CHAPTER 13

Deuteronomy 6:4 — A New Proposal

The “oneness of God” is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Deut 6:4 — שמע ישראל יהוה אחד, normally translated “Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One,” has been traditionally understood to be a monotheistic credo that affirms the existence of the sole god YHWH. Not without some trepidation, the present brief study examines Deut 6:4 in quest of the meaning assigned by the ancient author of the verse, at the expense of the significance the verse has held for succeeding generations.

Deut 6:4 is followed by the command to love YHWH — אהבת את יהוה אלהיך wholeheartedly. Because early interpreters understood the verse as an expression of Jewish monotheism, the Mishnah (Berakot 1:1–2) prescribed its recitation twice daily.1 In the New Testament, Jesus tells an inquiring scribe, “the first of all the commandments is ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.’” The scribe commends Jesus saying, “You are right in saying that God is one and beside him there is no other.”2 But as Nielsen3 has noted, a monotheistic formulation in Deuteronomic language would more likely have read: "יהוה הוא האלהים אין עד", YHWH is the God. There is no other"; or perhaps אלהים עמדנו אין, “there is no god beside him.”

Indeed, careful attention to the wording and context of Deut 6:4 requires the reader to confront two crucial questions. First, what can the phrase יהוה אחד mean in classical Hebrew? Second, what connection is there between what Israel is supposed to “hear” and the command to love YHWH wholeheartedly? Driver6 proposed two possible answers to the first question: יהוה אחד may mean that YHWH “is in essence indivisible, cannot . . . assume different phases or attributes, as presiding over different localities.” Second יהוה אחד might refer to the uniqueness of YHWH as “the only deity to whom the true

1 Deut 6:4 is the opening verse of the Shema liturgy which is recited twice daily. The Shema comprises Deut 6:4–9, Deut 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41.
2 Mark 12:29, 32.
4 See Deut 4:35, 39.
5 See Deut 32:39.
6 S. R. Driver, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 90.
attributes of the Godhead really belong.” Both suggestions take את אחד as predicative of YHWH who is thus described as being אחד.

Driver’s first proposal is philologically unsound because את אחד does not mean “indivisible,” in Biblical Hebrew. That notion is expressed by שלם (e.g. Deut 27:6; Josh 8:31; 1Kings 8:61); or by the negation of verbs on the order ofบาล “differentiate” (e.g. Lev 1:17; Ezra 9:2); פרד, “part” (2Sam 1:23); והנה “split” (Ezek 37:22); or ודלל “divide.” (Josh 18:2) In other words, the designation of YHWH as אחד does not, as Driver would have, it rule out the existence of “YHWH . . . as presiding over different localities.” A writer wishing to deny the existence of local YHWHs, say at Samaria or Teman, who, in fact, are now known to have been worshipped in preexilic Israel7 would have written something along the lines of Zech 14:9, a verse cited by Rashi and Nachmanides as a parallel to Deut 6:4 and almost as significant in Jewish liturgy. That verse reads: יהוה מלך על כל הארץ ויהוה אחד הוא יהוה גם משם את אחד “YHWH shall become king of the entire land (of Israel).”8 On that day there will be one YHWH with a single name.” But despite the occurrence of יהוה אחד in both verses, the fact that אחד is not repeated in Deut 6:4 makes Zech 14:9 irrelevant to its interpretation. The actual parallels to Zech 14:9 are Gen 11:1 and Num 15:16. The first reads וייר מלא כעם אחד ואת רביים אדומים “It was the case that the whole earth had the same language with the same words.” The second reads: תורת אחד ואת משפטים אחד ואת יהוהกล בור ולא חכמה “You and the alien who resides among you shall have the same ritual and the same rule.” As for Driver’s suggestion that אחד in Deut 6:4 indicates the unique9 divinity of YHWH, grammar would require a copula, in this case the third person pronoun הוא.10

The difficulties with the predicative explanation impelled many scholars from Abraham ibn Ezra to the NJPS translators to understand Deut 6:4 as a monolatrous command along the lines of “YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.”11

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8 That is what כולם כעם means in the very next verse, Zech 14:10. See A. Ehrlich, Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel vol. 5 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich,1912), 353.
9 2Sam 7:23 reads in part: כי עם כל אחד ואת מעורבים אדומים. This means “seems to be another nation.” However, that LXX ethnos allo indicates a Hebrew ארץ אחר “another nation.” Even if we retain ארץ we must follow the lead of Ehrlich and understand the text anastrophically as, כי ארץ כל אחד ואת מעורבים אדומים, "And is there one nation on earth like your people, like Israel?" In other words, אחד does not refer to Israel as unique. Israel is unique because there is not one nation גוי אחד like them. See A. Ehrlich. Mikrâ ki-Pheschutô vol. 2 (Ktav reprint: NY, 1965), 203.
10 Cf. Cant 6:8–9.
11 The NJPS was criticized in Orthodox circles for translating “The Lord alone.” See S. Hoenig, Tradition 5/2 (Spring, 1963), 200.