

"Echad" in the Shema

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

Hear, O Israel: YHVH our God YHVH is one.

by [Paul Sumner](#)

A case is often argued by some Bible expositors that the Hebrew adjective **echad** means a "compound unity." From this, many say the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) literally means:

Hear, O Israel:
The LORD our God,
The LORD is a compound unity.

This translation is then taken to be primary evidence that the Jewish Bible teaches the **plural** nature of God, which then validates, many believe, the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

In my view this interpretation of **echad** in the Shema is not correct, because it is based on the premises of systematic or dogmatic theology, not on Biblical Theology.

The following study focuses on three reasons why the historic Christian interpretation of **echad** in the Shema cannot be validated from Scripture.

[A PDF version of this study is available. Click title: ["Echad" in the Shema.](#)]

First

Echad has a spectrum of meanings in the Hebrew Bible. To say it **means** "compound unity" confines the word to a narrow category that doesn't match all its *varied* uses by the biblical writers. It's like saying the word **elohim** only refers to the true God. When, in fact, **elohim** is used for false gods and goddesses, angelic beings, the judges of Israel, the king of Israel, and the Messiah. It's necessary to qualify the phrase "it means..."

Second

The word "Shema" is a Hebrew command: "Hear, Listen, Obey" (Deut 6:4). It is not a creedal jewel suspended in mid-air. It exists within a theological context. It exists in the early, foundational chapters of Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy exists as the final chapter of the Chumash, the Torah. The specific placement of this crucial passage must have a bearing on how we interpret it.

Third

Yeshua told his disciples that he and the Father were "one" (John 10:30). He didn't define their oneness here. Later when he prayed to his Father on behalf of his disciples, he asked that they "may all be one, **just as we are one**" (John 17:21-22).

Whatever this oneness may entail, we assume it doesn't mean his disciples would enter into metaphysical unity with the transcendent deity, as in Neo-Platonism or modern New

Age pantheism.

Paul provides a key definition of the unity of Yeshua's disciples: "The one who joins himself to the Lord [Messiah] is one SPIRIT with him" (1 Cor 6:17). Jews and non-Jews can "both have our access in one SPIRIT to the Father" (Eph 2:18). Paul links being "filled" with this SPIRIT with "putting on" the "New Man," which reflects the nature of the Messiah that was created by God (Eph 5:18, 4:24; Col 3:10).

[See [Meanings & Uses of Ruach](#), and [Synonyms of Ruach: A Study in Hebrew Metaphors](#)]

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What Does **אֶחָד** Mean?

The Hebrew adjective **echad** occurs 970 times in the Tanakh. (Its feminine form, **achat**, is included in this total.) [Note 1] Here are the main uses of the word, according to numerical counts.

"One"

By far, the most common meaning of **echad** (600+x) is the simple **cardinal** number "one."

- Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into **one** place [maqom echad]. (Gen 1:9)
- He took **one** of the man's ribs [achat mitzalotayv]. (Gen 2:21)
- The man has become like **one** of Us [ke-achad mimmennu]. (Gen 3:22)
- We are all sons of **one** man [ish echad]. (Gen 42:11)
- The youngest is with our father today and **one** is no more. (Gen 42:13)

"First"

In its first appearance in the Bible **echad** is an **ordinal** number and means "first":

- And there was evening and there was morning, the **first** day [yom echad]. (Gen 1:5b)

Some expositors say "yom echad" alludes to the **composite** nature of the day, since it consists of an evening and a morning. Yet subsequent days in chapter 1 are also made of an **evening** and a **morning**, and they are numbered the "second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth" days of the week (Gen 1:8, 13, 19, 23, 31). This pattern shows that **echad** in v. 5b means "first," not "compound (day)."

The ordinal **echad** occurs elsewhere in Genesis:

- The name of the **first** [ha-echad] is Pishon. (Gen 2:11)
- On the **first** day [be-echad] of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible. (Gen 8:5b)
- In the six hundred and **first** year, in the **first** month, on the **first** of the month, the water was dried up. (Gen 8:13)

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"Same"

Echad can signify "the same" or "one and the same."

