

## **The Shema as Foundational Verdict for God’s People: An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4–9**

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### **Abstract**

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Deuteronomy 6:4–9, also known as the Shema, presents a theological and contextualization challenge for exegetes today. It instructs on the doctrine of God (6:4), loyalty to the covenant (6:5), education foundations (6:6–7), and expression of faith through religious rituals (6:8–9). The study examines the unclear Hebrew words in the text, which causes disagreement among biblical scholars. Based on the monotheistic statement in Deuteronomy 6:4, the study presents God’s character as sovereign and self-sufficient God who does not share His glory with other gods. The text’s main point is the undivided loyalty to Yahweh, the God of the covenant. He is the Suzerain of Israelites. In the Shema, loyalty means obedience to God’s instructions and trusting Him in life. The paper locates family as the foundation of Christian education to retain devotion to God. A worshipper of Yahweh should be motivated by a genuine love of God. The study helps believers to understand the truth about the nature of God and the duty He has entrusted them.

**Keywords:** Shema, Deuteronomy, Law, Yahweh, Heart, Teach, Covenant

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### **Introduction**

The words of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 are commonly known as the Shema from Jewish traditions, derived from the first Hebrew word in verse four.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish people significantly value it as the cornerstone of their faith. They recite it in the morning and evening.<sup>2</sup> It is the pivotal truth that shapes the message of Deuteronomy. The New Covenant affirms the stipulations of the Shema.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The new American commentary v. 4 (Broadman & Holman, 1994), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce E. Willoughby, “A Heartfelt Love: An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4-19,” *Abilene, Texas* 20, Restoration Quarterly (1977): 77.

For instance, Christ identified Deuteronomy 6:4–5 as the foremost of all commandments in Mark 12:29–30, on which the Torah stands.

The book of Deuteronomy takes the form of covenant-treaties of the Ancient Near East in the second millennium BC.<sup>3</sup> The procedural progression of the contents and the literary structure portray a similar pattern to the Hittites treaties.<sup>4</sup> It is a renewal of the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites.<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4–9 falls under the general stipulation of the covenant defining the covenantal relationship of Yahweh as the Suzerain, who provides and protects, while Israelites as the vassals who give their allegiance to Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> Yahweh is the God who instructed Israelites through Moses at the plains of Moab, where they were about to cross to Canaan. He prepared and guided them on how to live in the Promised Land.

The narrative of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 comes after Moses had given the ten commandments in chapter five. It is part of the Deuteronomy 4:44—11:32 discourse unit. The author emphasizes obedience for posterity and prosperity (Deut 6:1–3) as he draws the attention of the Israelites to the great commandment and its expression in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. Moses warned the Israelites about the danger of forgetting the Lord in their prosperity. He urges them to fear the LORD<sup>7</sup> and serve Him alone in Deuteronomy 6:10–15. He warns them of testing the Lord and encourages them to embrace obedience (Deut 6:16–19). Finally, Moses reiterates teaching and states the commandment to Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:20–25.

### Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6: 4–9

#### The Revelation of Yahweh's Character and His Nature (6:4)

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

Moses emphatically calls the attention of the Israelites to listen and act by use of an imperative שְׁמַע and a vocative “O Israel!” The word שְׁמַע is a keyword in the book of Deuteronomy. It has a

<sup>3</sup> Jack S. Deere, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, ed. Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary (Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1983), 260.

<sup>4</sup> It is divided as follows Preamble (1:1–5) historical prologue (Deut 1:6 —4:43), general stipulations (Deut 5:1—11:32), specific stipulation (Deut 12:1—26:19), depository of law (31 —34:5), witnesses of the covenant (30:19; 31:19; 32:1–47), curses and blessings (27:1 —28:68)

<sup>5</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 30–32.

<sup>6</sup> Deere, 260.

<sup>7</sup> Use of capitalized noun LORD refers to Yahweh, throughout the paper.

varied meaning in the OT as “to hear,” “to listen,” “to obey,” “to perceive,” “to catch,” “to comply,” and “to fulfill.”<sup>8</sup>

When שָׁמַע is used as a primary or secondary introduction to a text like in Deuteronomy 6:4a, it mainly refers to covenant instructions. In Deuteronomy and its phraseology in other OT texts, the use of imperative שָׁמַע “as a demand to hear Yahweh’s words often masks the demand for the exclusive worship of Yahweh”<sup>9</sup> Hearing God or His representatives means to do what He says within His will.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in the context of 6:4, where Yahweh is Suzerain, and the Israelites are His vassals, שָׁמַע it means “to obey.”

