* were to be considered an absolute one, rather than using the words *heis*, or even *prōtos* in the Greek, a term like *monos* could have surely been used instead.²⁹ However, what the Septuagint's Jewish translators did, was render *ADONAI Eloheinu ADONAI echad* as *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin*, "The Lord our God is one Lord." In doing so, they helped to affirm that the God of Israel is the one and only God. A term with some ambiguity present to it, *heis*, was used for "one."

Whenever the Greek term *heis* is used, context determines its proper meaning. However, we can to an extent carry the meaning of *echad* over into *heis*, where *heis* is employed in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Heis*, just like *echad*, can certainly be used to speak of a composite one and not an absolute one. There are places witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures, where *heis* as a reference to the One God of Israel in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, is specifically applied to Yeshua the Messiah. This is important for not only recognizing a plural Godhead of at least Father and Son, but also in establishing how Yeshua the Messiah is integrated directly into the Divine Identity, being every bit as much God as the Father.

²⁹ The term *monos* is employed to describe exclusive service to the God of Israel in the Septuagint (1 Samuel 7:3) and Apostolic Scriptures (Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8).

1 Corinthians 8:5-6

The Messianic Shema: One God and One Lord

“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, Yeshua the Messiah, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him*” (NASU).

Generally, all readers of 1 Corinthians are aware of the complicated circumstances that the Apostle Paul had to address, as his audience was significantly factionalized (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:11-13), and there were a significant number of issues plaguing them. Much of the Epistle of 1 Corinthians was composed as part of an ongoing correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian Believers, with 1 Corinthians actually being the second letter he had sent to them (1 Corinthians 5:9). Much of the dialogue, that occurred between Paul and the Corinthians in this letter, is seen with the Apostle arguing much of his position on the basis of logic—as it is quite possible that his non-extant letter argued from Tanach Scripture and was largely dismissed. Among the important topics needing to be discussed, in 1 Corinthians, was the issue of meat taken from idol sacrifices. What was to happen in the event that any of the Corinthians ate meat that had been sacrificed to idols? Paul describes the situation in view:

“Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3, NASU).

Is it further stated by Paul how “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” (1 Corinthians 8:4, NASU), *kai hoti oudeis Theos ei mē heis*. Paul was not one to deny the real existence of dark supernatural forces, nor was he one to deny the insistence of the Apostolic decree which decisively forbade the new, non-Jewish Believers from eating meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:19-21). Yet, what if a Believer *ever* did eat meat sacrificed to idols? Ultimately, idols are just dead gold, silver, stone, and wood. The One God of Creation is superior to all, as He is the One who actually *created* the powers that pagans consider to be their gods.

In the event that a Corinthian Believer might eat meat sacrificed to idols, forgiveness from Him would surely be available. However, we can see that Paul did not at all endorse the Corinthian Believers going

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out and eating meat sacrificed to idols. He chides the Corinthians who think they can do this without any ensuing consequences, calling it “this liberty of yours” (1 Corinthians 8:9, NASU),³⁰ because by going out and associating with those who eat meat sacrificed to idols, younger and weaker Believers may relapse into paganism (1 Corinthians 8:7-13).

Why the Apostle Paul can assert the supremacy of the One God of Israel is affirmed in an extremely important way, as is seen in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6:

“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, Yeshua the Messiah, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him” (NASU).

There is no doubting in Paul’s mind that the idols the pagans of Corinth served were to classify as so-called “gods” and “lords.” These were real demonic entities, composing the dominion of Satan—but were ultimately nothing in view of the Supreme Creator. However, for the righteous, Paul asserts that there is One God for them to serve, worship, and obey. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, though, the Apostle Paul is witnessed reworking the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, as not only does he testify that there is One God, the Father—but that there is also One Lord, Yeshua the Son. This is the Deity to whom all of the righteous are to pay heed. Notice the discernible linguistic connections between Deuteronomy 6:4 in the Septuagint, and how its language has been appropriated to apply to both the Father and Son:

Deuteronomy 6:4 (LXX): *Kurios ho Theos hēmōn Kurios heis estin*

1 Corinthians 8:6: *All’ hēmin heis Theos ho Patēr ex ou ta panta kai hēmeis eis auton, kai heis Kurios Iēsous Christos di’ ou ta panta kai hēmeis di’ autou*

In various theological circles, it has been witnessed that 1 Corinthians 8:6 has been known as a kind of “Christian *Shema*,” in that the One God of Israel and the One Lord Yeshua the Messiah are identified side by side with one another. The relationship that the Father and the Son have, is presented by Paul in terms of the

³⁰ The statement of, “But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (1 Corinthians 8:8, NASU), is likely one of the multiple Corinthian slogans that Paul had to confront in 1 Corinthians. The worst of them by far was *panta moi exestin*, “Everything is permissible for me” (1 Corinthians 6:12/10:23, NIV).