- Behold, they are **one people** [am echad] and they all have the **same** language [safah achat, fem.]. (Gen 11:6)
- They both had a dream the **same** night [layelah echad]. (Gen 40:5)
- Pharaoh's dreams are **one and the same** [halom echad hu]. (Gen 41:25)

"Singularity"

Echad can denote oneness as "singleness."

- [The Passover] is to be eaten in a **single** house [bayit echad]. (Exod 12:46a)
- The [menorah] was a **single** [achat] hammered work of pure gold. (Exod 37:22b)
- They... cut down a branch with a **single** cluster of grapes [eshkol anavim echad]. (Num 13:23)
- Not a **single word** [davar echad] has failed of all He promised, which He promised through Moses His servant. (1 Kgs 8:56b)
- Look to Abraham your father,
And to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain;
When he was **one** [single man] I called him,
Then I blessed him and multiplied him. (Isa 51:2)
- I will remove the iniquity of that Land in a **single day** [yom echad; same as Gen 1:5b] (Zech 3:9).

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"Undivided Oneness"

At times, **echad** denotes a unity of purpose or effort, or a shared condition.

- The people answered with **one voice** [kol echad]. (Exod 24:3)
- Then I will give to the peoples purified lips,
That all of them may call on the name of YHVH,
To serve him with **one shoulder** [shechem echad]. (Zeph 3:9)
- The Hand of God was also on Judah to give them **one heart** [lev echad]. (2 Chron 30:12)

Genesis 2:24

This passage is a common focus of attention in discussions of the Shema.

- [Adam and Eve] shall become **one flesh**. (Gen 2:24)

Some expositors propose that our First Parents' oneness of flesh is a **compound unity** consisting of each other's physical being. But the verse points to the opposite. Before her creation, Eve was "in" or part of Adam (Gen 2:22). Upon creation, she became a separated, though obviously related, distinct person.

Then God reversed the operation and rejoined them in a new way, in **marriage**. They are no longer apart: they are one single body. Eve is not now "in" Adam, but "with" him as his counterpart [kenegdo, v. 20b]. Their unity is not composite, but singularly whole. The two,

as male and female, are now one Human—one, single "Adam" (Gen 3:22, 24).

Ezekiel 37

Similarly, in Ezekiel 37 God plans one day to bring together the two rebellion-split houses of Israel and Judah. There will not be a king in the Northern Kingdom Israel and a king in the Southern Kingdom Judah. God will take their two "sticks" or "rods" (symbols of their authority) and rejoin them as one scepter under "David," the future Messiah.

- I will make them **an undivided nation** [goy echad] in the Land . . .
One single King [melech echad] will be king for all of them,
And they will no longer be two nations,
And they will no longer be divided into two kingdoms. (Ezek 37:22)

Some believe this union of the two kingdoms is also a compound or composite unity of two parts. But that's precisely **not** the point here. Their once individual, self-willed identities will disappear; they will become one nation, under God, indivisible.

As originally intended, the one people will be ruled by Messiah, **the Echad King** [melech echad].

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"Uniqueness"

Finally, **echad** has another nuance of meaning that sheds light on the Shema.

We saw above that **echad** usually denotes the number "one" (as opposed to two, three, or 10 million). There is something about one thing that is like no other — a solitary "one-ity" that highlights **uniqueness, one-of-a-kind-ness**. Several things are unique in the Bible.

King David, in overwhelmed prayer, after being given the privilege of leading God's redemptive program on earth, asks the Lord:

- Who is like Your people Israel,
a **unique nation** [goy echad] on earth? (2 Sam 7:23)

In the future, God will return to Har Zetim with his armies and radically change Jerusalem's geography. And that

- . . . will be a **unique day** [yom echad; same phrase in Gen 1:5b]
which is known only to the LORD.... (Zech 14:7)

And on that Yom Echad, Unique Day...

