
OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

READING THE HEBREW BIBLE
AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

R. W. L. Moberly


Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2013 by R. W. L. Moberly

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moberly, R. W. L.

Old Testament theology : reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian scripture /

R. W. L. Moberly.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4885-2 (cloth)

1. Bible. Old Testament—Theology. I. Title.

BS1192.5.M64 2013

230'.0411—dc23

2013017369

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotation labeled CEB are from the Common English Bible®. Copyright 2010, 2011 by Common English Bible.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2007

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

To Jon Levenson,
wise biblical interpreter and interfaith interlocutor

Contents

Preface ix

Abbreviations xi

Introduction 1

1. A Love Supreme 7
2. A Chosen People 41
3. Daily Bread 75
4. Does God Change? 107
5. Isaiah and Jesus 145
6. Educating Jonah 181
7. Faith and Perplexity 211
8. Where Is Wisdom? 243

Epilogue 279

Bibliography 289

Author Index 309

Subject Index 313

Scripture Index 327

Preface

In this book I discuss some of the scriptural content that I have thought about, prayed about, given addresses about, and taught for the last twenty years or so. I have written some earlier and shorter versions of the subject matter of each chapter, though each chapter here is a genuinely new discussion. Those who know me may recognize some of the songs that I sing. I hope that the book's content, like a good wine, may have acquired some depth and flavor through the long period of its being aged and matured in the mental cellar.

The book is also a sequel and complement to my work *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Both there and here I try to model a way of doing Old Testament theology that is built around a dialectic between ancient text and contemporary questions, within a Christian frame of reference that is alert to other frames of reference. In the earlier book the readings of the biblical text are restricted to Genesis; here they range (selectively) across the canon of Hebrew scripture; also the readings here are fuller and more detailed than was possible in the earlier book.

Although I had made a start on the book earlier, most of it was written in the spring and summer of 2012, while I was on regular research leave. I am grateful to my colleagues for taking over many of my responsibilities so as to give me space and time to write. As usual, I did not travel on my research leave but remained in the congenial context of Abbey House, with books and friends (and a wonderful view of the cathedral) readily accessible.

I am, as always, deeply grateful to friends who have read drafts of the material and suggested improvements. My wife, Jenny, meticulously read everything and helped improve my clarity of thought and expression. David Day warned me when I was in danger of becoming too heavy for the non-specialist reader. Richard Briggs gave me some “aha!” moments for improving

my argument. Anthony Bash ruthlessly weeded out some of my irritating and redundant English idioms of which I had ceased to be aware. Patrick Morrow gave me some wonderful insights from the rabbis and helped fine-tune some of what I'm trying to say. Even if I did not incorporate all their wisdom, I hope they will all find that the text has improved since they read it. As ever, though, only I can be blamed for my decisions and delinquencies. I am grateful also to Jon Parker, who as my research assistant for some of the time made access to some of the bibliography much easier. (If only I too could be as computer literate as my research students.)

I have much appreciated the publishing process with Baker Academic. Jim Kinney has been a congenial colleague at conferences for many years, and I am happy to show concrete appreciation for his wining and dining me! He has also valuably contributed to the shape of this book. Brian Bolger has been a helpful and responsive editor, a pleasure to work with. Finally, I am grateful for the local help of my friend Douglas Earl for his compilation of the indexes.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esth.	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps./Pss.	Psalm/Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Mark	Mark	Gal.	Galatians
Luke	Luke	Eph.	Ephesians
John	John	Phil.	Philippians
Acts	Acts	Col.	Colossians
Rom.	Romans	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians

1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Titus	Titus	1–3 John	1–3 John
Philem.	Philemon	Jude	Jude
Heb.	Hebrews	Rev.	Revelation
James	James		

General

//	parallel to	<i>BHK</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica</i> , ed. Rudolf Kittel (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937)
§/§§	section/s		
AB	Anchor Bible		
<i>ABD</i>	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)	<i>BHQ</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Quinta</i> , ed. A. Schenker et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007–)
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies	<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> , ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967/77)
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament [series], general ed., Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001–)	<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
AD	anno Domini	BibS(N)	Biblische Studien (Neukirchen, 1951–)
ad loc.	<i>ad locum</i> , at the place discussed	BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
AG	Analecta Gorgiana	BLS	Bible and Literature Series
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969)	BO	Berit Olam
		BS	Biblical Seminar
		<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
		<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
		BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
		<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research	CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
AT	author's translation	CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , trans. G. W. Bromiley et al., 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77); from German, <i>Die kirchliche Dogmatik</i> (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1932–67)
AV	Authorized Version (= KJV)		
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud		
BBRS	Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements		
BC	before Christ		
<i>BDB</i>	<i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , ed. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907)	CEB	Common English Bible
		cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
		chap./chaps.	chapter/chapters
		CSCD	Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine

CSsR	Congregatio Sanctissimi Redemptoris, Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer		and Takamitsu Muraoka, 2 vols., <i>Subsidia biblica</i> 14/I–II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991)
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality	JPSBC	Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary
<i>DCH</i>	<i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , 8 vols., ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic / Phoenix Press, 1993–2011)	JSNTSS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
DH	Deuteronomistic History/ Historian	<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary	JSOTSS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
ed./eds.	editor/s, edited by, edition	<i>JSR</i>	<i>Journal of Scriptural Reasoning</i> , http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
esp.	especially	JTIS	Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements
ESV	English Standard Version	<i>KD</i>	Karl Barth, <i>Die kirchliche Dogmatik</i> . See <i>CD</i>
ET	English translation	LBT	Library of Biblical Theology
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and the rest	LCL	Loeb Classical Library
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament	LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies (formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series)
FOTC	Fathers of the Church		
Gk.	Greek	lit.	literally
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910)	LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs	LXX	Septuagint
Heb.	Hebrew	mg.	margin/al
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>	MT	Masoretic Text
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies	n/n.	note
IBCTP	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching	NCB	New Century Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary	NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is	NIV	New International Version (2011)
intro.	introduction, introduced by	NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature	NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation
ITL	The International Theological Library	NKJV	New King James Version
JB	The Jerusalem Bible		
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>		
<i>JM</i>	<i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> , by Paul Joüon		

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version	SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
		SC	Sources chrétiennes
NRSVA	New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised	SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
NSCE	New Studies in Christian Ethics	SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
NT	New Testament	SJ	Society of Jesus (Jesuit)
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis	SNT	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
OBS	Oxford Bible Series		
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology	SOTBT	Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology
OCD	Disalced Carmelite Order	STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
OT	Old Testament		
OTG	Old Testament Guides	STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
OTL	Old Testament Library		
OTT	Old Testament Theology	<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
P	Priestly source (of the Pentateuch)	<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1974–2006; ET from German of 1970–95)
4QSam ^a	4QSamuel ^a , a Dead Sea Scroll from Qumran Cave 4		
REB	Revised English Bible		
<i>RelSRev</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>		
repr.	reprinted (by/of)		
RES	<i>Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique</i> , ed. Jean-Baptiste Chabot and Charles Clermont-Ganneau et al. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1900–1968)	TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
		trans.	translator, translated by
		UCOP	University of Cambridge Oriental Publications
RSV	Revised Standard Version	v./vv.	verse/verses
RV	Revised Version	vol./vols.	volume/volumes
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity	VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
		VTS	Vetus Testamentum: Supplement Series
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature		
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series	WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series	ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
SBONTNET	Sacred Books of the Old and New Testaments: A New English Translation		

Introduction

In this book I am trying to do two things, corresponding to the two parts of the book's title. In terms of the main title, *Old Testament Theology*, I am contributing to a familiar genre of biblical scholarship, while at the same time modifying it in a way that seems to me appropriate at a time when biblical scholarship is open to new possibilities. Most contributions to Old Testament theology aim to be more or less comprehensive, in some way covering the Old Testament as a whole. Here I am selective and consider only a few passages. However, I hope that these passages are *representative* of Israel's scriptures and allow many of its characteristic and leading concerns to emerge. Indeed, most of the standard topics that one would expect to find in an Old Testament theology—God, monotheism, idolatry, election, covenant, torah, prophecy, psalms, wisdom—do appear in the pages that follow, despite some notable absences, such as creation or sacrifice.

In terms of the subtitle, *Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture*, I want to give prime place to issues of hermeneutics. On the one hand I take with full seriousness the fact that Israel's scriptures were written in Hebrew and collected, collated, and used before Christianity appeared in history (hence the wording *Hebrew Bible*). On the other hand, I take with equal seriousness the fact that these documents have been, and still are, received and privileged by Christians in such a way as to function authoritatively for Christian faith (hence *Christian Scripture*). The difficult question of how best to hold these two perspectives together has, in one way or another, been central to much modern biblical scholarship. Within their own frame of reference, a growing number of Jewish biblical scholars also face these questions as they seek to combine ancient historical perspectives on their foundational documents with viewpoints from rabbinic and post-rabbinic reception, and also to probe the

relationship between Scripture and halakah. The current scholarly context is made more complex by the growing number of scholars who, because of their particular interests, may be uninterested in—or who, because of their ideological anxieties, may be actively resistant to—continuing reception of Israel’s scriptures as either privileged or authoritative. Whatever the biblical scholar’s perspective, however, hermeneutical decisions are inescapable (hence *Reading . . . as*).

The Role of Hermeneutics

The importance of basic hermeneutical decisions, focused in the notion of *reading as*, is nicely spelled out by Richard Briggs:

Rather than talking bluntly about what “scripture is” . . . we might better learn to speak of “scripture as” whenever we want to offer judgments or criteria regarding the responsible interpretation of scripture. . . . The shift from “is” to “as” represents, in my judgment, one of the most fundamental hermeneutical contributions to reflection on the nature of human interpretation of the world and texts around us. . . . Garrett Green, in one of the most sustained theological treatments of the matter, offers the notion that it is the shift from Kant’s “copula of judgement” (“is”) to the “copula of imagination” (“as”). . . . The postmodern mood, at least arguably, blurs the huge significance of “as/is” into a vague sense of everything being open to ideological and political spin, which is not untrue as far as it goes, but is rather an occasional social consequence of what is going on and not the fundamental point at stake.¹

With specific reference to biblical interpretation, one insight that has emerged with particular clarity in recent years is that there are a variety of legitimate perspectives and questions that may be brought to the study of the biblical text, and these can require differing modes of study. As I once put it: “How we use the Bible depends on why we use the Bible. In practice, many of the disagreements about how are, in effect, disagreements about why, and failure to recognize this leads to endless confusion.”² A concern to read the

1. Richard S. Briggs, “‘Scripture Is’ as ‘Scripture As’: Hermeneutical Plurality and Scriptural Responsibility,” in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, forthcoming). The work of Garrett Green, to which reference is made, is his *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 70–74, esp. 73.

2. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 2. In the first clause I have changed italics to roman type.

Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture will undoubtedly not be shared by all biblical scholars—though there is always the hope that any mode of biblical study, if well carried out, will still be illuminating to others whose own preferred mode of study is different.

One consequence of my focus on reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture is that I offer extended reflection on the nature of the varying interpretive decisions that can be made with reference to the particular texts I am studying, in the hope that this will clarify what is, and is not, involved in the proposed reading strategy. Since this present study is selective and representative, further work along the lines proposed here would naturally round out and nuance the general approach. Interestingly, a not-dissimilar recent proposal for a dialogical biblical theology—in which there is interplay between biblical text, historic appropriations, and contemporary theological concerns—comes from a Jewish scholar, Benjamin Sommer.³ I hope that my approach to reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture, far from closing down dialogue between Christians and Jews, will contribute to making the dialogue more interesting and worthwhile and help improve the quality of our disagreements as well as agreements.

