ON THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN THE SHEMA 
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Although the word יְהַד (RSV "one") in the Shema is patient of a variety of construals, the variety may be grouped into two sorts: the word says something about Israel’s God in se (Yahweh is "one, unique," or the like); or it says something about the claim of this God upon Israel ("Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone," or the like). The latter sort of construal has received increasing support in recent years, as biblical scholars have asserted the need to disen-tangle interpretation of the Shema from the concerns of the explicitly monotheistic philosophy or theology of a later age, and as they have analysed the Shema in the context of Israel’s covenant traditions. In such a construal, the opening sentence contains not so much an affirmation to Israel about Yahweh as a claim upon Israel for exclusive covenant loyalty to Yahweh.¹

Consensus, however, is not yet in sight. This reflects the fact that in the Shema the meaning of יְהַד is ascertainable only indirectly, from a variety of contextual and thematic considerations. Thus, for example, the construal “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone” is argued in part from presumably similar statements involving the use of the phrase lĕbadʼ-, "alone", and from the general themes (in Deuteronomy and elsewhere) of Yahweh’s claim to exclusive loyalty vis-à-vis other gods. The degree of indirectness of this construal is indicated by the fact that other instances of יְהַד meaning “alone” have yet to be adduced in the Hebrew Bible.

In this article, I wish to explore the first sort of construal (“Yahweh is one”) in a way that avoids importation of anachronistic philosophical and theological concerns, and that identifies a concern for the “oneness” of Israel’s God squarely

¹ I will not attempt to survey recent interpretations. I will, however, comment below on the proposal of Francis I. Andersen.
within Israel's religious history and at the heart of the covenant traditions. As with other interpretations, my argument will perforce rest largely on indirect evidence; though in contrast to the "Yahweh alone" construal, I hope to show that the specific nuance I propose for "one" occurs in at least two other biblical passages. The upshot of my analysis will be that the claim upon Israel to love Yahweh its God with all its heart and soul and strength follows upon an affirmation to Israel that Yahweh is יְהֹוָ֣ה "one". The purpose of this affirmation is to identify in God the dependable ground upon which an exhortation to wholehearted loyalty may appropriately be made.

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In a short but penetrating discussion of the theological issues in the Shema, Patrick D. Miller makes a number of points pertinent to my thesis. He takes the Decalogue, in particular its Prologue and first two Stipulations, as the most important co-text for the interpretation of the Shema. He goes so far as to say—correctly, in my opinion—that "the Shema is a mirror image of the first part of the Decalogue". One implication which he draws from this correlation is of special interest: whereas the partial quotation of the Shema in the New Testament tends to confine our attention to its demand aspect, the Shema (like the Decalogue) contains not only a claim upon Israel but also an affirmation concerning Israel's God. Miller writes.

... it is as the God who sets an afflicted and enslaved people free that the Lord creates and claims a relationship with the people. The single ground for identifying the Lord and explaining why that one claims to be "your God" is the clause "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (p. 20, italics added).

That is to say, the demands of the covenant are rooted in the affirmation of the identity and character of the God who establishes the

2 The word "co-text" indicates the literary environment of the Shema, in distinction from "context" which refers to its worldly environment. See Christopher Butler, Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology (Oxford, 1984), p. 4. I will be discussing "context" as well as "co-text" in this article.