- YHVH will be king over all the earth;
in that day YHVH will be **Echad** [the only one],
and his name **Echad** [the only one]. (Zech 14:9)

In the Song of Songs, the young man describes his singularly peerless, inimitable, incomparable beloved:

- My dove, my perfect one, is **unique** [achat; fem.] (Song 6:9a)

אֶחָד — The Real Word for Unity

When commentators declare (without making qualifications) that "echad **means** compound, composite unity," they haven't done thorough lexical study. For example, the

standard Hebrew word to denote joining, unity or togetherness is **yachad**, not **echad**.

- He was King in Yeshurun,
When the heads of the people were gathered,
The tribes of Israel **together** [yachad]. (Deut 33:5)
- My heart is turned over within Me,
All together [yachad] my compassions are kindled. (Hosea 11:8b)
- Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell **together in unity** [gam yachad]! (Ps 133:1)

In the Dead Sea Scrolls document **The Community Rule** (1QS, The Manual of Discipline), the group of priests and their disciples abiding at Qumran is called **The Yachad**: the Union, the Comm-Unity.

- This is the rule for the men of **the Yachad**... (1QS 5:1)
- ... **the Yachad** of the eternal covenant (1QS 5:5)
- Whoever enters the council of **the Yachad** enters the covenant of God (1QS 5:7-8)

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How to Translate the Shema

In light of these multiple uses of **echad**, we must be open to reading the Shema with an open mind about what it denotes. What are our options? What makes most sense, within the Bible?

The LORD is first.
The LORD is one [God].
The LORD is the same [as whom?]
The LORD alone.
The LORD is a single [Being, Deity, Elohim].
The LORD is a unified [Being, Deity, Elohim].
The LORD is unique, the one and only [God].

Given the theme of YHVH's centrality in Deuteronomy (see below), and given the command aspect of the Shema ("and you shall love YHVH your God"), the sense of **uniqueness** seems most appropriate in this verse.

Here is how some Jewish versions render the Shema:

Isaac Leeser (1845): Hear, O Israel! The Lord, our God, is the One Eternal Being.
Jewish Publication Society (1917): Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Joseph Hertz (1937): Hear, O Israel, The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.
Jewish Publication Society (1985): Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

[**Echad** occurs in **Deuteronomy** at: 1:2, 3, 23; 4:42; 6:4; 12:14; 13:12; 15:7, 7; 16:5; 17:2, 6, 6; 18:6; 19:5, 11, 15; 21:15, 15, 16 [Heb v. 17]; 24:5, 5, 11; 28:7, 25, 55; 32:30.]

The Septuagint (LXX) renders the Shema literally, except it does not transliterate the Tetragrammaton (YHVH). Rather, it substitutes "Kuriōs/Lord" without an article ("ho") as though the word is God's proper name.

Ἴσραὴλ· κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν·
[akoue, israel, kurios ho theos hemon kurios heis estin]
"Hear, Israel: Lord our God Lord is one."

YHVH is God of Gods

The Bible never denies the reality of other, foreign "gods" (elim, elohim), though it calls them demons (Lev 17:7; Deut 32:17; 2 Chron 11:15). The commandment "You shall have no other **elohim** before me" is thus multivalent.

All parts of the Hebrew Bible have a unified testimony:

- Who is like You among the gods, O YHVH? (Exod 15:11a)
- For great is YHVH, and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols. (Ps 96:4-5a)
- YHVH your Elohim is Elohim of elohim,
And Lord [Adonim] of lords [adonim]. (Deut 10:17)

[Consider the study "[Elohim](#)" in Biblical Context.]

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The Shema in Historical Context

The jewel of the Shema is mounted in an intricately crafted setting.

The book of Deuteronomy is the concluding "Law of Moses." It depicts the time when Moses is preparing the Second Generation to enter Canaan (without him).

Their parents had escaped from Egypt and most died in the wilderness. He is instructing their children in their national history and teaching them God's torah about who He is and what they should do as His people in the Land.

Beyond this moment, in the wider biblical context, Israel is about to join a centuries-long battle with the people of Canaan **and their primary god, Baal**, son of El and Asherah (Astarte).