Of course, theoretical discussion as to the nature of hermeneutics, and about perspectives and strategies for reading, can be extensive. I have made some contribution to such discussions elsewhere and do not propose to add to them here.⁴ In any case, my sense of the way biblical scholarship works is that no amount of impressive-sounding discussion of hermeneutical theory or of particular approaches will make much impact until people can see how the proposals work in practice and how they genuinely enable a better grasp of

3. Benjamin D. Sommer, “Dialogical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically,” in *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation*, by Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer, LBT (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 1–53. An earlier landmark essay is by Jon Levenson, “Theological Consensus or Historicist Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies,” in his *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 82–105.

4. For example, see my *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, CSCD (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–44; “How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology,” *TynBul* 53/2 (2002): 177–202; “How Can We Know the Truth? A Study of John 7:14–18,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 239–57; “Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief,” *JTI* 2/1 (2008): 71–100; *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, OTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–20; “Interpret the Bible Like Any Other Book? Requiem for an Axiom,” *JTI* 4/1 (2010): 91–110; “What Is Theological Commentary? An Old Testament Perspective,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 172–86; “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church: Bultmann and Augustine Revisited,” *JTI* 6/1 (2012): 1–22; “Biblical Hermeneutics and Ecclesial Responsibility,” in Porter and Malcolm, eds., *Future of Biblical Interpretation*, forthcoming.

particular biblical texts. If there is no such recognition, the learned theoretical discussion will simply gather dust. So my aim in this book is to “get on with it” and offer readings of the Hebrew text of Israel’s scriptures that will, I hope, demonstrate the fruitfulness of the overall approach being advocated. I will, however, return briefly to hermeneutical issues in the epilogue by way of reflection on the readings offered.⁵

I think there can be little doubt that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a distancing of Old Testament study from classic Christian understandings and priorities, and the plausible locating of biblical texts in their likely ancient contexts of origin, had for the most part an enormous positive impact on people’s ability to read the familiar texts freshly and with deeper understanding of some of their dimensions. Such fruitfulness constituted a major justification for the mode of study. Unfortunately, the continuation of such study has not always remained as fruitful: it has given rise to its own scholasticisms, with no shortage of specialist scholarly wrangles. My concern here is to retain awareness of the enduring philological and historical insights that have emerged and to recontextualize them within a frame of reference that puts different questions to the texts. My hope is that this attempt to reintegrate Old Testament study with classic Christian understandings and priorities may in its own way have an impact on people’s ability to read the biblical texts freshly and to acquire a deeper understanding of some of their dimensions. The “aha!” factor, when one comes to “see” something significant in a text, is always an aspiration for work in the humanities—though it depends not only on the author but also on the reader. If, however, readers who are unpersuaded by my interpretations undertake to offer better interpretations of the biblical passages in question, that also would be a welcome outcome.

Memorandum to the Reader

Each of the eight chapters represents a study of a particular text and/or issue, which can be read on its own. However, the chapters are probably best read sequentially so that a cumulative hearing of significant voices in Old Testament theology, together with a better understanding of the hermeneutical proposals, can then emerge. The sequence of chapters loosely follows the sequence of the Jewish canon: Law, Prophets, Writings.

5. Unfortunately, issues relating to historic Christian appropriation of Israel’s scriptures via the Septuagint lie beyond the scope of this study other than in occasional footnote discussions of text and interpretation.

In each chapter there are passages in a smaller font that serve three distinct purposes. Some of them give detailed discussion, often of a philological nature, in support of a contention in the main argument. Some of them constitute an excursus, a discussion of an issue related to the main argument but not essential to it. Some of them give an example of a contemporary issue that illustrates what is being said about the content of the biblical text. A reader who just wants to follow the main argument could omit these smaller-font passages since the argument resumes after these excursions at the point where it was before them. However, I hope that most readers will find the content of these smaller-font passages worthwhile.

When referring to God, I consistently capitalize pronouns and possessives (“He,” “His”). This is partly because such capitalization is an ancient reverential practice, which I consider to be valuable (even if unfashionable). It is comparable to the reverential use of “the LORD” or “YHWH” so as not to use a vocalized form of the name of Israel’s God (“Yahweh”), an ancient Jewish practice widely observed by Christian translators of Israel’s scriptures, which I also follow. However, the capitalization is also because of the contentious contemporary issue of gendered language in relation to God. God is beyond gender, yet religious language must use analogical language drawn from life in the world. As I use the capitalized “He,” I seek to stand in continuity with the Old Testament’s own use of the masculine pronoun, while recognizing that God is not masculine in human terms. Although the Old Testament does not develop the point that God transcends gender, the combined absence of a consort for YHWH and rejection of the notion of feminine deities in the canonical texts, whatever may have been going on in Israelite religion on the ground, suggests that the classic understanding of God’s transcendence of gender is rooted (tacitly? incipiently?) in those Hebrew texts that have been received as authoritative by Jews and Christians.

I do not presuppose a knowledge of Hebrew on the part of the reader, though I hope that the periodic discussions of Hebrew usage, in transliteration, may encourage the Hebrew-less reader to start learning. My chosen general-purpose system of transliteration is user-friendly: I indicate long vowels and vowel letters with a macron (ā), very short vowels with a breve (ĕ), and minimize diacritical marks (e.g., *shūv* rather than *šûb*, to indicate that the Hebrew word for “turn/repent” is pronounced *shoov*). Those who know Hebrew do not need extra diacritics (even if they may quite properly prefer them), while those who do not know Hebrew may find them puzzling. The one exception is the use of *h* to indicate a hard “h,” as in Loch Ness.

Although I work from the Hebrew text of Israel’s scriptures in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, I cite the biblical text in the English translation provided

by the NRSV (except as noted). Where I think the translation is problematic, I signal that by dotted underlining in my citation (e.g., maidens), explain what I consider preferable, and say why. However, I only pick out problematic text-critical and philological issues when it makes a difference to my argument: I do not want to clutter the text and footnotes or allow the wood to be obscured by the trees.

I

A Love Supreme

Where is a good place to begin if one wishes to hear the primary and most resonant voices of the Hebrew Bible? There are many possible starting points. One could certainly do worse than begin at the beginning with Genesis 1, since this majestic account of God’s creative work, together with its depiction of humanity as made “in the image of God,” introduces and frames all that follows in the canonical collection and continues to have enormous resonance. Nonetheless I propose that one can fruitfully start elsewhere, with one particular passage whose foundational and focal nature can readily be demonstrated—Deuteronomy 6:4–9, widely known by its Jewish name (derived from its first word in the Hebrew), the Shema.¹

Introduction to the Shema

In the Shema, Moses, who is the speaking voice throughout Deuteronomy, says:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.³ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

In this chapter I develop three of my earlier studies: “Toward an Interpretation of the Shema,” in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 124–44; “How Appropriate Is ‘Monotheism’ as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?” in *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North, JSNTSS 263 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 216–34; and “Pentateuch” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Me–R*, vol. 4, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 436–37.

1. “The Shema” is really shorthand for the name of the historic Jewish practice of daily prayer, the *Q̄ērī’at-Shēma*, which is classically composed of Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; and Num. 15:37–41, together with certain blessings (somewhat abbreviated in some recent Jewish practice).

⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

^a Or, the LORD our God is one LORD; or, the LORD our God, the LORD is one; or, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one.

The primary importance of this paragraph is indicated in three interrelated ways. First and most broadly, its history of reception and use is enormous. Down the centuries countless Jews have recited these words morning and night (following the rabbinic construal of v. 7b), and many have used these words as their dying words, not least when they have been killed for being Jews. It is within this Jewish context that Jesus stands when he singles out 6:4–5 as the commandment that is “first of all,” that is, of supreme importance (Mark 12:28–30).

Second, the contextualization of these words within Deuteronomy means that they appear in the Old Testament’s most systematic account of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, whose perspectives inform substantial parts of the histories and the prophetic literature. Moreover, within Deuteronomy itself, these words are the keynote of Moses’s exposition of the covenant between YHWH and Israel. They are the first thing Moses says after being appointed as prophet/mediator between YHWH and Israel, which happens after YHWH’s direct address to Israel in the Ten Commandments is felt by Israel to be overwhelming (Deut. 5:22–33). The Shema follows a prefatory “Now this is the commandment . . . that the LORD your God charged me to teach you” (6:1).

Third, there is the straightforward implication of the wording of 6:4–9 in itself. First, YHWH, and YHWH alone, is presented as the appropriate recipient of Israel’s undivided allegiance (vv. 4–5). Then “these words” that Moses commands are of such importance that they are to be kept in mind, taught to the next generation, discussed constantly, displayed upon one’s person, and inscribed upon the entrances to both private and public spaces (vv. 6–9). It is hard to imagine greater emphasis than this being laid upon the significance of the Shema. Thus the history of its use and also its weighty contextual location are fully appropriate to the content of the Shema in itself.

One of the almost inescapable drawbacks of the regular use, or common knowledge, of famous biblical passages is that people can, through routine, become dulled as to the often-astonishing implications of the material. So it is worth trying to highlight the enormity of what the Shema says.

For some years my son and I have been regular supporters of one of the leading football (i.e., soccer) clubs in the North East of England, Sunderland

AFC. The junior supporters' club, of which he was a member while under sixteen, is called 24–7, the common contemporary idiom for “all the time.” The club magazine is called *A Love Supreme*. I confess that I note these names with a certain wry amusement and do not take them seriously; nor, I imagine, do numerous other Sunderland supporters (despite the passion with which many in the North East follow football), for we know what it is to live in a culture of linguistic inflation. And yet the idea of a love supreme that is for all the time is exactly that of which the Shema speaks; it is something that millions down the ages have taken with full seriousness. That is the content to which any worthwhile discussion must try to do justice.

Toward Establishing a Context for Interpreting the Shema

All attempts to discuss the Shema face two basic problems: translation and contextualization. Initially, therefore, it will be appropriate briefly to outline both these problems and the characteristic interpretations of the text to which they give rise.

The Problem of Translation

After the initial, and straightforward, invocation “Hear, O Israel,” there is more than one way of rendering the words that follow. Most modern translations, like the NRSV (cited above), offer in a margin/footnote at least three renderings other than that in the main text—though the various options tend to reduce to two main alternatives, in both of which it is clear that the final word *'ehād* is in some way being predicated of Israel's God.

The difficulty of translation arises from two factors. One is the fact that the Hebrew text is a noun clause consisting of four words with no verb: *yhwh 'ēlohēnū yhwh 'ehād*. It is regular Hebrew idiom to dispense with the verb if the clause in question is a subject-predicate clause in which the implied verb is some form of the verb “to be” (“A is B”). So almost all translators assume, surely rightly, that 6:4 presents such a subject-predicate clause. The problem is that it is not fully clear what is the subject and what is the predicate, a difficulty not helped by the fact that in Hebrew word order the predicate may either precede or follow the subject. All the translation variants arise from differing decisions as to subject and predicate. Nonetheless, despite differences, almost all interpreters agree that the final term, *'ehād*, is in some way being predicated of Israel's deity.²

The other difficulty is the sense to be ascribed to the final word, *'ehād*. Should it have its common numerical sense, “one,” or does the context require it to have a different sense, such as “alone”?³

2. The sole apparent use of the wording of Deut. 6:4 elsewhere in the OT, in Zech. 14:9—“And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one [*'ehād*] and his name one [*'ehād*]”—clearly takes “one” as the substantive predicate but does not clarify its precise sense.

3. Hebrew more readily expresses “alone” with *bādād* than with *'ehād*, as in Deut. 32:12, *yhwh bādād yanḥennū* (“YHWH alone led him” [AT]).

Views differ as to which of these senses should be chosen.⁴ Historically, the rendering “one” has predominated. For example, the LXX renders *’ehād* by *heis* (one): *kyrios ho theos hēmōn kyrios heis estin*. Elsewhere it expresses “You are God/Lord alone” with *monos* (alone): *sy ei ho theos/kyrios monos* (Ps. 85:10 [86:10 ET]; 4 Regnorum 19:15 [2 Kings 19:15]).