The verbless clause that follows יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד is problematic in its grammatical construction. It requires several considerations, such as the number of nominal clauses present, identification of the subject and the predicate, and analyzing the function of אֶחָד and its appropriate meaning. The position of the verb “to be” is also significant in determining the meaning of the Shema. This verbless clause can be rendered in different ways. These different renderings or translations result in different theological implications, while others only differ in their emphasis and order of the words. Below are the renderings of 6:4b, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

*Yahweh our God is one Yahweh*<sup>11</sup>

*Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*<sup>12</sup>

*Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone*<sup>13</sup>

*Our God is Yahweh, only Yahweh!*<sup>14</sup>

*Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one*<sup>15</sup>

### The Most Probable Translation and Meaning of Shema

The above renderings are grammatically acceptable to scholars, although one must determine the best rendering that would give the most probable translation of the Shema clause. In the analysis of יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד we first consider the pairing of the nouns in the nominal clause and their

<sup>8</sup> E. Jenni, “*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*,” ed. Claus Westermann 1 (1997): 1376.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1379. See also: Deut 11:13;16:27;30:16; Judg 2:17,20;3:4;2Kgs 18:12; Isa 30:9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 1379.

<sup>11</sup> See American Standard Version (ASV), King James Version (KJV) and Bible in Basic English (BBE) translations.

<sup>12</sup> See New King James Version(NKJV), English Standard Version(ESV), New International Version(NIV), Christian Standard Bible (CSB) translations.

<sup>13</sup> See New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> See Common English Bible (CEB).

<sup>15</sup> See New American Standard Bible (NASB), World English Bible (WEB), New English Translation (NET) translations .

possible translation based on the context of the Shema and the theology of the book of Deuteronomy and entire Old Testament. We also consider the rendering in the Septuagint and references to the Shema in the New Testament.

The four words are taken as two separate but interconnected clauses comprising יהוה אלהינו and יהוה אחד. The first clause יהוה אלהינו can be translated as “*Yahweh is our God*” or “*Yahweh our God,*” or “*Our God is Yahweh.*” According to Bord, the proper name Yahweh in the book of Deuteronomy is often accompanied by the word אלהים, with or without pronominal suffixes. In cases of verbal elision, the two terms are separated by the pronoun “He” and the addition of the definite article following the term אלהים.<sup>16</sup> Based on Bord’s argument, “*Yahweh our God*” is a preferred translation over “*Yahweh is our God*” in the first nominal clause of the four Hebrew words. Those who share this view, like Weinfeld, Braulik, and Lohfink, see “*our God*” as apposition of Yahweh.<sup>17</sup>

Barbiero, who argues that 6:4 is linked to 5:6–10, states that “*Yahweh is our God*” fits well to express a performative force to renew the covenant between Yahweh and His people.<sup>18</sup> Block supports this translation due to its verbless clause formulation. He agrees that a definite article cannot follow אלהינו due to the presence of the pronominal suffix. Still, he argues that in Deuteronomy, “*Yahweh our God*” mainly occurs in verbal clauses functioning as the object of the subject. Therefore, Block argues there is room to embrace this rendering for יהוה אלהינו as a verbless clause.<sup>19</sup>

The translation “*Our God is Yahweh*” considers אלהינו to be more defined than the proper noun יהוה in this verbless clause. It differs from the case of the Shema in that יהוה seems to be more defined in the first clause and the second clause of 6:4b. The term יהוה appears twice in 6:4b; thus Yahweh seems to be the subject of the clauses.

DeRouchie observes that the definite noun אלהים + suffix occurs 321 times in the book of Deuteronomy. Ten times of these occurrences refer to idols (Deut 32:37; 7:16, 25; 12:2-3 (2 times); 12: 30–31 (4 times) and (Deut 20:18) while 311 occurrences refer to Yahweh. There are only three instances where יהוה does not precede אלהים (Deut 10:21; 31:17 and Deut 32:3). For

<sup>16</sup> Lucien-Jean Bord and David Hamidović, “Écoute Israël (Deut. VI 4),” *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 1 (2002): 19.

<sup>17</sup> Leonardo Pessoa da Silva 1 Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais Pinto, “The Shema and the Devotion to Only One Deity” (April 2019): 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel I. Block, “How Many Is God? An Investigation Into The Meaning Of Deuteronomy 6:4–5,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (2004): 197.

the remaining 308 occurrences out of 321, it is only in four instances (29:5; 10:21) and (5: 6, 9) where יהוה + suffix stands as predicate complement of a pronoun standing for יהוה.