The Egyptians had numerous deities, whom the LORD humbled in the Ten Plagues. Following their decimation, he gave a spiritual banner to new-born Israel: "I am YHVH your God who brought you out of Egypt... you shall have no other Elohim (God or gods) before me" (Exod 20:2, 3).

For more details on the Ancient Near Eastern pantheons, see [The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible](#) [PDF, 26 pages].

Forty years later, in full view of the western hills of Canaan, Moses now gives the Second Generation the foundational doctrine about their unique ancestral God and about them, his unique people.

- What great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is YHVH our God whenever we call upon him? (Deut 4:7)
- Has anything as grand as this ever happened:
or has its like ever been known?...

Has any god ventured to go take for himself one nation from the midst of another ... as YHVH your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut 4:32, 34)

- It has been clearly demonstrated to you that

YHVH alone is God

[YHVH hu ha'elohim ein od milvado]
in heaven above and on earth below;
there is no other [ein od]. (Deut 4:35)

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In effect, Moses then takes the premiere doctrine of the Decalogue and forms it into a national banner for the Second Generation to march under as they enter into Canaan:

Shema Yisrael—Hear, O Israel!

YHVH is our God. YHVH is Unique, He is the One and Only God.
The other elohim are idols and demons.

Because of this, you shall love YHVH your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5 my paraphrase)

[\[See Note 2\]](#)

The Five Shemas

But this is not the only "Shema Yisrael" in Deuteronomy. There are others in this pre-Canaan primer for the Second Generation. And each one encourages the people to listen, obey, and trust the Lord their God.

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. (Deut 5:1)

Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you... (Deut 9:1)

Hear, O Israel! You are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for YHVH your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you. (Deut 20:3-4)

Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of the LORD your God. (Deut 27:9)

Within the historical, pedagogical setting of Deuteronomy, the **Shema Yisrael** in 6:4 shines as a banner of faith in the **unique God**. It also reminds the hearers that His uniqueness and love for them should rightly produce reciprocal love for Him. [\[See The Seventh Shema.\]](#)

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The Shema in Later Times

Some six centuries after Moses and the national entry into Canaan, a later generation was apostacizing from the Lord. To bring them back, the **prophet Elijah** (whose name means "My God is YHVH") called for a spiritual **Identity Contest** on the mountain of Carmel [1 Kings 18:20-40]. His question to the people was very simple:

- Who is the true God?
Is it Baal, the fertility/storm god of the Canaanites?
[whom most Israelites are fawning over]
Or is it YHVH, the Lord [adon], the God of our fathers?
(paraphrase, 1 Kgs 18:21)

At the flaming conclusion of the contest—when Baal failed to send fire from heaven, but YHVH did—the wavering people made loud confession of the ancestral faith:

- "YHVH hu haElohim, YHVH hu haElohim —
Yahveh he is the true God, Yahveh he is the true God...
[implied: **Baal is not!**]" (1 Kings 18:38)

The Shema, given by Moses centuries before, was now dramatically vindicated. A generation in peril chose it as their own creed and bowed the knee to the one, true, unique God. **Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad.**

Finally, in some future era, prophet Zechariah foresees a time when the God of Israel is the only deity recognized on earth. In an apparent allusion to the Shema, he predicts.

- The LORD will be king over all the earth;
in that day the LORD will be the **only one** [or "one", YHVH **echad**]
and his name the **only one** [shemo **echad**] (Zech 14:7, 9)

The Hebrew and Ugaritic scholar Cyrus Gordon notes that Greeks in the 6th century BCE, at the time of Zechariah, called their Creator god "The One." Perhaps Zechariah's message contains a contemporary anti-Hellenist polemic along the lines of:

- Only YHVH, the God of Israel, will be "The One"...
and his name "The One" [contra any gods of the Greeks].

[C.H. Gordon, "His Name is One," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970): 198-199]

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Context, Context, Context

Thus, in the whole expanse of Israelite history, the Shema declares YHVH's singular uniqueness as Israel's God. She was to **listen** (shama) to that declaration and **obey** (shama) its implications, and love the One who chose to reveal himself to her.