Of the two main alternatives, one is “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”⁵ The other is “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The apparent difference in meaning is that the sense of the former concerns *the relationship between YHWH and Israel*. The point is that their relationship is to be exclusive, which is a primary and recurrent concern in Deuteronomy; in such a formulation, however, it is compatible with recognition of a plurality of deities (“whatever other deities there may be, Israel must adhere to YHWH alone”). In the latter rendering the text is saying something about *YHWH Himself*. The point is that He is “one”; whatever precisely that may mean, it has regularly been taken to be a *locus classicus* for biblical monotheism⁶—and correspondingly, the denial of the existence of any other deity.⁷ Thus the difference between the translations is apparently weighty.

The Problem of Contextualization (1): Living Tradition as Context for Interpretation

The basic problem of understanding that is focused in translation is compounded by another basic problem: what is considered to be the appropriate context for interpreting the passage? To try to clarify some of the issues at stake, I will outline three differing approaches.

One of the fundamental rules that we learn in biblical studies, as in the humanities generally, is “Interpret a text in its context.” This simple-sounding principle, however, obscures the difficulty that there is more than one context for most significant texts, especially biblical texts.⁸ In the case of the Shema in particular, the question “Which context?” is both weighty and contested.

4. I have discussed the translation more fully in my “‘Yahweh Is One’: The Translation of the Shema,” in *Studies in the Pentateuch*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTS 61 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 209–15; repr. in my *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology*, SFSHJ 52 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 75–81. A good recent discussion of translation is by Lucien-Jean Bord and David Hamidovic, “Écoute Israël (Deut. VI 4),” *VT* 52/1 (2002):13–29.

5. Thus major contemporary translations such as the NRSV and NJPS. The CEB varies the form but not the sense: “Our God is the LORD! Only the LORD!”

6. This traditional translation and interpretation is still advocated by, e.g., Robert Alter: “The statement stands, then, as it has been traditionally construed, as a ringing declaration of monotheism” (*The Five Books of Moses* [New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004], 912).

7. The issues for monotheism posed by these two renderings in the OT will be discussed toward the end of this chapter.

8. See further chap. 5 below, “Isaiah and Jesus.”

For much of Jewish and Christian history, a common working assumption has been that the biblical canon as a whole, within the life and worship of an observant/believing community, provides the context for any particular verse; moreover, this context can include theological understandings and formulations that have arisen in post-biblical discussions. There is a long history of theological and philosophical reflection on what is entailed by God's being "one" and on the nature of the "love" that should be directed to Him.

For Jews, unsurprisingly, the wording of the Shema has acquired its own existence in life and liturgy. It is, as Gunther Plaut puts it, "an example of original text and later tradition coalescing and impinging upon each other to a remarkable degree." Plaut goes on to speak of the Shema as richly meaningful:

The *Shema* thus came to be like a precious gem, in that the light of faith made its words sparkle with rich brilliance of varied colors. Negatively, it underscored the Jew's opposition to polytheism and pagan ethics, to the dualism of the Zoroastrians, the pantheism of the Greeks, and the trinitarianism of the Christians. Positively, the One God was seen to imply one humanity and therefore demanded the brotherhood of all; it spoke of the world as the stage for the ethical life and linked monotheism and morality. It meant that God undergirded all laws for nature and for mankind; hence heaven and earth as well as human history were His domain. . . . These principles were seen by generations of Jews as rays shining forth from the *Shema*, as from a diamond set into a crown of faith and proven true and enduring in human history.⁹

Time-honored issues (Jewish resistance to polytheism, pantheism, or trinitarianism) and contemporary concerns (affirmation of monotheism and morality) come together in this jewel of great and enduring value.

Somewhat comparably, Michael Fishbane concludes the introductory chapter to his recent *Jewish Theology* thus:

When we think of Jewish theology and its various components, we are put in mind of its most central statement of principle. This is stated in scripture and has been repeatedly interpreted over the ages. [Citation of Deut. 6:4–9 follows.]

Such is the theological charge: to affirm God in one's life, through mind and heart and deed, through teaching and interpretation everywhere; and to cultivate a mindfulness of this duty through signs and symbols, so that one will always be reminded of the sanctity of the body and its actions—in the home (as the domain of one's family and future generations) and in the city (as the domain of society and the sphere of interpersonal values). A modern Jewish

9. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations: 1981), 1365, 1369–70.

theology will do this in its own distinctive way, resonant with our contemporary sensibilities and mind-set.¹⁰

The Shema still functions today as a fundamental articulation of the responsibilities of Jewish life and thought.

In a Christian frame of reference, one cannot find sentiments comparable to those of Plaut or Fishbane. Historic Christian use of the Shema has been both less in extent and more complexly refracted than Jewish use; and perhaps most important, the Shema has not featured in the practices of everyday Christian life. Christian use has predominantly had two concerns: on the one hand, the oneness of God in 6:4, and on the other hand, love for God in verse 5.

For example, in Christian theology there has regularly been a felt need to show that the affirmation of God as “one” is compatible with a trinitarian understanding of God—or even, that it underwrites it. Jaroslav Pelikan, for example, considers that for the Cappadocian fathers in the fourth century AD, the “monotheism” of Deuteronomy 6:4 was “the bulwark of the Nicene dogma of the Trinity,” and “the orthodox dogma of the Trinity . . . [was] the only way to vindicate the Shema, in the face of the Christian worship of Christ as divine.”¹¹

In his famous work *The Trinity*, Hilary of Poitiers, a contemporary of the Cappadocians, discusses this passage in relation to Arian denial of the deity of Jesus. Hilary reads Deuteronomy 6:4 as mediated by the New Testament, not least by the language and thought of 1 Corinthians 8:6 (“For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things”—a passage that indeed appears to be an explicitly Christian reformulating of the Shema in such a way as to include Jesus).¹² He sees these passages together as directly bearing upon the Arian controversy. In this way he well exemplifies living and contemporary ecclesial faith as one prime context for interpretation:

This is their [the Arians’] central doctrine: “We know that there is only one God, for Moses has declared: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one.’” Has anyone dared to raise any doubts about this doctrine? Has any one of those who believe in God been heard to teach anything else except that there is one God, from whom are all things, one power without birth, and this one power

10. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008), 45.

11. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 29, 94.

12. See, e.g., N. T. Wright, “Monotheism, Christology and Ethics: 1 Corinthians 8,” in his *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 120–36.

without a beginning? [Thus Hilary initially affirms belief in these words as fully orthodox.] But, we cannot deny that the Son of God is God simply because there is only one God. Moses, or, rather, God through Moses, ordered that this first commandment, to believe in the one God, should be given to the people both in Egypt and in the desert who were addicted to idolatry and to the worship of the pretended deities. [Hilary sees the purpose of the words as to inhibit idolatry, not to preclude belief in the divinity of the Son.] This decree was right and fitting, for there is one God from whom are all things. Let us see whether the same Moses also acknowledges the divinity of Him through whom are all things. [Hilary continues to read Deut. 6:4 via the terminology of 1 Cor. 8:6.] For, since God is one, nothing is taken away from the Father because the Son is also God. [Hilary argues that God's being "one" does not preclude Jesus as Son from being included in that oneness, and he thinks that he can find attestation to plurality within the one God elsewhere within the writings of Moses.]¹³

Indeed, Pelikan himself sees Deuteronomy 6:4 as the foundation of Christian creedal faith: "Behind and beneath all the primitive creeds of the apostolic and sub-apostolic era there stands the primal creed and confession of the Christian church, The Shema: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.'"¹⁴

More recently, with regard to 6:5, Alan Jacobs has nicely summed up the Christian significance of Jesus's construal of our text:

When asked by a scribe to name the greatest of the commandments, Jesus complied by citing two injunctions, one from Deuteronomy (6:5) and one from Leviticus (19:18): "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ([Matt.] 22:37–40 RSV). But he then goes on to make the greater, and more startling, claim that upon these two commandments "depend all the law and the prophets." That the one identified by the Christian Church as incarnate Love speaks these words compels our closest attention to them. To say that "all the law and the prophets"

13. Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity* 4.15; in Hilary, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, CSsR, in FOTC 25 (New York: FOTC, 1954), 103–4. When commenting on Deut. 6:4 in the sixteenth century, John Calvin commends the fact that "the orthodox Fathers aptly used this passage against the Arians; because since Christ is everywhere called God, He is undoubtedly the same Jehovah who declares Himself to be the One God" (vol. 1 of [4] *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, in *Calvin's Commentaries* [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1852–55; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005], 420).

14. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 4 of *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 374.

“depend” upon these two commandments—or this twofold commandment—is to say that the multitude of ordinances and exhortations in the Old Testament presuppose the love that Jesus enjoins. No one can meet the demands of the Law who does not achieve such love.¹⁵

Thus the concerns of the Shema, at least in part, are important within Christian faith—but as framed by the New Testament and recontextualized within a Christian frame of reference.

The Problem of Contextualization (2): Point of Origin as Context for Interpretation

Modern biblical scholarship has characteristically set aside historic theological, philosophical, and existential debates in relation to continuing Jewish and Christian use of the biblical text; instead it has argued (or assumed) that the primary context for interpretation should be the ancient historical context of origin. Given the predominant consensus that the late seventh century BC is the period in which Deuteronomy, or at least an early version of the book, should be located, the concern becomes to articulate a late monarchic context that makes sense of Deuteronomy’s declaration about YHWH. This generally goes in one (or both) of two main directions.

On the one hand, archaeological and epigraphic discoveries make it possible to envisage a context in which there were several local deities—Yhwh of Teman, Yhwh of Samaria—who apparently needed, in the view of the Deuteronomists, to be recognized to be in fact one and the same;¹⁶ thus the concern of the text becomes the unity (in effect a “unification”) of YHWH. As Feldmeier and Spieckermann put it: “One can easily recognize the intention of the emphasis on the unity of YHWH in the *Šema* [Shema] after the destruction of the northern kingdom. . . . A YHWH of Samaria no longer competes with a YHWH of Jerusalem. Rather, one YHWH acts everywhere.”¹⁷ The point of this can be seen in religio-political terms, “to create the unity of the people

15. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 9.

16. For the text of the ninth/eighth-century inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd, in which these divine designations occur, see Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, trans. John Bowden (German, 1992; ET, London: SCM, 1994), 1:86.

17. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 98; cf. Gerhard von Rad’s observation that one way of reading the Shema is as “a confession of the oneness of Yahweh in face of the multiplicity of divergent traditions and sanctuaries of Yahweh” (*Deuteronomy*, trans. Dorothea Barton, OTL [German, 1964; ET, London: SCM, 1966], 63).

out of the unity of God. . . . The one God unifies the former, predominantly hostile, fraternal nations into one nation of brothers.”¹⁸

On the other hand, it is possible to read the Shema as in some way programmatic for Josiah’s reform, which usually involves making a close connection between 6:4 and the regulation about the place of worship in 12:1–14, the first of the specific requirements in Deuteronomy’s legal code. Thus, for example, Rainer Albertz depicts 6:4 as “the reform slogan which was hammered home to the population time and again in public pronouncements,”¹⁹ and Norman Gottwald comparably articulates an agenda for the slogan: “The sonorous, almost mesmerizing, liturgical style of Deuteronomy and DH interpretive passages sets forth a solemn coherent message about the indivisible unity of *one God for one people in one land* observing *one cult*.”²⁰ Feldmeier and Spieckermann similarly observe: “The one YHWH has one cultic site—naturally in the city of Jerusalem. . . . The one place of worship corresponds to the singularity of God with respect to the indivisibility of God’s presence in the one, new Israel.”²¹

Such scenarios are indeed imaginable and plausible, and they appeal especially to interpreters who want to envisage the socio-political dimensions and resonances of biblical language in its context of origin. Yet they have drawbacks. One drawback, often obscured by the confident manner of formulation, is the strongly conjectural nature of such scenarios: however plausible they seem, these apparently solid bricks are comprised of only a few straws.

