

Chapter 1 – The Word “Echad” in the Shema Text

Many of the doctrines that I inherited from my parents and Christian teachers were nothing more than repetitions of concepts that were introduced into the Messianic movement during the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries. The purpose of these teachings was the complete dejudaisation of the movement and to create a new people apart from Israel and the Jewish people. This was definitely not the purpose behind Yeshua’s command to his disciples to go out into the whole world and cause the gentiles to be his followers after having gone through a Jewish Messianic purification bath in his name.

In my search for the original Hebraic and Messianic teaching of the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the Writings of the renewed covenant, I have been forced to question the entire theological inheritance that I received through Christian tradition. I have had to expose this inheritance to a thorough test of the Scriptures when they are interpreted from a Hebraic point of view, not a Greek one. As we know, the 66 books of the Bible were written by Israelites who understood things with a Hebraic mindset, not a Greco-Roman one as in the western world where I grew up. Because of this, I also questioned the trinity doctrine as it is expressed in the Christian tradition that I grew up in.

Here I am going to share some of the arguments that I have worked through while searching for truth as it concerns the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Lord is One, Not Three

At first, it was very hard for me to understand the Shema text, the Jewish confession of faith, in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which was affirmed by the Messiah and which he also partially quotes in Mark 12:28-30,

*“One of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together. Knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, ‘Which commandment is the greatest of all?’ Yeshua answered, ‘The greatest is, “Hear, Yisra'el, the Eternal our Elohim, **the Eternal is one**: you shall love the Eternal your Elohim with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.””* (HNV revised)

In one translation, verse 29 is written this way,

*“And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is: “Hear, Israel. The Lord our God is **one Lord**”* (LITV¹¹)

Each morning and evening every faithful Jew makes this confession. Furthermore, these are the last words spoken before death. This is the Jewish confession of faith which is close to the heart of every Jew. In this text, it is not only ones faith and trust in the

¹¹ Literal Translation of the Holy Bible

Eternal, the Elohim of Israel that is declared, but also that there is no other beside him, that he is one. This is the foundation for true monotheism.

The Shema text says that the Eternal is ONE. Since I came from a background that believes in a triune God, I was very disturbed by this word. I was forced to admit that the Bible says that Elohim is one, not three as I had learned.

Then I read writings that circulate among Messianic Jews, saying that the Hebrew word for “one”, “echad”, does not mean “only” –which in Hebrew is “yachid” – but rather a “unified entity”. But, when I continued on in deeper research about how the word “echad” is used in the Bible, I noticed that it has two meanings, on the one hand it means “a unified entity”, and on the other hand it means “a singular unity”.

In Genesis the word “echad” and its feminine form “achat” occurs almost 50 times. It speaks of, among other things, one day (1:5; 27:45; 33:13), one place (1:9), one rib (2:21), one flesh (2:24), “one of us” (3:22), one language (11:1, 6), one people (11:6; 34:16, 22), “this one/lone” (19:9), one bush (21:15), one mountain (22:2), “one of the people” (26:10), “one single blessing” (27:38), one camp (32:8 v. 9 in Hebrew), “one single day” (33:13), “one single people” (34:16, 22), the same night (40:5; 41:11), one single straw (41:5, 22); one single meaning of two dreams (41:25, 26); one single man (42:11, 13), and one of the brothers (42:13, 16, 19, 27, 32, 33; 44:28).

The word “echad” and its feminine form “achat” is a numeric word. It is the most common word that is used in the Hebrew in order to express singularity. In the texts that we have presented here, we see that the word is used to describe all kinds of units, but even more specifically to denote singularity, and then often preceded by the article “ha” (“the”), “ha-echad”. The word “yachid” is used more sporadically in the Scriptures, only twice in the entire Chumash (the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch) and 11 times in the rest of the Scriptures. This means that the word echad is used many times in order to express singularity, even though it is not necessarily limited to that but can also express plural-unity, then however, with the emphasis on the unity and not on the plurality.

This means that in Genesis, we can find the word “echad” used as a unified entity. Genesis 2:24 speaks of the man and his wife being “one flesh”. The Hebrew word that is translated as “one” in this case is that same word “echad”. We also have other places, for instance 11:6 among other places, which speak of one people. This means then that the word “echad” *can* actually mean an entity that is put together of several persons. Then the question naturally arises if the word “echad” in the Shema passage could possibly include more than one person.

In my searching for the truth concerning this subject, I received an article by Dr. Lawrence Duff-Forbes about the use of the word “echad” in Genesis. He claims that the word was only used 18 times in Genesis. Based on this, he comes to the conclusion that the use of the word “echad” in Genesis clearly expresses a plural entity more than singularity. He claims that its primary use gives a clear idea of the plural entity, while the idea of one absolute and undividable singularity is almost completely detached from the

concept. He goes on to say that those who revere the Scriptures as a single revelatory writing for mankind cannot allow that any interpretation of the word “echad” be added or held to that has no foundation in the Word of God. Dr. Duff-Forbes then finishes by saying that if one uses only the scriptural meaning of the word “echad” as a shining torch when studying the Shema Israel passage, one will understand that any application or perception of the word that tends to limit its meaning to only one absolute singularity would be a considerable distortion.