In 304 instances out of 321, יהוה + suffix is preceded directly by יהוה, and in all these occurrences, יהוה + suffix is in apposition to יהוה. For example, 6:5 reads, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ and 6:15 reads, כִּי אֵל קָנָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּקִרְבְּךָ. The pattern repeats in 98.7% of the 321 occurrences. So, DeRouchie argues there is no occurrence in Deuteronomy where יהוה + suffix stands in a predicate relationship with the proper name יהוה.<sup>20</sup>

Based on the argument of Block, there is room for יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ to be translated as “Yahweh is our God” or “Our God is Yahweh” as a verbless clause. However, the author is not convinced by these translations for several reasons. First, there is no instance in the book of Deuteronomy where יהוה + suffix has been used as a predicate of the divine proper name itself. Second, the 98.7% trend of the occurrences would be hard to ignore. Third, “Our God is Yahweh” seems to define our God more than Yahweh. Also, the nominal clause is explicit that Yahweh is the subject. Therefore, the researcher supports “Yahweh Our God” as the most appropriate rendering of the first pair of a nominal clause in 6:4b.

### Word Study of אֶחָד in יהוה אֶחָד

The second clause יהוה אֶחָד is clear that אֶחָד is describing יהוה. The problem arises with the meaning of אֶחָד. The Hebrew term אֶחָד has a wide semantic range in the Old Testament. The chief meaning is the cardinal “one” (Deut.32:30).<sup>21</sup> It can translate as “unique” or “only” in 2 Samuel 7:23 as the writer points to the distinctiveness of Israelites as the redeemed of God among other nations of the earth. In Song of Solomon 6:9, the poet uses אֶחָד to describe the uniqueness of his lover as the only daughter of her mother who is incomparable. It translates as “alone” in 2 Kings 19:15,19 as King Hezekiah acknowledges the LORD of Israel as God alone.

From the examples given here, the word אֶחָד does not just tell about the quantity but also about quality. It differs from the Hebrew word יָחִיד, which denotes absolute singularity (Psa 25:16). The word אֶחָד as a cardinal number has a significant theological implication in its usage in the Pentateuch. It emphasizes the exclusion of idols from the space of Yahweh as demanded by the Decalogue (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). This relates to the usage of אֶחָד in 6:4.<sup>22</sup> This accounts

<sup>20</sup> Jason Shane DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2017), 216.

<sup>21</sup> Jenni, “Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament,” 79.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Old Testament library (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1966), 62–64.

for the different rendering of the word in English using such words as “one,” “alone,” “unique” and “only” in English translations.

Jewish Rabbis in the first-century AD era understood יהוה as an affirmation of the divine unity of God, expressing monotheism. Gerald Janzen proposes that “one” in Deuteronomy 6:4 should be understood as the “unity of Yahweh” in terms of His integrity and consistency in His actions.<sup>23</sup> This distinguishes Yahweh from other Ancient Near East gods that manifested contradicting attitudes toward people. Yahweh showed moral unity, thus proving to be absolutely trustworthy to Israel. On the contrary, the Canaanites were in tension and fear of what the superior gods would do if they offended them. One god would punish the people if they gave their loyalty to another. However, Block rightly argues that there is no clarity in the text to support Janzen’s hypothesis, which he sees as a forced meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Christensen supports the translation of יהוה as “unique” to mean Yahweh is the only incomparable.<sup>25</sup> However, Miller disclaims that the uniqueness does not fit in the context of Shema. He suggests two possible translations of יהוה as “one” or “alone.” The former has to do with unity, oneness, and inclusiveness of the character of Yahweh, while the latter has the idea of sole worship of Yahweh.<sup>26</sup>

The יהוה approximates the adverbial meaning of לבד to translate as “only” or “alone.” An objection to this translation is that Moses would have used לבד instead of יהוה. Weinfeld responds to this objection by saying לבד could not be used as an adverb in a nominal clause; thus, יהוה was used. Bruno counters this by giving a comparable clause in Isa. 37:16, where לבד is used within a nominal clause.<sup>27</sup> McBride and Tigay advocate it being translated as “only” based on parallel usage by the Akkadian and Semitic languages of ANE. The authors provide their stand in the context as follows.

### Analysis of יהוה

When יהוה in יהוה יהוה is treated as an attributive adjective, it translates as “one Yahweh,” treating Yahweh as a title instead of the divine proper name. Theologically, this implies that

<sup>23</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, “On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy VI, 4-5),” *Vetus Testamentum* 37, no. 3 (1987): 287-289, 300.

<sup>24</sup> Block, “How Many Is God?,” 200.

<sup>25</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1- 21: 9*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 145.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: J. Knox Press, 1990), 99–100.