On the one hand, for example, we simply do not know how people at the time envisaged the implications of phrases such as “Yhwh of Teman/Samaria,” and it would be entirely possible to read such phrases as indicating nothing other than some special local presence or manifestation of a single deity (perhaps at a memorable moment in the past, and/or in relation to the identity of a particular shrine), who was recognized to transcend these locations and to be present elsewhere also.

In an Egyptian-Hittite treaty of about 1280 BC, divine witnesses are invoked, including “the Re, the lord of the sky” and “the Re of the town of Arinna” and also “Seth, the lord of the sky,” “Seth of Hatti,” “Seth of the town of Arinna” (and Seth of various other locations).²² Since Re was the sun, it is unlikely that the plural designations imply more than one Re or any “unification” of Re. In more recent history Roman Catholics have not thought that the singular identity of the Virgin Mary is imperiled by her particular association with certain locations: Notre Dame de Chartres, Notre Dame de Lourdes, and so forth.

18. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God of the Living*, 98.

19. Albertz, *Israelite Religion*, 206.

20. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 390.

21. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God of the Living*, 100.

22. See *ANET*, 199–201, esp. 201.

On the other hand, Deuteronomy presents no evidence for constantly repeated “public pronouncements” (other than in the Shema’s own instructions to recite, ponder, teach, and display its wording), and it has no repeated use of the numeral “one.” Where one might most expect it, and where the conjecture of a slogan for religious reform almost requires it, as in the legislation for the place of sacrificial worship in 12:1–14, the text does not speak of worship at “one place” (*māqōm ’ehād*), but rather of worship at “the place that YHWH will choose” (12:5, 11, 14). Relatedly, Israel is not “one people” (*’am/gōy ’ehād*) but “a holy people . . . [whom] YHWH has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people” (7:6 AT; cf. 10:14–15; 14:2).

Interestingly, there is a well-known text, in Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* (written in the late first century AD), that does indeed repeat “one” in a somewhat formulaic or catchword way. In the course of summarizing Moses’s laws for Israel’s constitution, Josephus depicts them as making this requirement: “Let there be one holy city in that place in the land of Canaan, . . . and let there be one temple therein, and one altar of stones. . . . In no other city let there be either altar or temple, for God is one and the Hebrew race is one.”²³

Josephus does not linger to spell out precisely why one temple is entailed by one deity and people, which is unfortunate since the logic is hardly self-evident. Probably the best conjecture is that it relates to the requirement for Israel to converge on Jerusalem for major festivals (“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose” [Deut. 16:16]) and also to go there for other significant religious undertakings, such as the offering of sacrifice or the celebratory feast of the tithe (12:1–14; 14:22–27), on the grounds that such coming together of the people before God at one particular temple symbolically represents and enables the national unity of Israel before their God; synagogues, when they developed, were places for local gathering. The understanding that pilgrimage to a foundational site relates closely to unity and identity is reflected comparably in the Islamic requirement that every Muslim, at least once in life when circumstances allow, should make pilgrimage to Mecca—the hajj.

It may well be that unifying pilgrimage in some form is what Deuteronomy envisages, and that this gave rise to Jewish practices of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which in turn were a precedent for Islamic practices. Nonetheless, the biblical text does not speak of “one God, one people, one temple.” This does not mean that Deuteronomy was not associated with Josiah’s reform. It

23. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4:200–201; in *Josephus*, ed. and trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 4:571–73.

simply recognizes that there is no reform slogan in the biblical text. We know less about the context of origin than we would like.

The Problem of Contextualization (3): The World of the Text as Context for Interpretation

The basic issue is how the notion of “context” should be construed. As it stands, Deuteronomy says nothing about Josiah’s (or any other comparable) reform and presents the Shema entirely in terms of the logic and implications of the covenant between YHWH and Israel as expounded by Moses. I have no desire to challenge the scholarly consensus that Deuteronomy is a post-Moses composition, probably from the seventh century (or, as a persistent minority opinion has maintained, from the sixth century, or possibly even later); instead I seek rather to clarify the different perspectives by which it is meaningful to read the text. In the first place, one should distinguish between “the world within the text” (Moses’s addressing Israel in Moab, as Israel is about to cross the Jordan into the promised land) and “the world behind the text” (a possible reform movement in seventh-century Judah, or some other comparable scenario). These different perspectives, or “contexts,” should be carefully distinguished and not prematurely conflated. Certainly the way in which one reads the world within the text can and should be appropriately informed and nuanced by one’s best guesses as to the likely world behind the text. Yet to collapse the former into the latter is not to take seriously the dynamics of the text;²⁴ it also risks reducing the mode of its expression (at least among suspiciously-inclined interpreters) into little more than a covert, and quite likely manipulative, form of religiously inspired political maneuvering.

The opposite problem, of course, is that some interpreters, usually those of a conservative/traditional disposition who suspect that a seventh-century date impugns the integrity or authenticity of the text, collapse the world behind the text into the world within the text, such that no, or minimal, difference is allowed to be recognized between the two; the text must be read as the words of the historical Moses.

Although interpreters whose interest lies primarily, or solely, in a history of Israelite/Judahite religion may reasonably be interested in the world of the text in relation to the world behind the text, it does not follow that all readers

24. One might compare reading Gen. 1 in terms of the world within the text (the creation of the world by God, its being the object of His delight, and humanity made in the image of God) and reading it in terms of the putative world behind the text (its composition reflecting the concerns of certain Judahites in Babylonian exile). For a fuller discussion of the significance of this distinction, see my *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, OTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42–57.

of Israel's scriptures should share that interest—as has become clear from the widespread recognition in recent years of legitimate diversity of interest and perspective in readers' approaches to the biblical text. Moreover, in addition to the perspectives of the world within the text and the world behind the text, there is the further perspective of “the world in front of the text,” which is a continuing people of Israel that understands itself to be addressed by the text. This in-front-of-the-text world is realized in those diverse communities of Jews and Christians who see their identity as standing in continuity with that of biblical Israel and are open to being shaped in certain ways by the text received as authoritative. Those whose interest lies in the enduring significance of the biblical text as Jewish and Christian scripture may legitimately maintain a primary focus on the world within the text in relation to the world in front of the text. For the fundamental assumption embodied in canonical preservation and reception is that the language and concerns of the text—God and Israel, divine call and human response, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, a choice between life and death (Deut. 30:15–20)—have continuing resonance and application. However much the text may arise out of certain conflicted situations in the ancient world, it has a meaning and a value that is not restricted to its time of origin but rather is enduring, as attested by “a great cloud of witnesses” down through the centuries.

In what follows I will offer a reading of the Shema whose primary concern is the relationship between the world within and the world in front of the text, though I will keep an eye also on the world behind the text insofar as it helps nuance the reading.

A Reading of the Shema

A Reading of Deuteronomy 6:4–5

The best way to start must be to attempt to offer a persuasive reading of the key term in Deuteronomy 6:4, which is in some way predicated of YHWH: “one” (*'eḥād*).

The immediate contextual clue is that the meaning of “one” (*'eḥād*) should be such as to make appropriate the response of unreserved love that is specified in 6:5. Idiomatically, I suggest that the Hebrew verb at the beginning of 6:5 (*vě'āhavtā*) should be rendered “so you should love YHWH your God.”

The nature of the connection between verse 4 and verse 5 is not always brought out in translations. The common Hebrew conjunction at the beginning of 6:5, *vav*, is sometimes entirely omitted (as in NRSV, NJPS, CEB) or simply translated “and” (as in RSV, REB). However, the text contains a common Deuteronomic idiom—a *vav* (*wāw*) consecutive perfect (*věqātal*) in the second person—whose force is to draw an inference as to what should be done on the basis of what has just

been said: “so you shall/should/must . . .” Here are three examples: Deuteronomy 8:5 articulates what Israel is to understand on the basis of YHWH’s testing and provision while they were in the wilderness (8:2–4) with *vēyāda’ tā*, “so you should know/take to heart that as a man disciplines his son, so YHWH your God disciplines you” (AT). In 10:19 the appropriate response to knowing that YHWH is a God who does justice and “loves the sojourner” (10:18) is *va’āhavtem*, “so you must love the sojourner” (AT). In 30:19b Moses spells out the appropriate response to the life-and-death challenge that has been set before Israel (30:15–19a) with *ūbāhartā*, “so you must choose life” (AT).²⁵

If unreserved love is the appropriate response to, and consequence of, the declaration that YHWH is *’ehād*, then *’ehād* should have a sense that is commensurate with this.

Within the Old Testament one passage stands out above others in the resonance between its usage of *’ehād* and that of the Shema. In one of the extended sequences in the Song of Songs in which the male lover eulogizes his beloved (6:4–10), the lover envisages himself in quasi-Solomonic mode as having a vast harem at his disposal (6:8–10):²⁶

⁸There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
and maidens²⁷ without number.

⁹My dove, my perfect one, is the only one [*’ahat*],
the darling [*’ahat*] of her mother,
flawless to her that bore her.

The maidens saw her and called her happy;
the queens and concubines also, and they praised her:²⁸

25. Samuel Rolles Driver, when discussing the *vav* (*wāw*) consecutive with the perfect, observes: “In fact, the *wāw* possesses really in this connexion a demonstrative significance, being equivalent to *then* or *so*” (*A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, ed. W. Randall Garr, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1892; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 117). See also discussion of the idiom in *JM* §119e; and *GKC* §112aa, ff.

26. The mode is quasi-Solomonic since the narrative of Kings ascribes to Solomon himself an even larger harem than that in the Song: “seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11:3).

27. Since “maiden” in English historically signifies a woman who is unmarried and/or a virgin, it is not a good rendering of *’almāh* in this context, and “young women” would be preferable. The distinction within the text is probably between social classes: royalty (queens), nobility, i.e., those with appropriate status to be secondary wives (“concubines”), and young peasant women from the villages. The wondrously beautiful Abishag from the village of Shunem should probably be envisaged as one such peasant woman (1 Kings 1:1–4). Given her exceptional beauty, it is perhaps unsurprising that Abishag, despite her particular context in relation to the elderly David, should have on occasion been imaginatively identified with the beloved woman of the Song. This seems to be the implication of the Syriac reading of 1 Kings 1:3, *Shilomit* (see *BHS*, ad loc.), which appears to identify Abishag with (or else perhaps make her an ancestor of) the beloved woman who is “the Shulammitte” in Song 6:13 (7:1 MT).

28. I understand the words of 6:10 to represent the praise uttered by those mentioned in 6:9b. To clarify this, I have therefore changed the NRSV’s full stop at the end of 6:9 to a colon.

¹⁰“Who is this that looks forth like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
terrible as an army with banners?”

The impressive range of choice that the lover has (v. 8) is, in effect, irrelevant for the simple reason that there is only one woman who really matters to him. If he has her, what need for others? For she is *’ahat* (the feminine of *’ehād*), which here clearly has the sense of “the one and only,” “unique” (v. 9). She is special, unlike any other. As the lover considers his beloved, not only is she the “one and only” to him, her lover, but also she is the “one and only” to her mother. Indeed, so exceptional is she that all the potential competitors for the man’s affections do not resent her but rather acknowledge her supreme radiance as that of which one cannot but be in awe (vv. 9b–10).

The man’s words express the particularizing logic of love (unlike, arguably, the logic of lust). Although in the envisaged scenario there are in fact many women available, his words are personal and relational. It is the reality of one singling out another in such a way as, “forsaking all others,” to focus solely on her. This reality the woman also reciprocates when she indicates that, even in a huge crowd, her eyes are only on him since he is “more conspicuous than ten thousand” (5:10 AT).²⁹

In Song 6:9 the meaning of *’ehād* is clear and unambiguous, and this meaning is related to the logic of love. Since *’ehād* in Deuteronomy 6:4 is also related to the logic of love, it makes good sense to ascribe the same meaning to *’ehād* in each context. If YHWH our God is “the one and only,” then Israel’s unreserved love is indeed the appropriate response.