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monotheistic declaration of the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema*. The Son is the Father's agent of Creation to be sure (John 1:3; Colossians 1:15-17), but He is identified in 1 Corinthians 8:6 as the One Lord, *heis Kurios*. What makes this important, of course, is how the title *Kurios* was employed in the Greek Septuagint for rendering the Divine Name YHWH/YHVH—a **status applied directly to the Messiah!** The memorial name of the Eternal God, which was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:15), is something that is possessed by the Messiah (cf. Philippians 2:10-11). In the view of Gordon D. Fee, from his commentary on 1 Corinthians, we see how,

"In the same breath that he can assert that there is only one God, [Paul] equally asserts that the designation 'Lord,' which in the OT belongs to the one God, is the proper designation of the divine son. One should note especially that Paul feels no tension between the affirmation of monotheism and the clear distinction of the two persons of Father and Jesus Christ."³¹

The early Believers affirmed the Son's relationship to the Father in terms of the Son being the LORD or YHWH of the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema!* In recent Christological studies, this has been explained as the Son being integrated into the Divine Identity of the Godhead. In his book *Jesus and the God of Israel*, Richard Bauckham states that for 1 Corinthians 8:6, "Paul rewrites the Shema' to include both God and Jesus in the unique divine identity,"³² which would obviously force a person to recognize how Yeshua the Messiah is to be considered the LORD God, and not just some kind of supernatural exalted being, yet ultimately not being God. Yeshua's integration into the Divine Identity, presented in terms of the *Shema*, would guard against any idea that the early Believers thought that there were multiple gods in the Heavens, but obviously that the One God of Israel involved more than the Father. Bauckham further explains,

"In stating that there is one God and one Lord, Paul is unmistakably echoing the monotheistic statement of the Shema'...He has, in fact, taken over all of the words of this statement, but rearranged them in such a way as to produce an affirmation of both one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ...The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to understand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God affirmed in the Shema'...Paul is

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 375.

³² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 213.

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not adding to the one God of the Shema' a 'Lord' the Shema' does not mention. He is identifying Jesus as the 'Lord' (YHWH) whom the Shema' affirms to be one. This, in Paul's quite unprecedented reformulation of the Shema', the unique identity of the one God *consists of* the one God, the Father, *and* the one Lord, his Messiah (who is implicitly regarded as the Son of Father)."³³

The Father to be regarded as the One God, and the Son as the One Lord (*Kurios*/YHWH), would require not only Yeshua the Son to be considered Deity—but would also require the Godhead to be plural. The language proposed by a scholar like Bauckham, that the Son shares the same **Divine Identity** as His Father, is to be greatly appreciated. While Divine agency is involved in this, as the Son obeys the Father and submits to the Father—the Son is seen to be identified with titles that would have normally been exclusively reserved for the Father.

The Truth About the Trinity and Messianic Handling of the Shema

When one encounters the subject of the plurality of *Elohim* or God in much of today's Messianic movement, there is no shortage of statements or Messianic writing and literature that will denounce the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity—that God is composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as somehow being “pagan.” For some reason or another, any possible parallel or detectable connection to another religion, as small as it might be—of God being composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—means that the concept is to be flatly rejected. This is a problem, because the historic doctrine of the Trinity is one of a *multitude* of potential beliefs that can be rejected via such a method, because of possible parallels or connections with paganism. There are scores of possible connections to be made between the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, and Ancient Near Eastern mythology—yet there is no widespread clamor in the current Messianic movement to say that the Noahic Flood is really just the Epic of Gilgamesh repackaged into Israel's Scriptures. Flippantly claiming that something is just outright “pagan,” often without any substantial evidence, has been used far too frequently in today's Messianic movement to reject things that are legitimately communicated by the Bible.