<sup>27</sup> Pinto, “The Shema and the Devotion to Only One Deity,” 26.

there were many deities called by the name Yahweh, an idea that lacks support from the Scriptures. Thus, there is no proof to consider the Shema as a confrontation of Poly-Yahwehism in the book of Deuteronomy.

The word  $\text{יְהוָה}$  in  $\text{יְהוָה יְהוָה}$  may be translated as an adverb to mean “*Yahweh alone*” or “*only Yahweh*.” This adverbial use of  $\text{יְהוָה}$  raises a few concerns. First, this translation concentrates more on the assertion of the Israelites’ cry of allegiance, not the nature of Yahweh Himself. Second, having settled on the first clause of the Shema as “*Yahweh Our God*,” the second clause does not accommodate the translation of  $\text{יְהוָה}$  as “*alone*” or “*only*” because of the need for a predicate clause to complete the thought of both clauses. If the first clause was translated as “*Yahweh is our God*,” then *Yahweh alone* or *only Yahweh* would fit well. They, however, do not fit well with the preferred translation, “*Yahweh our God*,” either grammatically or logically.<sup>28</sup> The option that works well is *Yahweh* takes  $\text{יְהוָה}$  as a predicate of Yahweh. This rendering stresses the supremacy and uniqueness of Yahweh.<sup>29</sup>

Moses is drawing the attention of the Israelites to Yahweh as the Supreme and Sovereign God. Therefore, the most probable rendering of the Shema is “*Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*.” Some biblical scholars agree with this rendering. DeRouchie, for example, sees 6:4 as a monotheistic confession. Yahweh is God by Himself, and He is incomparable. Therefore, the Israelites were not just to prioritize Him but to have Him alone.

The rendering “*Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*” is also supported by the Septuagint rendering of 6:4 that says, ἄκουε Ἰσραὴλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν.<sup>30</sup> The translation of *heis*, meaning “*one*,” is clear in Greek, unlike in Hebrew text. The Septuagint translators for the diaspora Jews favored this translation, supporting a possible historical rendering of Shema, according to LXX LXX.

The New Testament also sheds light on how the Jews translated and understood the Shema. Jesus, as a Jew, directly referred to the Shema in the Gospels. When a scribe confronted Him with a question on the most important commandment in Mark 12:29–30, He quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as the greatest commandment. He said, “Ἀκουε Ἰσραὴλ: Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν, Κύριος εἷς ἐστίν.”<sup>31</sup> He continued to quote Deuteronomy 6:5 in Mark 12:30. In Mark

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>29</sup> See the word study of  $\text{יְהוָה}$  on page 29 for more details.

<sup>30</sup> The LXX translation was taken from LXX LXX (Rahlfs text).

<sup>31</sup> The Greek text was taken from NA28 Greek NT Text.

12:32, the scribe affirmed Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 to be right according to the truth by saying, ἐπ'εἶπες ὅτι εἷς ἐστίν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλος πλὴν αὐτοῦ. Seeing that he had answered wisely, Jesus told him that the kingdom of God was not far from Him (Mk.12:34). An analysis of the conversation of Jesus and the scribe regarding the Shema shows that the translation of "*Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*" was accepted by the Jews.

The Pauline epistles also support the monotheistic rendering of the Shema. Paul points out that God is One (Rom 3:29–30; 1Tim 2:5; Gal 3:20). Paul, also addressing the church of Corinth, instructs that there are many gods and lords, but for the believers, there is one God and One Lord through whom all things exist (1 Cor 8:5–6). Paul's teaching on the doctrine of God here focuses on the existence of One True God, not on the oath of allegiance.

It also reveals that their understanding of Deuteronomy 6:4 is focused on the nature of Yahweh Himself being supreme and sovereign above any other gods of the nations since there is no other god besides Him. Yahweh is incomparable and sovereign over the whole earth. He is one in number, although that does not contradict the doctrine of the Trinity. The term  $\text{יְהוָה}$  can embrace plurality as a compound unit as in Genesis 2:24, where man and a woman become one flesh. In Ezekiel 37:15–28, God told the prophet to join two sticks into one stick, referring to the union of Judah and Ephraim.

Therefore,  $\text{יְהוָה}$  "God is One" can accommodate the oneness of God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). Those who use Deuteronomy 6:4 to accuse Christians of being ditheists or polytheists misunderstand the Shema. Julian's accusation of ditheism sees Jesus as the second god of Christians besides Yahweh instead of accepting His deity as God. Muslim's accusation of polytheism takes the Trinity as three separate gods, thus denying the Oneness of God in the three Persons of the Trinity.