On this reading the argument that 6:4 is *either* about an exclusive relationship between YHWH and Israel (with other gods recognized) *or* about the nature of YHWH as “one” (with other gods denied) is misleading and offers a false alternative. If YHWH is “one” in the sense of “the one and only,” then it means that He is such that the people of Israel must be exclusive in their faithfulness and allegiance to Him. This construal does not deny the possible reality, in some sense, of “other gods”; indeed, such a denial would be odd in the context of Deuteronomy, given its repeated warnings against going after “other gods.”³⁰ Nonetheless, the point is that, whatever “other gods” there may be, such “other gods” should be of no existential interest to Israel, but rather are to be displaced, rejected, and disregarded, since Israel’s focus is to be on YHWH alone.

29. Compare *dōdī lī wa’ānī lō*, “My beloved is mine and I am his” (2:16; cf. 6:3; 7:10 [11 MT]), which is expressive in its simplicity.

30. In the immediate aftermath of the Shema, there are warnings against “other gods” in Deut. 6:14; 7:4; 8:19; 11:16, 28.

Israel's response of love to "the one and only" is spelled out in 6:5. It is difficult to know how far to analyze the individual words since the rhetorical force lies in the whole: Israel's love should be total. However, the specific terms pose some further challenges of both translation and interpretation.

In Hebrew idiom "heart" (*lēvāv*) regularly refers to the seat of thought,³¹ and so it depicts thinking rather than feeling; there is thus a case for rendering it as "mind." "Soul," though a time-honored and often-still-retained rendering of Hebrew *nephesh*, is likely to mislead. For a common meaning of "soul" in English is the spiritual or immaterial part of humans, distinct from the body, which may perhaps survive death. Such a sense is far removed from the Old Testament's own frame of reference. Other Deuteronomic use of *nephesh* depicts it as the seat of emotion and desire,³² which would be best captured in English either by "heart" or by "being."³³ It is a common Deuteronomic idiom to link *lēvāv* with *nephesh* to depict a full response to YHWH (10:12; 30:2, 10). The present passage is unusually emphatic in adding a third element, *mē'ōd*, traditionally and no doubt correctly rendered "might/strength"; *mē'ōd* is usually an adverb yet is uniquely used as a noun here and in one related passage that depicts King Josiah in the context of his reform as, in effect, a paradigm of what our text envisages: "Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his mind [*lēvāv*], with all his being [*nephesh*], and with all his might [*mē'ōd*], according to all the law of Moses" (2 Kings 23:25 AT). Rabbinic tradition took *mē'ōd* to mean "money/possessions." This is surely a fine example of a meaning that is unlikely to have been held by the author of Deuteronomy yet is a good construal of the text. For it felicitously captures one of the major ways in which people can have impact within their life setting and thereby realizes the thrust of the biblical text.

Christians are most familiar with the requirement to love God via its New Testament rendering in Mark's account, whose wording has also been much used liturgically: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (12:30). Here it appears that the initial term (*lēvāv*, heart) has received a double rendering, both "heart" and "mind," perhaps to try to capture its full implications, in a context where the idiomatic sense of the heart as the seat of thought may have been less clear. As such it would be a good example of the need to change in order to remain the same.³⁴

The key word in 6:5 is "love." Although this is an uncontroversial rendering of the common Hebrew verb *'āhēv*, we need to probe a little to discover what

31. For example, Ps. 14:1, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God';" or Isa. 10:7, "his [Assyria's] mind [*lēvāv*] does not so think" (AT).

32. For example, Deut. 12:20, "When . . . you say, 'Let me eat meat,' for you desire [lit., your *nephesh* desires] to eat meat, then you may eat meat as much as you desire [lit., in all the desire of your *nephesh*]" (AT); or Deut. 24:15, where an Israelite is to pay the wage to a poor laborer with no delay, "for he is poor, and he sets his heart [lit., bears his *nephesh*] upon it" (AT); cf. 1 Sam. 18:1, which depicts Jonathan's strong attachment to David: "And Jonathan's heart [*nephesh*] was bound to the heart [*nephesh*] of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself [lit., as his *nephesh*]" (AT).

33. Admittedly, "soul" in the idiom "the life and soul of the party" is perhaps not a bad approximation to this sense of *nephesh*; but it still would be a poor translation. The translational problems here illustrate well the difficulty of rendering the anthropic idioms of one culture into idioms of another.

34. The puzzling variations in the wording of Deut. 6:5 in the three Synoptic Gospels are interestingly discussed by Paul Foster, "Why Did Matthew Get the *Shema* Wrong? A Study of Matthew 22:37," *JBL* 122/2 (2003): 309–33.

it does, and what it does not, entail. In contemporary parlance the verb “love” almost inescapably entails strong feelings. How far should an understanding of “love” as “feel strongly attracted and/or attached to” be found in the biblical text? I offer three perspectives.

First, if Moses is prescribing love, can feelings be prescribed? It all depends on how they are envisaged. Jeffrey Tigay says, “The idea of commanding a feeling is not foreign to the Torah, which assumes that people can cultivate proper attitudes.” As an example of this, he cites “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart; . . . you shall not bear a grudge against your countrymen” (Lev. 19:17–18 AT).³⁵ Alternatively, Moshe Weinfeld says, “Characteristic of Deuteronomy is love which can be commanded, i.e., loyalty.”³⁶ Perhaps the central point is that Hebrew verbs depicting mental and emotional states typically envisage actions commensurate with the state—thus to “remember” (*zākar*) includes acting upon a particular awareness, to “hear” (*shāmaʿ*) includes acting upon what one hears through obeying, and to “love” (*ʾāhēv*) includes actions that express one’s orientation toward another.³⁷

Second, Moses in the Shema is addressing Israel as a people in the context of outlining the covenant between YHWH and Israel. This corporate, covenantal context makes the language of Deuteronomy comparable to that of certain ancient Near Eastern treaties. Such treaties between a victorious overlord and a vassal country can specify that a vassal should “love” its overlord, where the primary sense is clearly that of obedient allegiance rather than loving feelings.³⁸

This and other much-discussed parallels of terminology (and of form) in ancient treaties need to be used with some care in interpreting Deuteronomy. In the context of treaties between conqueror and conquered, the sense of “love” is likely to focus maximally on conduct and minimally on intention or motivation, other than fear of reprisal. This can readily engender cynicism about such “love,” for it is not difficult to become doubtful as to whether such obedient compliance is really a positive and desirable quality

35. Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 76.

36. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 333.

37. Thus in the Decalogue we read, “those who love me and keep my commandments” (Deut. 5:10); and subsequently “love” is linked with other verbs of responsive life practices, when Moses articulates what YHWH requires of Israel: “to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God” (10:12–13). There is a comparable understanding also in the NT, where Jesus says: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

38. See William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 77–87.

for human beings; perhaps it would be better to restrict mere compliance to animals and encourage humans to think of freely chosen cooperation. Deuteronomy's concern is for a thoroughgoing internalization and appropriation of obedient action toward YHWH, so that action and intention fully cohere, and so do practice and thought. If a human overlord sought such a response from people, it would tend toward a repressive totalitarianism, where people were expected to internalize their oppression. The exception would be when rulers rightly engage the hearts and minds of their people, but then the response can be *given* rather than exacted or manipulated. Because YHWH has delivered Israel from oppression in Egypt and offers a way that leads to blessing and life, Israel can give Him obedient and unreserved allegiance, and this can be genuinely life-enhancing.

Third, although the Shema is addressed to Israel as a people, there is a long history of its appropriation by individuals (within the context of their belonging to God's people). Here one should still retain a primary sense of "love" as allegiance, rather than focusing on its emotional dimensions. This is not just for philological reasons, but also for psychological and pastoral reasons. For there are many whose spiritual life may be low on "emotion," because of personality and/or experience, without any diminution of authenticity.

Ruth Burrows, for example, has written many searching books on the spiritual life out of her experience as a Carmelite nun. On the one hand she says:

Perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are not too taken up with our own initiatives and activities . . . and fail somewhat in attention to the first commandment, that we must love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Unless the first commandment dominates our life and motivates our concerns, then there is a danger of our just beating the air.³⁹

Yet on the other hand she also says:

I know many people who say simply and sincerely that they love God and their lives prove that this is not mere sentiment. For myself, I have never been able to say it. It has seemed presumptuous for me to do so. . . . Most certainly, I have wanted to love him and it has been and is my belief, my hope and my confidence that, when his work in me is complete, I will love him because I will love with the heart of Christ. It is hard, at least for me, to detach the word "love" from feeling and in my case feelings of love, generally speaking, have been absent. Still I maintain that trust includes everything and is infinitely pleasing to God.⁴⁰

39. Ruth Burrows, OCD, *Love Unknown* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 115–16.

40. *Ibid.*, 143–44.

Although at first sight what she says about loving God may appear inconsistent, the point is that she understands unreserved love of God to be primarily about trust and obedience in relation to what she terms “objective realities,” and only marginally about feelings. As such she surely stands in deep continuity with the priorities of the biblical text.

By way of concluding this discussion of Deuteronomy 6:4–5, it might be appropriate to suggest a new translation that changes somewhat the Hebrew idiom in the interests of a fresh expression of its meaning: “Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is the one and only. So you should love YHWH your God with all your thinking, with all your longing, and with all your striving.”

A Reading of Deuteronomy 6:6–9

The Shema continues:

⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

What are “these words” that are to be kept, recited, talked about, bound, fixed, and written?⁴¹ Because “these words” are what Moses is “commanding you today,” it is sometimes felt appropriate to see a wide referent here—perhaps the Ten Words/Commandments, or perhaps the content of Deuteronomy as a whole. However, since “these” is a context-specific term,⁴² it surely makes best sense to take the referent of “these” as the immediately preceding content of verses 4–5, in whole or in part. Probably the decisive factor is how one interprets verses 8–9, since the pondering, teaching, and discussing of verses 6–7 could be taken equally well with a broad or a narrow referent. Insofar as one envisages specific practices of writing “these words” so that they are visible on one’s person and on the entrances to private and public buildings,⁴³ it must surely be a short, easily written, and easily read text that is envisaged.⁴⁴ This rules

41. The verbs in vv. 7–9 have a third-person-plural suffix (“them”) as the pronominal object, for which “these words” in v. 6 must be the antecedent.

42. “These words” in Deut. 1:1 clearly introduces the content of the book that follows, while “these words” in 5:22 comparably specifies the immediately preceding Ten Words/Commandments.

43. In Deut. 6:9 “house” represents private/domestic space, while “gates” represents the entrance to a town and thus public space.

44. See T. Veijola, “Höre Israel! Der Sinn und Hintergrund von Deuteronomium VI 4–9,” *VT* 42 (1992): 528–41, esp. 537–40.

out the Ten Words/Commandments, never mind the book of Deuteronomy as a whole. It leaves verses 4–5, especially if it is solely the affirmation that “YHWH our God, YHWH is the one and only” or even just “YHWH is the one and only” (four or two words respectively in Hebrew), as eminently eligible for display.

Discussion of verses 8–9 tends to be hampered both by too ready a recourse to a dichotomy of reading the text either “literally” or “metaphorically” and by too ready a recourse to traditional Jewish practice as an example of the former. Christian commentators have tended simply to assume that the language of these verses is metaphorical.⁴⁵ There is, however, nothing in context to suggest that something other than specific practices is envisaged.⁴⁶ Furthermore, there are sufficient analogous practices from the wider world of ancient Israel to make it likely that specific practices are envisaged here.⁴⁷

The rabbinic interpretation that adult males should wear tefillin/phylacteries at times of prayer, and that containers with texts should be affixed to doorposts, is not a *literal* reading—the text says nothing about donning something specifically at prayer times, or about affixing containers—but a *serious* reading, which attempts to realize in an appropriate way something of what the text envisages in life contexts other than that in which Deuteronomy originated. In itself verse 8 most likely envisages writing “these words” on bands: on wristbands, to be a constant reminder of their allegiance to their bearers, and on headbands (or perhaps on an emblem on headgear),⁴⁸ to display the allegiance of the bearers to others. Similarly, verse 9 most likely envisages the actual writing and display of “these words” on the entrances to both private

45. Gerhard von Rad observes: “It is not clear what significance is attached to the tokens which serve as reminders and so forth. Probably we still have to do here with a figurative mode of expression, which was then later understood literally and led to the use of the so-called phylacteries” (*Deuteronomy*, 64). Or, as John Thompson more bluntly puts it: “What was given originally as a metaphor became for later Jews a literal injunction” (*Deuteronomy*, TOTC [London: Inter-Varsity, 1974], 123).

