“YAHWEH IS ONE”: THE TRANSLATION OF THE SHEMA

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One of the fundamental theological statements of the OT is Deut. vi 4, the Shema. It is notable, however, that while the importance of the verse is not in doubt, its interpretation is a matter of continuing and unresolved debate. Much of the debate revolves around disagreement as to the translation of the Hebrew, whose possible different renderings give rise to significantly different meanings. It is the thesis of this article that the disagreement about translation can in fact be satisfactorily resolved. If the thesis is correct it will not of itself resolve all the problems of interpretation, since the proposed translation raises particular interpretative difficulties of its own; but it will provide the necessary foundation on which any true interpretation must be built.

The Hebrew text of Deut. vi 4 reads: "š'ma יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יִהְיוּ נֵעֵן יְהוָה יְהֵיהָד. It is generally agreed that š'ma יִשְׂרָאֵל is unproblematic and should be rendered "Hear, O Israel" (cf. Deut. ix 1, xx 3), serving as an introduction to what follows. The problem of translation centres on the fact that in the next four words yhwh יְהוָה יִהְיוּ נֵעֵן יְהוָה יְהֵיהָד there is no verb, and therefore a verb must be supplied by the translator. The natural assumption is that this verb should be the verb "to be", for it is a common idiom of Biblical Hebrew to use verbless clauses whose construction is that of noun and predicate juxtaposed and related by an implied verb "to be".¹ Further, it is also a natural assumption that the tense of the verb is present, since no other tense is suggested by the context² and Hebrew tends to indicate past or future by the specific

¹ On noun-clauses see GK §§ 140, 141.
² A future sense was given to the second part of the verse by Rashi who interpreted it “canonically” in the light of the wider context of Zeph. iii 9 and Zech. xiv 9 to give the sense that the Lord who is now God of Israel alone will in future be the one God of all the earth (A.M. Silbermann [ed.], The Pentateuch with the Commentary of Rashi: Deuteronomy [Jerusalem, 1973], p. 37).
inclusion of hāyār or yihyeh. If, then, one is to understand the verb “is”, the crucial question is precisely where in the sentence it should be understood.

To put the same point differently, the question is how much of the sentence is subject and how much is predicate. What precedes the verb that the translator must supply will be the subject and what follows the verb will be the predicate. But the division between subject and predicate can be put at any point in the sentence. The four words of the clause offer three possible positions in which the verb can be understood; and if the verb is understood in the first position then it can also be understood in the third, thereby making a sentence with two subjects and two predicates. There are thus four basic alternatives:

(i) \( \text{yhwh} - ^{3}\text{êlôhênu yhwh} ^{2}\text{êhád} : "\text{Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone}".\)
(ii) \( \text{yhwh} ^{3}\text{êlôhênu} - ^{2}\text{êhád} : "\text{Yahweh our God is one Yahweh}".\)
(iii) \( ^{3}\text{êlôhênu yhwh} - ^{2}\text{êhád} : "\text{Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one}".\)
(iv) \( ^{3}\text{êlôhênu yhwh} ^{2}\text{êhád} : "\text{Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one}".\)

If one examines these four renderings (with their variations), two basic differences among them become apparent. First, if yhwh is subject and ^3êlôhênu is predicate, as in (i) and (iv), then we have a statement about the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, while if ^3êlôhênu is part of the subject and not the predicate, as in (ii) and (iii), then we have a statement about the nature or character of Yahweh. Secondly, (i) is different from all other renderings in translating ^2êhád as “alone” rather than “one”. It is not absolutely necessary that if yhwh is subject

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3 Cf. GK §141 f, g, i.
4 Cf. e.g. S.R. Driver, Deuteronomy (3rd edn, Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 89–90. It should be noted that yet other renderings have been proposed. For example, F.I. Andersen suggests “Our one God is Yahweh, Yahweh” (The Hebrew Verbless Clause in the Pentateuch [Nashville, 1970], p. 47), while M. Dahood suggested “Obey, Israel, Yahweh. Yahweh our God is the Unique” (L.R. Fisher [ed.], Ras Shamra Parallels I [Rome, 1972], p. 361). These may perhaps best be described as syntactically adventurous. The present argument with regard to the more common renderings will apply equally to these.
5 A variant, which avoids giving the unusual sense “alone” to ^2êhád is “The LORD is our God, one LORD” (New English Bible). This variant seems to make better sense with the title “LORD” than with the proper name Yahweh.
6 This was the rendering of the LXX: κύριος δ Θεός ήμων κύριος εἰς ἐστίν. In this form the text is cited in Mk xii 29. One modern liturgical rendering of this is “The Lord our God is the only Lord” (The Alternative Service Book 1980 [Cambridge, 1980], p. 120). Although this is an attractive rendering, it depends on the implications of the title “Lord” and would be less meaningful if the proper name Yahweh were substituted.
7 Or “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is ‘One’”, if ^2êhád is taken as a name or title (C.H. Gordon, “His Name is ‘One’”, JNES 29 [1970], pp. 198–9).