The focus of the Shema is to awaken the Israelites to the unique nature of their God, distinct from the ANE gods. It supports the first commandment in Deuteronomy 5:7, which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (NASB). The Israelites are called to a monotheistic faith, to worship Yahweh in His supremacy and sovereignty (Deut 4:7,35,39; 32:39). Though there were many gods in the land of Canaan, the Israelites were to disregard them because Yahweh was their God.

This theology of the Shema is evident in Old Testament and New Testament. Yahweh is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and awesome God with no partiality (Deut



10:17). As sovereign God, the whole creation is supposed to worship Him in heaven and the earth (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; 1 Kings 22:19–22, Psa 29:2; 82:1; 89:5; 103:20–21; 148:2–5). Prophets like Jeremiah declare there is no one like Yahweh (Jer.10:6–16). Zachariah also affirms the supremacy of Yahweh on all the earth (Zach 14:9).

In summary, analysis of the grammatical, theological context, and historical interpretation of the Shema within the book of Deuteronomy supports the view that 6:4b is a statement of monotheism. Moses told the Israelites this truth that could positively direct their lives in the Promised Land. This pivotal truth of their God will lead them to enjoy His blessings if they remain loyal to Him as their Suzerain, but it will also lead them to destruction if they disobey Him (Deut 28:1–68). He would be faithful to them, and they were to reciprocate by being loyal to Him alone.

### A Call to the Great Commandment (Deut 6:5)

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ:

In verse 5, Moses shifts his focus to a call for a befitting response to the stated truth in 6:4. Yahweh would keep His identity to give undivided attention to Israelites; thus, it was their fundamental duty to reciprocate complete loyalty to their Suzerain. He had set them apart as a His nation and kept His covenant, fulfilling all His promises faithfully. Therefore, the well-being of the Israelites in the land was not only based on their election. Instead, their welfare depended on Yahweh and their loyalty to Him (Deut 4:37; 7:6–7; 10:15; 14:2,21; 26:19; 28:9).<sup>32</sup>

Jesus referred to 6:5 as the foremost and great commandment in Mark 12:30 and Mathew. 22:37–38. In Luke 10: 27–28, when a lawyer asked Jesus what he could do to inherit the kingdom of God, Jesus referred him to the law. The lawyer quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, and Jesus told him he was correct.

The word וְאָהַבְתָּ used in verse 5 is from אָהַב translated as “to love.” Its usage falls into three categories; love between human beings (Lev 19:18,34), God’s love for His people (Deut 4:37; Isa 43:4; Mal 1:2), and people’s love for God.<sup>33</sup> God also loves things (Psa 87:2, Mal 2:11 and values (Psa 33:5).<sup>34</sup> The term וְאָהַבְתָּ as it appears in 6:5 refers to people’s love for God

<sup>32</sup> Bruce E. Willoughby, “A Heartfelt Love: An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:4-19,” *Restoration Quarterly* 20 (1977): 80.

<sup>33</sup> Jenni, “Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament,” 52.

<sup>34</sup> R. Laird (Robert Laird) Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody press, 1980), 14.

occurring around twenty-four times in Old Testament. Els points that it appears 13 times outside Deuteronomy (Exo 20:6; Josh 22:5; 23:11; Judg 5:31; 1 Kings 3:3; Neh 1:5; Psa 18:2; 31:24; Psa 91:14; 97:10; 116:1; 145:20; Dan 9:4) and 11 times in Deuteronomy (Deut 6:5; 7:9 ; 10:12; 11:1,13,22; 13:4,19:9; 30:6,16,20). The majority of text using אהבה occurs in Deuteronomistic phraseology.<sup>35</sup> It is commonly used to condemn the love of other gods and encourage love for Yahweh. Moses was calling the Israelites to have the right attitude of love towards God.

The command to love the LORD in 6:5 summarizes the requirements of Israelites in the covenant. This concept of love in 6:5 is manifest in the book of Joshua, where the Israelites are reminded to love the Lord and serve Him holistically (Josh 22:5; 23:11). It forms a key foundation in relation to other obligations given by Moses before and after it. The bond of love entails “to fear the LORD” (Deut 4:10; 5:59; 6:24; 8:6; 10:12; 14:23; 17:19; 28:58; 31:13), “to serve the LORD” (Deut 10:12; 11:13), “to cling to the Lord” (10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20) and “to obey the LORD” and walk in His ways (Deut 19:9; 30:16; 13:3–5) as reflected in Deuteronomy.<sup>36</sup>

The nature of love commanded in the Shema springs from the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. They are to respond faithfully in obedience to His instructions (Deut 5:10; 7:9). In the context of ANE treaties, it means exercising absolute loyalty as the expected response of vassals to their Suzerain.<sup>37</sup> Obedience to God counted as love for Him. This is also clear in the words of Jesus (Jn 14:23) that those who love Him will obey His commands. Jesus continuously quoted Deut. 6:5 as the greatest commandment (Mk 12:30; Matt 22:37; Lk 10:17).