46. The commonly cited Exod. 13:9, 16, where prescriptions for unleavened bread and the redemption of the firstborn are followed by “It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem/memorial on your forehead” (AT)—where the terminology is almost identical to that in Deut. 6:8—is not a good analogy, because in context its sense cannot be other than metaphorical, a figurative way of expressing the commemorative function of the practices in question. The figurative idiom in Exodus is probably dependent on the specific practice in Deuteronomy.

47. See Othmar Keel, “Zeichen der Verbundenheit: Zur Vorgeschichte und Bedeutung der Forderungen von Deuteronomium 6,8f. und Par.,” in *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy*, by D. Barthélemy, P. Casetti, O. Keel, and A. Schenker, OBO 38 (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 159–240.

48. The precise sense of Hebrew *tōtāphōt* is unclear and must be inferred contextually; cf. the specification that the high priest should have the inscription “Holy to YHWH” attached to his turban (Exod. 28:36–38 AT).

and public buildings, and such writing might well be on the lintel overhead rather than the upright. These are *symbolic* acts, expressing Israel's identity and allegiance in public ways. The rabbinic practices are likewise symbolic acts of allegiance that, even if not envisaged in the text, remain consonant with the text's concern.

Thus Deuteronomy 6:6–9 underlines the all-important nature of the preceding words as a summary of what is at the heart of the covenant between YHWH and Israel. The fact that YHWH is the one and only for Israel does not just call for a response of unreserved love and allegiance but also requires concrete practices and symbols as part of regular daily life. In general “these words” are to be kept in mind constantly (v. 6). More specifically, they are to be passed on to the next generation (children are to be inducted into Israel's identity and allegiance from their earliest years) and are to be a regular subject for conversation (v. 7). Although the idiom of “at home and away, . . . when you lie down and when you rise” may be primarily a way of saying “at all times,” the rabbinic requirement of specific recitation when one goes to bed and when one gets up has been valuable. It represents the recognition that specific practices give content and focus to a general awareness.⁴⁹ The display of allegiance to YHWH on one's person, in a way that will remind both self and others, means that in a world of contested allegiances Israel is required to be up front and courageous about its allegiance (v. 8). The marking of places where one lives, both domestic and civic, with this allegiance (so that one becomes aware of it at the point of transition into those places), likewise means that Israel's allegiance is never privatized but rather is integral to all the space that Israel inhabits (v. 9).

Curiously, Richard Dawkins strongly emphasizes that the practice of bringing up children to have religious beliefs is iniquitous and best labeled “indoctrination.”⁵⁰ Characteristic is this lament: “I think we should all wince when we hear a small child being labeled as belonging to some particular religion or another. Small children are too young to decide their views on the origins of the cosmos, of life and of morals. The very sound of the phrase ‘Christian child’ or ‘Muslim child’ should grate like fingernails on a blackboard.”⁵¹ Dawkins appears to combine an excessively intellectualized conception of religious faith with a distinctly underdeveloped sense of the social nature of religious knowledge, identity, and practice. In any case, it is hardly unreasonable for adults to seek to form children in patterns of thinking and living that they believe to be good—as Dawkins himself has no doubt done.

49. It is a recurrent problem that general religious affirmations easily become empty of real content. One can say, “My time and money belong to God,” when in fact they may remain at one's disposal in a way that might not differ from how they would be if they did not belong to God. The requirement to dedicate a seventh of time and a tenth of money to God can give teeth to the general affirmation.

50. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 254–64, 311–40.

51. *Ibid.*, 318.

Some Complexities in Christian Appropriation of the Shema

In the preceding section I have offered a basic reading of Deuteronomy 6:4–9. In order to develop this reading in relation to Christian understanding, I will look further at three of the many issues it raises: I will begin with hermeneutics and the nature of Old Testament interpretation, then I will turn to monotheism and idolatry.

Hermeneutical Considerations (1): What Should Christians Write and Display, and Why?

Initially I return to my opening observation that Christians have primarily been interested in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. This can be developed by comparing characteristic Christian and Jewish approaches to 6:6–9, the instructions to recite, teach, and display the foundational words that $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ is the one and only.

Within a Jewish frame of reference, it is notable that the first tractate of the Mishnah, *Berakot* (“Benedictions/Blessings”), begins with the question “From what time in the evening may the *Shema* be recited?”⁵² The text continues with discussion of the implications of the biblical instructions and the varying construals that have been offered. Whatever the disagreements over the observance of the Shema, the premise of *Berakot*, which underlies and would have been shared by all the differing voices cited, is that the Shema must be heeded and observed. The instructions of verses 6–9 have been important for Jews, essentially because so many have felt, and still feel, under obligation to do, in one way or other, what the text specifies. Correspondingly, contemporary Jewish commentaries on Deuteronomy tend to give substantial space to the question of what kind of practice is envisaged by these instructions, and to canvass historic Jewish debates thereon.⁵³

One can contrast Joseph Lienhard’s valuable recent compilation of Christian commentators on Deuteronomy in antiquity (commentators later than, but not far removed in time from, the Mishnah).⁵⁴ The relevant section on the Shema is headed “6:4–9, The Great Commandment”; that is, the Old Testament text is characterized with the terminology of Jesus (as appropriate to a Christian frame of reference). More strikingly, however, the editor gives, under the heading of “6:4–9,” an English translation of only verses 4 and 5. All the commentators

52. *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 2.

53. See, e.g., the substantial excursuses devoted to the Shema and its observance in Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 438–44.

54. Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ, ed., with Ronnie J. Rombs, under Thomas C. Oden, general ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, vol. 3, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), esp. 282–85.

who are then cited discuss verse 4, in relation to the nature of God, and verse 5, in relation to the love of God. That constitutes the whole section. In other words, 6:6–9 appears to be entirely absent in early Christian commentators; this is material on which they apparently had nothing to say, at least in the judgment of the editor. Why? It is difficult to resist the surmise that this is because ancient Christians considered themselves under no obligation to do what these verses say—unlike 6:4–5, which they did feel obliged to understand and practice. Comparably, contemporary Christian commentaries on Deuteronomy tend to devote most of their space and interest to 6:4–5, then do relatively little with 6:6–9, though something of historic Jewish practice in relation to verses 8–9 is usually noted. One might contrast this with the extensive space that Christian scholars tend to devote to the eucharistic words of Jesus in commentaries on the Gospels and on 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. This emphasis is presumably related to the Christian sense of pressure, in this context, in some way to do that of which the text speaks. In its own small way, the study of Deuteronomy 6:6–9 illustrates something of the social nature of interest and knowledge.

Characteristic Christian approaches to the Shema are deeply formed by instincts and assumptions derived from the New Testament—rightly and inevitably so. On the one hand, it is surely a desire to follow Jesus’s linkage of love of God with love of neighbor (which the Gospels also show to be already an accepted Jewish understanding)⁵⁵ that has generally caused the instructions about recitation and display to recede from sight. For once one speaks of loving God and loving neighbor, then one is likely, again following the lead of Jesus, to see this as a fundamental hermeneutical key to understanding Israel’s scriptures and also the life of faith more generally. In a certain sense it would be odd to return to the wording of Deuteronomy 6 once the words of primary importance in 6:4–5 have been taken in a different direction through recontextualization.

On the other hand, the logic of faith in Jesus has led to Christians having *alternative*, and in certain ways *equivalent*, practices to those envisaged in Deuteronomy 6:6–9. The all-important words to be recited on a regular basis, not least to frame the day through use in the morning and the evening, become the words of the Lord’s Prayer, the model prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples. The symbol that is to be displayed as a marker of identity and allegiance becomes the cross, the prime symbolic shorthand expression of Christian faith. Christians often wear a cross around the neck or in a lapel, and it is a historic Christian practice (though one not embraced by numerous

55. In Mark 12:32–33 Jesus’s interlocutor expresses no surprise at Jesus’s combination of the two primary commandments and immediately affirms it himself; and in Luke 10:25–28 it is the lawyer, not Jesus, who combines love of God and neighbor as expressing what stands in torah.

Protestants) to make the sign of the cross over oneself. Symbolic Christian marking of doorways has often been present in churches, and sometimes on other buildings also.

In earlier centuries the symbolic marking of entrances was a regular practice, and it can still be viewed today at some of the medieval colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (and elsewhere). Late medieval piety expressed itself more in images than words, but the basic logic is not different from that embodied in Deuteronomy 6:9. For example, the old entrance to New College, Oxford (founded in the late fourteenth century), as approached from New College Lane, is surmounted by a statue of the Virgin Mary, to whom the college is dedicated, flanked by statues of two kneeling figures: on the left, the angel Gabriel, and on the right, in a posture of suppliant prayer, William of Wykeham, patron and benefactor of the college, who had a strong personal devotion to the Virgin Mary. The presence of the angel Gabriel presumably means that the statues represent the annunciation, at which William of Wykeham is devotionally present.⁵⁶ The identity and the allegiance of the institution are thereby clearly expressed.⁵⁷

There was, of course, a marked change in the Reformation, when words were preferred to images, and when there was a fresh appropriation of the Bible as a whole. Biblical texts came to be ubiquitous in Protestant domestic decoration, and the instructions of Deuteronomy 6:6–9 were commonly appealed to. In the late sixteenth century, for example, Robert Cleaver wrote: “And this is the meaning of that Law, which Moses gave to the Israelites, Commaunding them to write the word of God upon the Postes of their houses, and upon their Gates. Whereby all under government, were taught, what should be required of them so long as they lived in those houses, namely, to serve God.”⁵⁸ A few years later Richard Braithwaite wrote:

And wee are taught what wee must doe, returning from Gods house to our owne: and what wee are to doe sitting in our houses, even to lay up Gods word in our heart and in our soule, and binde it for a sign upon our hand, that it may be as a frontlet betweene our eyes. And not only to be instructed thus our selves, but to teach them [to] our children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest downe, and when thou risest up. And not so onely, but thou shalt write them upon the posts of thine house, and upon thy gates. Whence you see, how no place, time, or occasion is to be exempted from meditating of God.⁵⁹

It remains striking that the prime implementation is seen to involve “lay[ing] up Gods word in our heart” and “meditating of God.” It seems to be a generalized biblically-focused devotion always and everywhere that constitutes the prime fulfillment of the biblical commandment.

56. The presence of a contemporary figure in a Gospel scene, usually the passion, is a common medieval artistic convention, nicely echoed in the modern spiritual folk song “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”

57. Despite the real continuity between William of Wykeham’s symbolizing the college’s identity and Deut. 6:9, it is unlikely that any explicit linkage was intended. Interestingly, the wording of v. 9 in the Vulgate (the form in which a medieval Englishman would have known the OT) is *scribesque ea in limine et ostiis domus tuae*, “and you shall write them on the threshold/lintel and on the doors of your house,” which restricts the requirement to domestic space. The Hebrew “gates,” which idiomatically signifies “town gates,” appears to have been understood (in Deut. 6:9) simply to mean “doors.”

58. Robert Cleaver et al., *A godlie forme of householde government* (London: Thomas Man, 1598), 24–25; cited in Tara Hamling, *Decorating the “Godly” Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 106.