Of course, the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is something that specifically developed in the Second-Fourth Centuries C.E., with much of the Christian Church having been cut off from its Jewish Roots, leads

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 112-113.

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a great number of Messianic people to treat it with some suspicion. Some are prone to reject any doctrine or belief that originated in Christendom, precisely because it is Christian. Others, however, know that this is inappropriate, because the Christian Church of the Second-Fourth Centuries C.E. used the same Holy Scriptures—both the Tanach and Apostolic Writings—that we use today. In his *Making Sense of the Trinity*, Millard J. Erickson properly advises all of us, “While those who give special authority to church councils have their authoritative answer [about the Trinity], that answer does not necessarily suffice for those Christians who do not consider the pronouncements of the church councils infallible.”³⁴ **Our attention needs to be placed squarely upon the Biblical text**, to see if the concept of a God composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is something that can be legitimately derived from Scripture.

Much of the confusion, that can arise from Bible readers wondering where a doctrine of some Trinity appears in Scripture, is that they typically look for a specific formula of *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* to be found. It is widely recognized that today, the so-called Johannine Comma of **1 John 5:7-8** in the Textus Receptus,³⁵ is unoriginal to what was originally written, which was, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement” (NASU).³⁶ However, the immersion formula of **Matthew 28:19**, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” is something which is not unoriginal to the ancient copies of Matthew’s Gospel,³⁷ and it has been argued on theological grounds by some that immersing in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a theme that naturally arises from what has been communicated by Matthew’s Gospel.³⁸

It would be too simplistic for any Bible reader to think, though—as those who oppose any doctrine of God being composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit commonly do—that these are the only two places in the

³⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 15.

³⁵ “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (1 John 5:7-8, KJV).

³⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp 715-717.

³⁷ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1117 states, “There is...no evidence that this is not an original part of the Gospel of Matthew.”

³⁸ John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1269.

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Apostolic Scriptures where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are seen functioning together. While the formula *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* is not always used as such, there are a selection of passages in the Apostolic Scriptures where these manifestations of the Godhead are seen functioning together, and co-existing side by side:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same **Spirit**. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same **Lord**. There are varieties of effects, but the same **God** who works all things in all *persons*” (1 Corinthians 12:3-4, NASU).

“The grace of the **Lord Yeshua the Messiah**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit**, be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14, NASU).

“*There is* one body and one **Spirit**, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one **Lord**, one faith, one baptism, one **God and Father** of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NASU).

“But we should always give thanks to **God** for you, brethren beloved by the **Lord**, because **God** has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the **Spirit** and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our **Lord Yeshua the Messiah**” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, NASU).

“Peter, an apostle of **Yeshua the Messiah**, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of **God the Father**, by the sanctifying work of the **Spirit**, to obey **Yeshua the Messiah** and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure” (1 Peter 1:1-2, NASU).

“John to the seven [assemblies] that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven **Spirits** who are before His throne, and from **Yeshua the Messiah**, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His **God and Father**—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:4-6, NASU).

If you were to remove Matthew 28:19, the customary immersion formula, from your deliberations, you will still have to reckon with the

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above passages, which give us significant clues about the composition of God. Is it at all reasonable to conclude that a plural *Elohim* or God is composed of the co-existent manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? There is ample evidence from the Biblical text that those who affirm the doctrine of the Trinity are *not* on unsafe ground. They have had to make decisions that affirm the Son as Divine, and the Holy Spirit as something separate from the Father, as both being integrated into the Godhead along with the Father. At the same time, when one sees references to “the seven Spirits who are before His throne” (Revelation 1:4, NASU), or to “a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Messiah” (1 Corinthians 10:4, NASU)—it might be said that the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity can be *incomplete* in a few areas. A Godhead composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being *incomplete*, however, is a *far cry* from the Trinity being pagan. Working with the Biblical evidence, rather than to conclude that *Elohim* or God is *only* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—it might instead be that *Elohim* or God is *widely* demonstrated to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As mortal human beings, none of us wants to ever find ourselves placing inappropriate limits on our Eternal God, and conclude that there are no other manifestations of God beyond Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A great deal of Messianic Judaism to the present time has never had a problem with viewing the plurality of *Elohim* as being *at least* composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁹ Messianic Judaism has demonstrated some aversion to using the term “Trinity,” as employed by much of Christianity, and instead preferred—and we should think rightfully so—to use valid alternative terminology like **tri-unity**, or perhaps in some cases, **revealed tri-unity**. Such terms would align with the Biblical evidence that God is composed of the co-existent persons or manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but it does not discount the possibility, or even probability, that there is more to God which has been largely disclosed to mortals. Remarking in his commentary *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah*, on Matthew 28:19, “Therefore, go and make people from all nations into *talmidim*, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the *Ruach HaKodesh*” (CJB), Barney Kasdan summarizes,