Summary: There is no **internal** evidence in the Hebrew Bible that any generation of Israelites understood the Shema as a reference to a compound unity in the Godhead.

Nor is there such evidence in the New Testament. [See the parallel idea that Yeshua is "unique," as is God, in the study [HaYachid—The Unique Messiah](#) (PDF).]

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Yeshua and the Shema

When a Torah scribe asked Yeshua which was the foremost commandment in the Law of Moses, he quoted the Shema and its appended command:

- 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 understanding, and with all your strength." (Mark 12:28-30)

He added the command to love one's neighbor found in Leviticus 19:18 as a corollary of loving God.

The scribe responded by affirming Yeshua's answer. Then he shifted focus to what seems to

be a veiled reference to monotheism—perhaps to tempt Yeshua to make a statement about his identity. [\[Note 3\]](#)

- Rabbi, teacher, you have truly stated that **He is one**, and there is **no one** else **besides him...** (Mark 12:32)

Yeshua didn't take the bait. Instead, "When Yeshua saw that he had answered intelligently [about the command to love], he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God' " (Mark 12:34).

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Yeshua didn't take this discussion of the Shema as an opportunity to affirm a theoretical compound unity in the Godhead or his place in it. Rather, he pointed the scribe to the extraordinary passage in **Psalm 110:1**, which speaks of a "Lord" who sits next to YHVH.

YHVH said to my Lord [Adon],
Sit at my right hand,
Until I put your enemies beneath your feet.

Then Yeshua tested him with an exegetical question about that Lord's identity: "How is it that the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? [Ps 110:1] David himself calls him 'Lord': and so in what sense is he his son?" (Mark 12:25-37).

The scribe and his theological comrades apparently could not, or dare not, answer Yeshua. Instead, "No one was able to answer him a word..." (Matt 22:46).

Yeshua's diverting attention from the Shema to **Psalm 110:1** is a significant move. In fact, Psalm 110:1 is the most quoted Hebrew text in the NT, more than Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22. He set the exegetical agenda for all his followers—and for Israel.

In essence, **Psalm 110:1** is the **Seventh Shema** in Hebrew Scripture. The one that completes the revelation of the one God to his people and to all peoples on earth.

Yeshua's shift of emphasis could become a vision-changing lesson for modern interpreters to follow his example—instead of the example of their teachers and rabbis.

- [Paul Sumner](#)

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Notes

(1) According to J.R. Kohlenberg & J.A. Swanson's Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament (1998), echad occurs **970** times in the Tanakh.

Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament says echad occurs **962** times.

Inexplicably, Abraham Even-Shoshan's Hebrew Qonqordantzia Hadashah Le'Torah Neviim Ukhtuvim says echad occurs only **699** times. [\[return to text\]](#)

(2) Here are renderings of the Shema in some Christian English Bibles.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD. (King James [Authorized] Version, 1611)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, is the LORD is one. (New International Version, 2011)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. (New Revised Standard Version, 1989)

Hear, Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one. (New American Standard Bible, 2020)

Attention, Israel! GOD, our GOD the one and only! (The Message, 2002)

Israel, listen to me. The LORD is our God. The Lord is the one and only God. (New International Reader's Version, 2014)

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(3) **John 10.** The statement by Yeshua, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), begs to be interpreted in light of this discussion of **echad**. In context, it seems clear that he was affirming a unity of purpose, will, and power with God the Father. His Father, who is "greater than all" (v. 29), had given him authority and divine power to keep all his sheep safe within the protected sphere of eternal life.

He asked his Father that his disciples "may all be one, just as we are one" (John 17:21-22). What all their unity may be, it does not mean they become united into the one Deity, as in New Age pantheistic religion.

Notwithstanding the accusations of the Jerusalem theologians that Yeshua, "being a man, [made himself] out to be God" (v. 33), he stood his ground that, as "Son of God" (v. 36), the Father was "in" him—not that he was God the Father.

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"There is a river whose streams [*pelagim*] make glad the city of God."
(Psalm 46:4)