59. Richard Braithwaite, *The English Gentleman* (London: I. Haviland, 1630), 161; cited in Hamling, *Decorating*, 106.

All this poses a nice hermeneutical conundrum. Deuteronomy does not envisage the recital or display of words or a symbol equivalent to the Shema, but of the Shema itself; and indeed, Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is an unusually emphatic passage in its specification of the attention that should be paid to *these* all-important words. Yet the symbolic practices specified in the biblical text are not observed by Christians, but have come to characterize Jews (who put on phylacteries and affix mezuzot) as distinct from Christians (who do neither of these things). This is presumably in large part because the explicitly Christian nature of the Lord’s Prayer and the cross, and their role in symbolizing identity as formed by Christ crucified and risen, has contributed to distancing Christians from what is envisaged in Deuteronomy 6. But Christians still hold the Old Testament to be authoritative and regard the words of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 as of high importance.

This “inconsistency” surely captures well something of the dynamics of Christian appropriation of Israel’s scriptures as the Old Testament. On the one hand, Christian reading needs to be attentive to the meaning of the text in its pre-Christian frame of reference; on the other hand, it must simultaneously take with full seriousness the recontextualization of the material in a frame of reference not originally its own. This Christian frame of reference both affirms and appropriates some of the content of the Old Testament and relativizes or marginalizes other of its content, according to the pattern of its own knowledge of God in and through Jesus Christ, and its implications for living. The logic of Christian appropriation of the Old Testament is neither “all” nor “nothing,” but rather a substantive engagement that has its own distinctive dynamic.

Hermeneutical Considerations (2): How Might Christians Realize the Concerns of the Text?

One possible anxiety that can be raised is whether such a dynamic of selective appropriation makes it, in effect, impossible for the Old Testament to be heard in its own voice or for that voice to make any real difference within a Christian frame of reference: will not Christian faith only hear what it wants to hear, and in the way it wants to hear it? There are interesting hermeneutical issues here, on which I offer three observations.

First, the summons to recognize YHWH as the one and only should rightly inform a Christian understanding of God and life with God, and do so without diminution, if only because there is so much also in the New Testament that has a comparable focus on God. The fact that the knowledge of God is mediated and focused for Christians in the person of Jesus makes no

difference to the dynamics of this supreme focus on God. The rootedness of Christian faith in Israel's faith, and the real continuities of many aspects of the life of faith from Old Testament to New Testament and beyond, gives Christian faith, at least in principle, an intrinsic openness to affirm Israel's witness to a love supreme as its own.

Second, the recognition that identity and allegiance may be appropriately displayed on one's person and on buildings surely indicates an important area for fresh thinking, to recognize not just what has been done in the past but also what might now be done in the present. There are many complex issues here as to what is feasible in a secular Western society, especially one whose secularity has been formed through reaction against antecedent forms of Christian identity. In principle, a secular frame of reference is meant to be able to host frames of reference other than its own and enable their peaceful (even if appropriately argumentative) coexistence; Christians can readily acknowledge and flourish in such a context. However, some recent controversies in England and France over people wearing religious symbols in public and/or the context of their work seem indicative of a secularism that feels threatened and hostile, rather than hospitable, toward symbols of religious identity in the public realm.⁶⁰

It has become increasingly clear that secular space is not in fact neutral space, but rather is undergirded by particular moral, political, and economic values and visions, which are contestable. Admittedly, it can be difficult to discern what those undergirding values and visions are, since contemporary secular states are complex, and their values can be both overt (as in the promotion of late capitalism, whose advertising adorns many a building and body) and elusive (as in the nature and basis of notions of the common good and living well). On any reckoning, some fundamental rethinking of "politics and religion" is a pressing Christian need.⁶¹

Although it may not be feasible (for many reasons, from the hermeneutical to the prudential) to enact the "plain sense" of Deuteronomy 6:8–9, this text

60. Rowan Williams helpfully distinguishes between two kinds of secularism. One he calls "procedural" secularism, which he considers to be arguably a descendant of a Christian recognition of the appropriate limits of state authority; within such secularism Christian presence and perspectives can have a legitimate public role. The other he calls "programmatic" secularism, which is ideologically driven, requires public loyalty, and insists that religious convictions must be wholly privatized. Williams shows this programmatic secularism to be not only inimical to faith but also untrue to the way in which complex societies actually operate (*Faith in the Public Square* [London: Bloomsbury, 2012], 2–3, 23–36, and passim).

61. A trenchant recent account is by William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), although his observations apply more, I think, to the USA than to politics on the other side of the Atlantic.

can nonetheless constrain Christians to rethink the nature of their identity and its expression in the public realm, where so many other identities and allegiances are already vigorously on display. It is hardly necessary to go so far as envisaging a contemporary equivalent of the medieval crusaders, who “took the cross” and displayed a large cross on their clothing (i.e., we need not imagine an extreme scenario so as to bring the whole notion into ridicule or disrepute), in order to ask about possible ways in which Christian identity might meaningfully and legitimately be displayed and practiced in the public realm.

Third, this is an appropriate context in which to note that there are possible legitimate concerns as to whether the practices envisaged in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 might, if taken “seriously,” entail a narrowing of interest and outlook upon life that could be unhealthy. Might they encourage a pietism in which overtly religious language is the only acceptable language, and religious texts are required to be the predominant form of artistic expression and decoration? Might they encourage an inward-looking and competitive religiosity, in which each strives to outdo the other in terms of conversation and display? Might they encourage lack of interest in the wider life and activities of the world, other than to see them as more or less threatening to the requisite priorities of piety? Nonetheless, while such moves indeed can be made, and from time to time have been made, they are in no way necessary consequences—although what is considered appropriate as expressing religious faithfulness will undoubtedly vary from culture to culture.

Within a Christian frame of reference, one key to understanding is the classic combination of love of God with love of neighbor, as in the words of Jesus. This makes the fundamental point that love of God and love of neighbor are not competitive, as though the interrelationship of the divine and the human were a zero-sum game in which the more one loves God, the less one can love other people. Rather, the opposite is the case. Love for God enables, and indeed is expressed in, love for others. The classic understanding of love for God is that it is something that will purify all other loves and order them aright, so that they can be what they should be, and be less likely to become unhealthy or idolatrous.

The recontextualization of Deuteronomy’s own frame of reference within a contemporary Christian frame of reference both enables Deuteronomy to be heard and taken seriously, and makes for an appropriation that is informed by substantive concerns from beyond Deuteronomy’s own horizons. The tension between these differing frames of reference is in principle fruitful and never to be definitively resolved, as it is constitutive of Christian engagement with Scripture generally.

Is Deuteronomy 6:4 Paradigmatic for Monotheism?

Another way of probing further the implications of our text is to ask whether the affirmation that YHWH is “the one and only” does, or does not, constitute “monotheism.”

Discussion of “monotheism” is usually presented in religio-historical terms, to do with when and why Israel’s religion became monotheistic—but not to do with the reading of the Old Testament as a literary-canonical collection that in important ways provides its own context of meaning. The once widely held view that monotheism goes back to Moses has generally been discarded, and the consensus view is that monotheism is first articulated in the mid-sixth century by Second Isaiah, largely for religio-political reasons, having to do with the affirmation of Judahite identity and hope over against Babylonian dominance. Here its presence is apparently unquestionable, and indeed can be depicted as “philosophical monotheism,”⁶² because of passages such as Isaiah 45:5–7:

⁵I am the LORD, and there is no other [*'ēn 'ōd*];
besides me there is no god [*'ēn 'ēlōhīm*].
I arm you [Cyrus], though you do not know me,
⁶so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
⁷I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things.

There is here not only explicit denial that there is any deity other than YHWH (vv. 5a, 6b) but also implicit denial of other deities through the rhetoric of sovereign power (v. 7). With regard to the Shema, however, the general scholarly consensus is that it, even if not far in time of origin from Second Isaiah, is not monotheistic but rather a staging post on the way to monotheism: the Shema represents monolatry, which requires exclusive worship of one deity without denying the existence of others, rather than monotheism proper.

This apparent conceptual difference between the Shema and Second Isaiah may well be less secure, however, than is generally supposed. The consensus view about the meaning of such passages in Second Isaiah can interestingly be set alongside a comparable consensus view about the meaning of Psalm 14:1, where “the fool thinks, ‘There is no God [*'ēn 'ēlōhīm*]’” (AT). Here commentators

62. Thus Baruch Halpern, “‘Brisker Pipes than Poetry’: The Development of Israelite Monotheism,” in his *From Gods to God*, FAT 63 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 13–56, esp. 32.

consistently observe that it is “practical” rather than “theoretical” atheism that is envisaged: the point is the denial not of the existence of God as such but rather of the contention that God makes the kind of difference such that He should be heeded. This construal is derived from the tenor of the psalm overall, where “the main emphasis seems to be on the conviction that there is no need to reckon with God in any sphere of one’s existence, i.e., for practical purposes God does not matter”; or, “The psalm is not concerned with the question of whether people accept the existence of a supreme being. It is concerned with whether people acknowledge the reality of the LORD, the God of Israel, by calling on the LORD in need and seeking the LORD in the decisions of life.”⁶³ This is in keeping with a clearly attested sense of the Hebrew word *’ayin* (or *’ēn*) (“there is no”), which can mean absence rather than non-existence (as in 1 Sam. 14:17, where Saul’s roll call reveals that Jonathan and his armor-bearer “were not there [*’ēn yōnāthān . . .*]).⁶⁴ Yet the comparable language in Second Isaiah is not given a comparable meaning, but rather is held to be precisely the kind of denial of existence that should not be ascribed to “the fool.” Of course, the concerns in Second Isaiah may be distinct from those of Psalm 14. Nonetheless, in many contexts of regular life, the force of “there is no other” is less likely to have the sense of philosophical denial than of rhetorical persuasion. Thus the political orator who says to the crowd “We have no choice” or “There is only one way” or “There is no alternative” is invariably not denying the theoretical existence of alternatives but rather is urging that these alternatives should be ignored and only the way the speaker is advocating should be embraced as the way ahead. Contextually, the prophet in Isaiah 40–55 is urging the Judahite exiles wholeheartedly to embrace YHWH and to reject other deities as making no difference to them. Thus it may be that the force of a passage such as “I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god” is in fact no different from that of the Shema with its focus on YHWH as “the one and only.”⁶⁵

If this is on the right lines, it suggests that the familiar distinction between “monotheism” and “monolatry” is not in fact well attuned to the tenor of certain prime Hebrew Bible passages.⁶⁶ Is, then, “monotheism” a good cat-

63. Thus Arnold Albert Anderson, *Psalms*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 1:132; and James L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBCTP (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 82.

64. The Hebrew in itself could mean non-existence; here as elsewhere, questions of context are all-important for determining meaning.

65. For comparable judgments about “monotheism” and Second Isaiah from other scholars, see Nathan MacDonald, “Monotheism and Isaiah” in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 43–61, esp. 50–52.

66. For a valuable and nuanced discussion that helpfully highlights both the differing ways in which “monotheism” and related terms are used and the limits of their usefulness (as well as

egory for interpreting the Hebrew Bible at all? Of course, adherence to one God has been a historic self-defining marker of Jews, Christians, and Muslims down the ages. Nonetheless, “monotheism” as a category, along with “polytheism,” “theism,” and “deism,” was first coined in the early modern period (the seventeenth century). There was then an attempt to find new and better categories for classifying “religion,” at a time when religion was starting to be reconceptualized as a distinctive phenomenon—more of a subset within life, rather than an approach to life as a whole.⁶⁷ Monotheism as a category can suffer, however, from the Enlightenment tendency to abstract and intellectualize faith, such that faith is defined in terms of a certain conceptual content, in isolation from associated moral, ritual, and symbolic practices. Insofar as the meaning of belief in God/gods is significantly given content by the practices that accompany it, an account that abstracts from these is likely to be misleading.