Moses intensified the necessity of this unique love by urging them to love the LORD with all אהבה ... נפש... לבב. The Hebrew word לבב “your heart” from לב signified “the seat of thoughts” (Gen 31:26; Job 12:3) or “the seat of emotions” ( Deut 15:10; 20:3,8,18; 28:47,67; Isa 30:29; Jer 15:16 ).<sup>38</sup> The word נפש can mean the literal breath of a human being (1 Kings 17:17; Psa 107:5), life (Gen 9:5; 2 Sam 23:17), the entire person (Lev 4:2; Josh 11:14; Psa 7:2–3) desires and appetite.<sup>39</sup> The term אהבה occurs as a noun only here and in 2 Kings 23:25, which is a

<sup>35</sup> Els P. J., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*; Vol 1,1997,283

<sup>36</sup> Willem VanGemenen, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Genesis-Songs of Solomon (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1997), 286.

<sup>37</sup> G. Johannes Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*; Vol 1, 2011, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Stolz F., “*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*,” 639.

<sup>39</sup> Fredericks D. C, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*; Vol 3,1997,133.

Deuteronomic passage.<sup>40</sup> In this nuance, it means power or might, but in an adverbial sense, it means “very,” “much,” “greatly,” and “exceedingly.”<sup>41</sup> The combination of the *לְבָבְךָ* and *נַפְשְׁךָ* mostly refers to the inner man as seen in Deuteronomy 4:29; 10:11–13; 13:4; 26:16; 30:2,6,10 and in other texts like Joshua 22:5; 23:14; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:48. This would encompass mind, affections, will, and the vitality where decisions are produced and released for action. Deuteronomy calls for the Israelites to express unreserved loyalty to Yahweh. The addition of *מְאֹדְךָ* “all your mighty/power” raises the standards higher to emphasize the loyalty appropriate for Yahweh. It brings the connection of the external man to the inner man; thus, the three aspects of being humans are connected to bring out the sense of the “whole self.” McBride says they were “to express a superlative degree of commitment.”<sup>42</sup>

In summary, Moses was exhorting Israelite to love the LORD holistically. All the Israelites’ thoughts, desires, and capabilities were to be submitted to the Lordship of Yahweh. Their love would translate to the obedience that Yahweh desired in their covenantal relationship. This greatest commandment would help them to fulfill all other commandments without struggle. Loving Yahweh would enable them to execute the instructions in verses 6–9.

### Individual Devotion to the Commandment (6:6)

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עַל-לְבָבְךָ:

Moses calls for personal devotion by keeping the law in the heart as the locus of action. This is significant because they also had to love the LORD with their hearts. Scholars have argued on which words Moses was referring to by *הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה*. Moberly posits that they were simply the words in 6:4–5, with a possibility of referring to verse four only. Weinfeld sees them as referring to the entire corpus of the covenant text addressed in Deuteronomy by Moses, with 6:4–5 as a summary.<sup>43</sup> McConville suggests the phrase “these words” in 6:6 could refer to all the words that Moses spoke in His address that day, as seen in the phrase *אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible; 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 339.

<sup>41</sup> Robin Wakely, *New Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis; Vol2*, 1997, 824.

<sup>42</sup> Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible; 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 340.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon. J McConville, “‘Keep These Words in Your Hearts’ (Deut. 6:6): A Spirituality of Torah in the Context of the Shema,” in *For Our God Always: Studies on the Message and Influence of Deuteronomy in Honor of Daniel I. Block*. (Winona Lake: Indiana Eisenbrauns, 2013), 141.

Deuteronomy 6:6 should be understood based on the immediate context of the love command and the command to teach in 6:7. Moses' wish was that the Israelites would love and keep Yahweh's words in their innermost being to influence their lives from within. Therefore, "these words" in 6:6 are likely to refer to 6:4–5. Further, considering the instruction that "these words" were to be written on phylacteries and mezuzot, they were, of necessity, brief texts as practiced by orthodox Jews. Although Moses was referring to the summary of the law in 6:4–5, he does not mean that the Shema was the only instruction they were to keep. They were to remember the whole law in its entirety.

There is a strong connection between keeping the instructions and לֵב (heart). The heart is portrayed as a "spiritual tablet" (Deut 10:1–5), a concept that developed in the book of Proverbs (Prov 3:1–3; 7:1–3). The words of Deuteronomy 6:6 bring the spiritual aspect of the law inscribed in the hearts, not stone tablets. The Israelites were to focus on Yahweh through His commands. The discipline of keeping instruction in their heart would keep them connected to Yahweh. The commands pointed them to their source. They were the means to fulfil the covenant relationship with their Suzerain.

