The Shema\(^1\) is in Jewish thought the supreme affirmation of the unity of God and is frequently regarded as the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.\(^2\) If the Shema may be understood as Judaism’s most basic confession and something like a creed during the time of Jesus, exploring and elucidating his understanding and employment of it in his ministry becomes a task worth pursuing.

Two things need to be ascertained before results may be arrived at. The first concerns the status of the Shema in Jesus’ day. To what extent can the evidence of the Mishnah be retrojected back to Jesus’ ministry? Whether we can speak of a creed or simply the frequent use of a passage, such as Deut 6:4–5, has important ramifications. If Jesus was dealing with a creed and made novel statements about its meaning, the overturning of an identity-making consensus may be at work. If he was simply highlighting the importance of one popular passage, what may be at work may simply be an employment of something popular for the building of a new proposal. Of course, the latter is still important for an assessment of the impact Jesus’ ministry had on his people, but it would not carry as great a significance as it would have done if the former were true.

The second concerns, of course, whether the gospel traditions, which feature Jesus’ discussion and use of the Shema, may confidently be traced back to him and are not merely the products of the post-Easter community. This will involve painstaking sifting and analysis, the results of which will doubtless not be convincing to everyone. However, if it is possible to derive results with a fair measure of confidence, exploring whether Jesus has offered anything new or creative to his contemporaries’ understanding of the Shema becomes something that scholarship on the historical Jesus cannot bypass. Indeed, if a leitmotif

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\(^1\) In today’s Jewish liturgy, it comprises three paragraphs: Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21; and Num 15:37–41. The name is derived from the first two words of Deut 6:4: שמע ישראל (Hear, O Israel!).

can be identified, the significance will be great, as it may very well lead us to the heart of Jesus’ ministry. There will then be ripple effects on our understanding of Jesus’ Jewishness.

1. History of Research

Surprisingly, scholarship on such an important topic has been meagre. Even if we attribute this dearth of interest to anti-Semitism of a bygone era, the lack of scholarly attention to such a topic in modern times is still baffling. This becomes even more apparent when it is realised that the citing of Deut 6:5 in the synoptic gospels (Matt 22.37//Mark 12:30; Mark 12:33; Luke 10:27) presents a most fascinating and intricate problem. They come in different forms. No one citation agrees with another. They all do not appear to conform to either the Masoretic Text (MT) or the LXX. J. Jeremias lamented in 1961\textsuperscript{3} that this glaring problem was not addressed by commentators up to his day.\textsuperscript{4} The exception to this was the lonely voice of T. W. Manson, who took notice of it but confessed that it was a very complex textual problem which he, unfortunately, was unable to solve.\textsuperscript{5} For Jeremias, this phenomenon of textual divergences over the gospels’ citation of Deut 6:5 is curious, especially when the Shema was a liturgical text of the Jews of Jesus’ day. What proposals did he come up with to explain this curious phenomenon? Beginning from the premise that the Shema was a creed in Jesus’ day,\textsuperscript{6} he proposed that the divergences in the synoptic gospels had arisen because the Greek-speaking church had stopped reciting it. The Lord’s Prayer had taken over its place in the liturgy of the church (\textit{Didache} 8.3). This contributed to early Christianity’s lack of precision over the words of the Shema. Consequently, he concludes:

both the prayers of Jesus and those of the early church stand in the [Jewish] liturgical tradition. The custom of praying three times a day is taken over from Judaism, but the new life bestowed through the gospel

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\textsuperscript{3} In a lecture delivered during the VIII\textsuperscript{e} Semaine d’Études Liturgiques at the Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe Saint-Serge, Paris, which was subsequently published. The work utilised is the English Translation, published as \textit{The Prayers of Jesus} (London: SCM, 1967).

\textsuperscript{4} Jeremias, \textit{Prayers}, 80.


\textsuperscript{6} Jeremías, \textit{Prayers}, 80.