Admittedly, the danger of intellectualizing and abstracting faith in the one God is perennial. One only has to consider James’s scathing critique in the New Testament—“You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19 NKJV)—to be reminded that in any age intellectual acknowledgment of God may easily become detached from appropriate responsiveness and life practices. Nonetheless it seems that this danger has been exacerbated in modern times, through the legacy of Enlightenment construals of belief in God. On any reckoning, the term “monotheism” does not intrinsically convey the existential dimensions conveyed by the Shema or Isaiah 40–55—either the call for a loyalty that resists alternative allegiances or a devotion to God as the one and only, as to a lover.

Thus there are important limits to the value of “monotheism” as a category for understanding the Old Testament. It may still have a place, *faute de mieux*, but it needs at the very least to be a matter of “handle with care.”

Conclusion: Deuteronomy, Idolatry, and Christian Faith

Finally, it may be helpful to raise a wider issue that arises from a consideration of the Shema in its Old Testament context.

When the value of belief in the one God has ceased to be self-evident, not least because its associated practices and understandings have largely fallen

providing a fresh analysis of both biblical and extra-biblical evidence), see Benjamin D. Sommer, “Appendix: Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel,” in his *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 145–74.

67. There is a good introduction to the issues and literature in Nathan MacDonald, “The Origin of ‘Monotheism,’” in Stuckenbruck and North, *Monotheism*, 204–15.

away—as is surely the case in contemporary Western society—then numerous time-honored questions come freshly to the fore: Why does it matter to believe in one God rather than many? Why does it matter to believe in one God rather than none? If believing in God makes little essential difference to the way one lives, as often appears to be the case, then why should it continue to be an important issue to consider at all? Why not simply forget about God altogether (and so also dismiss atheism as much as theism, since the one category is predicated on the other) and get on with living as best one can?

One helpful way into some of these issues can be via reflection on “polytheism,” a term coined as a correlate for “monotheism.”⁶⁸ “Polytheism” as a category for classification is arguably meant to be a more dispassionate way of giving an account of religious differences than the older term “idolatry,” with its inescapably negative resonances. Yet some scholars recently have sought to reinstate “idolatry,” in the context of some fundamental rethinking of what it means to believe in God. Particularly interesting is the work of Nicholas Lash, who says succinctly, “The first question to be asked concerning God, and our relationship with God, is not ‘to be or not to be?’ but what it is that we worship, that we take as God?”⁶⁹ Or, as he puts it more fully in his groundbreaking *The Beginning and End of “Religion”*:

It is taken for granted, in sophisticated circles, that no one worships God these days except the reactionary and simple-minded. This innocent self-satisfaction tells us little more, however, than that those exhibiting it do not name as “God” the gods they worship.

All human beings have their hearts set somewhere, hold something sacred, worship at some shrine. We are spontaneously idolatrous—where, by “idolatry,” I mean the worship of some creature, the setting of the heart on some particular thing (usually oneself). For most of us there is no single creature that is the object of our faith. Our hearts are torn, dispersed, distracted. We are (to use the seventeenth-century term) polytheists. And none of us is so self-transparent as to know quite where, in fact, our hearts are set.

Against this background, the great religious traditions can be seen as contexts in which human beings may learn, however slowly, partially, imperfectly, some freedom from the destructive bondage which the worship of the creature brings.⁷⁰

68. Many contemporary scholars are questioning the value of “polytheism” as a category for the accurate understanding and depiction of religious beliefs and phenomena.

69. Nicholas Lash, “Amongst Strangers and Friends: Thinking of God in our Current Confusion,” in his *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 36–51, esp. 41.

70. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49–50, 21–22.

Lash is reformulating a classic (pre-seventeenth-century) understanding of deity and idolatry. A representative formulation can be found, for example, in the work of Erasmus, in his exposition of Psalm 1 written in 1515: “For each individual, his god is the thing in which he places his greatest expectation of bliss. If he will do and suffer anything for money, his god is not the Lord, but Mammon; if he is a slave to pleasure, his belly is his god; if he wrecks everything for the sake of power, the Lord is not his god: the god he worships is called ambition.”⁷¹ Alternatively, Luther writes in his Large Catechism, when expounding the First Commandment: “What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress. . . . That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”⁷²

In what way can this insight be used for reading the Old Testament? One difficulty that the Old Testament poses is that it hardly lingers to explain *why* “other gods” are problematic, at least in terms the contemporary reader might hope for: different texts sound different notes, and none offer the kind of theological account that might appeal to someone who did not already accept the importance of following YHWH. In broad-brush outline, the Old Testament presentation of “other gods” has two primary emphases. On the one hand, other gods lead Israel away from allegiance to YHWH and are unacceptable for that reason (a characteristic emphasis in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomically influenced material); this is a stance that implies the reality of other gods, but whose reasoning can appear somewhat circular. On the other hand, images of gods are mocked as mere material objects, lacking life and power (a characteristic emphasis in prophetic literature and the Psalms); this is a stance that appears to imply the unreality of other gods, and its rhetoric is to dissuade Israel rather than persuade those beyond Israel. Nonetheless, I propose that the notion of treating as God that which is not God, which is fundamental to a classic understanding of idolatry, as in Lash’s account, may still be heuristically fruitful for reading and appropriating the Old Testament. There are at least two inner-biblical reasons for this.

First, there is an Old Testament reason. John Barton has argued that, although Israel initially distinguished between worshiping gods other than YHWH and the use of images in worship, such a distinction was elided by Isaiah, who thereby set in motion the classic understanding of idolatry:

71. *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 63, *Expositions of the Psalms*, ed. Dominic Baker-Smith, trans. Michael J. Heath (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997), 14.

72. Martin Luther, Large Catechism, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1722.

The recognition that idolatry really consists in *making gods for ourselves* and putting our trust in them is the great breakthrough in Israel's thinking about the matter, and I have suggested that it may be to Isaiah that we owe it. From Isaiah onwards the conviction grew that there simply were no other powers in the universe to rival Yahweh, the God of Israel, and that . . . however much worshippers might bow down to the idol and acknowledge it as a great power, it was really themselves they were worshipping all the time.⁷³

Barton further sees this Isaianic perspective as responsible for a classic interpretation of the initially distinct first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me" [Exod. 20:3]; i.e., no apostasy) and second commandment ("You shall not make for yourself an idol" [20:4]; i.e., no images) as being in essence a single commandment that prohibits the worship of a human substitute for the true and living God. Two initially distinct commandments are re-read as one commandment. If Barton is right, then already within the Old Testament there appears to be a hermeneutical move toward adopting a particular understanding of idolatry—to treat as God that which is not God—as the definitive understanding.

Georg Braulik, following Norbert Lohfink, makes a move comparable to that of Barton when he argues for the developing traditions of Deuteronomy as the context for Israel's first formulation of monotheism. He discusses passages that refer to YHWH as a "jealous God," which consistently relate to the challenge posed by "other gods," and observes: "As soon as language about God becomes monotheistic, the formula about the jealous God loses its meaning." He then discusses "late texts," such as Deuteronomy 8:1–18 and 9:1–8, which "say nothing about any confrontation with the gods," and he infers from these that "The gods are no longer YHWH's rivals; his rival is the human self-confidence of Israel." He infers from this that a process of re-reading, "theological *relecture*," is "incorporated in the framework of an older text."⁷⁴

Second, there is a New Testament reason, in the form of the famous words of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition: "No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24 NKJV//Luke 16:13). Here Jesus metaphorically depicts money and wealth in a personification as a possible, and tempting, object of allegiance that rivals and can displace allegiance to God.⁷⁵ In essence it is a restatement of the logic of the Shema, which is now

73. John Barton, "The Work of Human Hands' (Ps 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 63–72, esp. 71; repr. in *The Ten Commandments*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 194–203.

74. Georg Braulik, "Deuteronomy and the Birth of Monotheism," in his *The Theology of Deuteronomy*, trans. Ulrika Lindblad (N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 1994), 99–130, esp. 106, 111. Braulik's thesis is heavily dependent on his confidence in differentiating earlier and later texts within the central corpus of Deuteronomy, a confidence that not all share.

75. Modern translations tend to "clarify" the meaning of "mammon" by rendering it as "wealth" (so NRSV, CEB), but at the cost of diminishing the personification. By contrast, as Martin Hengel observes, "Perhaps the early church left this Semitic loan-word untranslated

formulated in such a way as to specify the danger of treating as God that which is not God. There are comparable moves also elsewhere in the New Testament, as in Colossians 3:5, where “greed” is glossed as “idolatry.” The point is that the tempting but misleading reality that can endanger allegiance to God is not some putative invisible entity (i.e., a deity, in a certain “traditional” conception) but rather those things encountered within the life of the world that can draw the human heart away from the one true God.

The classic Christian monastic vows can also be understood in this light. A person who embraces poverty, chastity, and obedience is renouncing three idols/false gods—money, sex, and power—upon which one can be tempted to set one’s heart as avenues to fullness of life. The monastic vow dares to affirm that God alone suffices and that Jesus in his poverty, chastity, and obedience displays fullness of life.

My proposal here is that the hermeneutical move in the words of Jesus, in conjunction with the comparable move already in Isaiah, makes available a reading strategy for the construal of “other gods” in the Old Testament. “Other gods” are those realities that, in whichever form they take, threaten allegiance to the true God because they treat as God that which is not God.

In methodological terms my concern is that one should be open to the potential value of later understandings for re-reading earlier texts. This does not depend on supposing that the later understanding was *really* already present in the earlier texts, even though it may already have been incipiently present. (If careful philological and historical study shows that in all likelihood certain biblical texts did not originally mean what they were subsequently taken to mean, that must be respected.) Rather, the point is that this conception of idolatry, “treating as God that which is not God,” is something that develops out of Israel’s texts and traditions and that represents a deepening engagement with their basic and consistent concern of preserving loyalty to YHWH. The proposed understanding is therefore neither identical with original understanding nor remote from it, but rather represents a development of the original, preserving important aspects of its substance even while reconfiguring that original. Such recontextualization and re-reading of Old Testament content is, of course, well known among biblical scholars. The question is what one is to make of it, and on what basis. As ever, *how* one reads the biblical text surely depends on *why* one reads it, and I am trying to articulate what is appropriate for reading the Old Testament as Scripture for today.

The notion of idolatry as “treating as God that which is not God” is, I suggest, able to do justice to the primary emphases of both of the main construals

because they regarded it almost as the name of an idol: the service of mammon is idolatry” (*Property and Riches in the Ancient Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden [London: SCM, 1974], 24).

of idolatry within the Old Testament. On the one hand, it incorporates the Deuteronomic emphasis on “other gods” as a reality, as an ever-present and ever-threatening danger, which bears on what people *do*. One cannot take for granted that allegiance to the true God will be sustained in the face of alternatives. The attractions of other allegiances and of structures of life built around them are both real and powerful, and people can only be weaned off them through sustained moral and spiritual discipline, which is what allegiance to God as “the one and only” should entail. As William Cavanaugh puts it with regard to contemporary American civil religion, “Everyone acknowledges verbally that the nation and the flag are not *really* gods, but the crucial test is what people do with their bodies, both in liturgy and in war.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, this construal incorporates the mocking dismissal of idols as mere human constructs, deceptive appearances unworthy of true allegiance. Here the rhetoric remains primarily to shame those who should know better.

The modern Western tendency is to regard the difference between “monotheism” and “polytheism” and “atheism” as a matter of deciding, in essence, how many invisible beings of theoretical potency should be recognized to exist (or not); this tendency is so deeply ingrained that it is not easy for an alternative construal to gain a hearing. But part of the point of starting the studies in this book with the Shema is to see that issues of allegiance and life priorities together with corresponding moral and symbolic practices are at the heart of what it means to understand, and be able to appropriate, the Old Testament’s portrayal of God. A love supreme is an existential issue, with implications that are as wide-ranging and far-reaching as they could be.

76. Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” in his *Migrations*, 115–22, esp. 119.