ANE treaties were frequently read to the vassals to ensure they were always fresh in their minds. The instruction of impressing the words upon the heart and soul was common in Hittites covenant treaties.<sup>45</sup> Moses used familiar language to help the Israelites renew their loyalty so that they would keep the commands and follow the ways of Yahweh. God's word revealed His nature and love for Israelites. Obeying the instructions was a sure way of enjoying life in the promised land.

In summary, the Israelites were to retain and meditate on the law in their hearts. They were to keep meditating on the letters of law and the spirit behind them. This way, they would be focused on their relationship with Yahweh and fulfill their duty. Personal commitment and meditation were to be extended to the following generations (v.7, 9).

### **Family Commitment to the Covenant (6:7)**

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבְךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

Moses was strategic in His instructions as he underscored the critical role of family and home in passing down instructions. The commands here should be understood within the context of the Israelite's social life and informal education systems. The covenant relationship was

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<sup>45</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 302.

multigenerational (Deut 4:9–10, 25,40; 5:9–10,29; 6:2). Therefore, the parents were to teach their children the commands and the love for Yahweh. Moses instructs the Israelites with the commands וְשִׁנְתָּם and וְדִבַּרְתָּ. The word וְשִׁנְתָּם comes from שָׁנַן, which means “to sharpen” in qal form.<sup>46</sup>

The piel form of the word שָׁנַן, when used in the context of teaching it, means “to recite” or “to repeat many times” or “to teach incisively or diligently.”<sup>47</sup> The Israelites were to inscribe the commandment in the minds of the children. They were to repeat them constantly to ensure that they were in the memory of each generation. The whole community, especially the fathers, were to teach their children the Lord’s ways intentionally. Their daily conversations with their children were to be influenced by the instruction of the Lord. Since informal education was dominant, it was possible to teach and discuss Yahweh inside and outside the house while working.

Moses uses several locative clauses, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ (when you sit in your house) וּבִלְכֹתְךָ (when you walk on by the way) and temporal clauses וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ (when you lie down) and וּבִקְוֹמְךָ (when you rise) respectively to bring out the idea that the law was to be taught everywhere. The covenant community had to be preoccupied with the words of Yahweh wherever they were. Moses uses contrasting locative and temporal phrases to create a merism that expresses the totality of time and place to teach. Teaching the commandments to their children was a sure way of ensuring their faith in God would continue. Moses uses an instructional model similar to that used in the Hittite covenant treaties.<sup>48</sup>

In summary, Moses gives the family platform as a context for religious education. Parents were to teach and pass God’s love and commands to their children to retain godliness in their generation.

### Practicing the Commandment (Deut. 6:8–9)

וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל־יָדָךְ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:  
וְכִתְבָתָם עַל־מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ:

Their outward actions were to tell more of their inward loyalty to Yahweh.<sup>49</sup> The orthodox Jews take the commands literally to date.<sup>50</sup> They ritualized Deuteronomy 6:8, resulting in the practice

<sup>46</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 167.

<sup>47</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, 332.

<sup>48</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 302.

<sup>49</sup> Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 167.

of wearing phylacteries. These are small leather containers with scrolls inscribed with a few portions of the Torah. They are worn on the forehead and left hand during the morning prayer.<sup>51</sup> Deuteronomy 6:9 also prompted the ritual of the Mezuzot; taken from the Hebrew word מְזוּזָה (literally, doorposts). They are small boxes containing scrolls inscribed with the Shema and other texts as accompaniments; it was placed on the upper side of the right doorpost in Jewish houses. Jews would touch it as they entered the house and went out.<sup>52</sup> These customs were common among the Ancient Near Easterners.<sup>53</sup>

In verse 8, Moses instructed them וְקָשַׁרְתֶּם לְאָזְנוֹתֵיכֶם יָדְכֶם, “and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand.” He expounds on how they were to love God with all their strength. Yahweh’s commandment was to affect their daily activities. When the term קָשַׁר is used in the context of teaching, it carries a symbolic meaning.<sup>54</sup> Moses reinforces his words as he tells them וְהָיוּ לְמַטְפֵּה בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ “And they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” The phrase בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ has a symbolic connotation referring to a forehead.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the clause creates an image of a band inscribed with the words of Yahweh on the forehead.