³⁹ Michael Schiffman, “Messianic Jews and the Tri-Unity of God,” in John Fischer, ed., *The Enduring Paradox: Exploratory Essays in Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer, 2000), pp 61-69; Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 2*, pp 52-59.

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“...While Messianic Jews affirm the concept of the tri-unity of the one God, we may not necessarily agree with [some of] the Greek words and explanation [historically offered]...Undoubtedly some of the Hebrew background would have made a great contribution to this doctrinal discussion. Even though it is good and proper to ask some deeper questions about the nature of God, we should emphasize that Yeshua himself called the *Sh'ma* the greatest commandment (cf. Mark 12:28-34). One thing is for sure: Whatever the New Testament teaches about the pluralistic aspect of the one God, it must be consistent with the full revelation of the *Tanakh* (cf. Matthew 5:17).

“Some conclusions from a Messianic Jewish perspective lead us to view God as One and yet as a mysterious plurality within that unity. This is reflected in the words of the Great Commission of Yeshua, as the disciples are to go ‘in the Name’ (reality) of *the Father, the Son, and the Ruach HaKodesh*. It must be pointed out that even with the mention of the three realities of God, Yeshua uses the singular word ‘name’ in describing all three. This is consistent with the mystery of the one God revealed in a plurality of manifestations.”⁴⁰

It is absolutely true that there might be others in Messianic Judaism, and certainly throughout the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, who would repudiate the idea that the *Elohim* or God of Israel can reveal Himself to humanity in the co-existent persons or manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where this has Biblical evidence, tends to be lacking. Where this has emotional evidence, as though everything that the historic Christian Church has believed is to *always* be rejected, is something quite plentiful. Yet for all of us, **our loyalty should be to whether or not a God composed of (at least) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can be reasonably deduced from the Biblical text.**

If I had to answer “yes” or “no” to the question, “Do you believe in the Trinity?”, I would answer “yes.” If I could explain myself following

⁴⁰ Barney Kasdan, *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah: A Messianic Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2011), pp 396-397.

It cannot be overlooked in the case of both Schiffman, in Fischer, 69 and Kasdan, 396, that they have referred to the Zohar and its assertion of there being “three heads” of God. While this could be used as a reference to claim that the idea of the One God of Israel made up of three persons or manifestations is not incompatible with historical Jewish theology, the Zohar originates from the Middle Ages and is thus not reflective of the Jewish theology of the broad First Century—much less the fact that the Zohar is a main work of the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. This is why we should think that Bauckham’s approach in *Jesus and the God of Israel*, of Yeshua being integrated into the Divine Identity of the LORD or YHWH, better corresponds to views present within the broad First Century period, and to the Biblical text itself.

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this question, I would add that “God might be more than the Trinity, though.” This is why *Elohim* or God might be better considered to be a **revealed tri-unity**, or to adapt traditional Christian terminology, a **principal trinity**. To deny that God is surely composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is to go against what has been communicated to us in Holy Scripture, and how it is to mold the worldview of Believers. In all likelihood, *there is more* to our Eternal God that goes beyond the co-existent manifestations or persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that would, at the very least, confuse us as limited mortals. Many evangelical Believers I have interacted with would be open to this, because God, after all, is far bigger and more wonderful than any of us can humanly imagine. At present, much of who God is and how He has acted in human history, has to be left as a mystery, something yet to be revealed to us until the Eternal State.

That there is One God, as the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 commands us to believe, cannot be denied. For Believers in the Messiah of Israel, we are to recognize Him as the One Lord, as His early followers did (1 Corinthians 8:6), with Yeshua integrated into the Divine Identity. And beyond this, that there is more to the composition of *Elohim* or God, can surely be recognized, even if much of it remains a mystery to us at present.