This might sound very convincing to one who is not familiar enough with the Hebrew Scriptures that he can find out for himself how the word is used. At closer investigation, one will see that the word “echad” does not occur only 18 times, but rather 23 times as a word standing alone. The question is if one is correct in using only 18 of the places in Genesis when the word “echad” stands alone (meaning without prepositions for example, and in its masculine form only) in order to understand the word’s complete meaning and use. Another question is whether or not Genesis alone is enough for a complete picture of the use of this word. The word occurs almost 50 times in Genesis alone, and nearly 900 times in the entire Tanach (OT). So, if the Shema passage is found in Deuteronomy, would not averaging out all the passages where the word occurs in the entire Pentateuch be a better foundation to stand on before coming to any such categorical conclusions? At closer study, it seems as though Dr. Duff-Forbes has made a biased judgment built on much too weak a foundation, built on a preconceived idea about the meaning and use of the word “echad” in the Scriptures.

We do not need to go further than to Genesis to see that the word “echad” does not have its primary emphasis on plurality but on singularity. Particularly in the seven places where “ha-echad” is used¹² the singular meaning is completely dominant. The word “ha-echad” can be translated as “the only” or “the single”.

In Genesis 41:5, 22, the word “echad” is used, without the definite article, about one single straw and in 42:11, 13 it is used about one single man, in order to specifically emphasize singularity. If we step over into Exodus, we can see that the word “echad” is used when unconditional singularity is denoted, for instance to say that there was not one single fly left (8:27), that not one single animal died (9:6, 7), that not one single grasshopper was left (10:19), and that not one of the Egyptians escaped (14:28).

We could go through passage after passage and see that there are very many examples of how the word “echad” is used in order to denote absolute singularity. Since there is a word for “only”, “yachid”, this teaches us that the Eternal preferred the use of the word “echad” above “yachid” in the Chumash, except for in two places, when he wanted to express absolute singularity.

It is absolutely correct to say that the word “echad” is used with the meaning of a unified entity. On the other hand, it is not correct to say that this is the word’s primary definition. When the Scriptures want to specifically denote singularity, this word has been given great preference over the word “yachid”. This hints to us that the word not only can, but

¹² 2:11; 10:25; 19:9; 42:27, 32, 33; 44:28.

also ought to be understood as singularity in the Shema passage. This is the way that the Jewish people have understood this word for millennia, and have therefore spread out the truth in the world about monotheism over the delusion of polytheism. You could ask yourself if the Eternal would have chosen to use the word “echad” about himself if he had meant to show the world that he is more than one, which is the primary emphasis of those who speak for the trinity doctrine. After all, it does not say that the Eternal is three, but only one.

One of Us

We are going to end this chapter by looking a bit closer at one of the texts that we mentioned in passing earlier, Genesis 3:22,

*“The Eternal Elohim said, ‘Behold, the man has become like **one of us**, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he put forth his hand, and also take of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...’”(HNV revised)*

Let us look at the words “one of us”, in Hebrew “echad mimenu”.

If we put ourselves on the side of those who advocate the trinity doctrine, we would say that this text, as well as the text in 1:26, clearly reveals that the Eternal is more than one, since he is speaking in plural form. We would then assume that he is speaking as a threefold personality. The expression “one of us” would then be referring to one of the three persons in the Trinity, most likely the Son.

One problem that arises however is when we look at the word “one”, which once again is “echad”. If there really was a triune God who was speaking of himself here and mentioning one of the three as “one of us”, how can the one be “echad” if this word means a unified entity. Did not “echad” mean that the three were one? How then can the word “echad” be used for only one of the three?

As we can see, the argument for “echad” having only the meaning of a unified entity, even found in one of the passages that are used as proof material for the trinity doctrine, falls apart.

Here we summarize this chapter by saying that the use of the word “echad” in the five books of Moses shows us that its primarily definition is a singular unit rather than a unified entity. The fact that the Eternal has chosen this word rather than “yachid” in order to express absolute singularity gives us a hint that we ought to understand the word this way when it is used in the Shema passage in Deuteronomy 9:4-9. Here is the Jewish confession of faith, which also Yeshua the Messiah confessed. When every Jew, at least twice a day, prays that the Eternal is one, it does not mean that he is three, but one alone and that there is no one beside him.

***“Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart,
that the Eternal he is Elohim in heaven above and on the earth beneath;
there is none else”***

(Deuteronomy 4:39 HNV revised)

***“I am the Eternal, and there is none else;
besides me there is no Elohim.
I will gird you, though you have not known me;
that they may know from the rising of the sun,
and from the west,
that there is none besides me:
I am the Eternal, and there is no one else.”***

(Isaiah 45:5-6 HNV revised)