The meaning of verse 8 remains unresolved among biblical scholars. Some scholars believe it is literal,<sup>56</sup> while others believe it is figurative.<sup>57</sup> Craigie and Christensen argue for both figurative and literal interpretations.<sup>58</sup> The author supports a figurative understanding of the instruction given in verse 8 based on a study of terms used in the text and their connection with preceding verses (4–7). The preceding two verses support the command in verse 8 to be seen as figurative command of ensuring that the words of Yahweh are practiced in all they do.<sup>59</sup>

In verse 9, Moses tells them to write the words of the Lord on their מְזוּזָה and וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ. The phrase וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ “and on your gates” could generally refer to the household gates, the city gates, or other gates present within the community. The use of the term שַׁעַר could mean more than just

<sup>50</sup> Andrew David Hastings Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, New Century Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 177.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 177–178.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>54</sup> VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 1000–1002. See also Deuteronomy 11:18; Proverb 3:3; 6:21–23; 7:3–5; 22:15

<sup>55</sup> See Exodus 13:9,16; Daniel 8:5,21; Deuteronomy 14:1

<sup>56</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 342–343.

<sup>57</sup> Eugene Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 1000.

<sup>58</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 171.

<sup>59</sup> VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 1001.

the physical gates. Gates had social and civic functions.<sup>60</sup> Moses likely told them to write the words of Yahweh on their gates to signify the importance of Yahweh's words to the activities that took place within the community. In summary, the two verses use figurative language. It is a call for Israelites to avail the LORD's instructions before them at all times and in all places to ensure they keep them out of loyalty to Yahweh.

## Application

The research suggests several areas of application of the Shema for its relevance in our era. First, understanding the doctrine of God in the Shema helps believers to confront false teachings on the Christian faith. Analysis of Deuteronomy 6:4 shows that the Shema focussed on the unique nature of Yahweh as a sovereign God in His oneness. The term  $\text{יהוה}$  has a sense of plurality; thus, it accommodates the three persons of the Trinity. The claims of Julian<sup>61</sup> and Muslims<sup>62</sup> that Christians are ditheists and polytheists based on the Shema are wrong teachings and must be deconstructed. Christians are monotheistic based on the Shema affirmation.

Second, it helps believers to understand the divine perspective of love in the covenant relationship between God and humanity. God, in His sovereignty, sets the stipulations to define the relationship. Covenant obligations are divinely ordained, and people cannot negotiate them.<sup>63</sup> One can either accept them in obedience or reject them in disobedience. Also, Deuteronomy 6:5 demands obedience from a willing heart. Love is inseparable from obedience in covenant relationships. As God remains faithful to fulfilling His promises, human responsibility to respond to God's character and works should not be ignored.

Third, Moses' instruction in 6:6 to have God's words in the heart is key to a believer's spiritual growth. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, but it grows by responding to it in obedience. As the locus of action, the heart should be fed with God's word (Lk 6:46; Matt 12:34). Consistent public and personal Bible reading should be encouraged to ensure believers are informed about God's commands.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 208–210.

<sup>61</sup> John G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, Society of Biblical Literature. Monograph series 16 (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1972), 109.

<sup>62</sup> Nabeel A. Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Text (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1994), 515.

Fourth, in Deuteronomy 6:7, the family is portrayed as the central location for Christian education. Parents should diligently teach their children God's words. The teaching of the Bible is vital in propagating the gospel of Christ to the next generation. The transmission of Christian faith through biblical teaching is multigenerational. It ensures the nations remain in fear of the Lord with the remnant in every age, who will sense God's voice and sensitize the nation to live within God's standard. Finally, from Deuteronomy 6:8–9, believers should be encouraged to live their lives based on obedience and love for God. They should avoid empty religious rituals and give true worship to the LORD from their hearts.

### **Conclusion**

The Shema is a foundational principle of God's people that emphasizes the monotheistic faith for the worshippers of Yahweh. It calls for loyalty as the most significant ingredient of a covenant relationship. Divine understanding of love is obedience to God's Instruction. The heart is a spiritual tablet and locus to keep and obey the instruction of the LORD. Yahweh's worshippers are to read, memorize and meditate upon His laws. Further, teaching children God's word was the fundamental responsibility of the parents at all times and places. Israelites were to avail instruction of the LORD everywhere to ensure that they remembered and obeyed them.

Although the Shema was in the Old Covenant, it agrees with the New Covenant requirements. God remains One and expects believers to obey Him as a sign of love. Jesus referred to the Shema as the greatest commandment. Holistic loyalty is critical in sustaining a relationship with God. Jesus taught that those who love Him obey His commands (Jn 14:23; Matt.7:24). The focus of the believers must be to please God. This way, they will pass the love of God to their children as the most precious treasure of life. Parents should teach their children to love God by how they live their faith out, and believers must treat their neighbors from the perspective of God's love.



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