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## The Shema and Loving God

**W**hat is *shema*? You might think of this word as having something to do with the famous Jewish law about God being “one.” Or, you may have heard it in relation to New Testament discussions about the greatest commandment. The term *shema* is associated with Jesus’ response to the teacher of the law who asked which of all the commandments is the most important (Mark 12:28-29). Jesus answered the teacher by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The opening word of this quote from Deuteronomy is the Hebrew term *shema*.

*Shema* is commonly translated by the imperative “Hear!” or “Listen!” Clearly, the word serves to capture the attention of the audience being addressed and functions as a command. *Shema*, in conjunction with the term “voice” or “word(s),” often carries the meaning of “obey” (Deut. 4:30; 1 Sam. 8:7; Josh. 1:18; Jer. 11:3). For example: “So they obeyed (*shema*) the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 12:24).

The precise phrase *shema yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel”) occurs only five times in the Old Testament (Deut. 5:1; 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9) and is directly cited only once in the New Testament (Mark 12:29; cf. Matt. 22:37; Luke 10:27). Three of the five occurrences in the Old Testament appear in relation to exhortations to obey God’s commandments (Deut. 5:1; 6:4; 27:9). The remaining two instances appear in the context of reminders to Israel that God would fight their battles for them (9:1; 20:3). Israel was thereby commanded to live in a relationship of obedience to

God’s words (commands) and to shun pride and fear with the knowledge that God had taken responsibility for their provision and protection.

### The Shema Prayer

The Shema identifies a Jewish prayer and declaration of faith. It begins with the declaration, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4), commonly understood as an affirmation of monotheism. Some translations read, “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (NRSV), emphasizing that Israel was not to follow after any other god. The prayer is made up of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41. It begins with the command to love God with all of one’s being.



The Shema is the Jewish prayer and declaration of faith. It begins with the affirmation, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Because this is central to Jewish faith, Jews have taken the following commands literally: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. . . . Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” (vv. 6, 8).

It continues with the exhortation to keep the commandments continually before oneself (at home and on the road, evening and morning, on hand and forehead, on houses and gates).

The second portion of the prayer repeats the importance of loving God with all of one’s being and promises reward and provision to those who obey. In contrast, turning to other gods will result in great losses. This portion of the prayer culminates in the same way as the first portion, with the exhortation to keep the commandments continually before oneself (at home and on the road, evening and morning, on hand and forehead, on houses and gates).

The third section of the prayer reinforces this concern to continually remember God’s commands. In this case, tassels with blue cords, attached to the corners of one’s garments, serve as the reminders to obey.

### The Command to Love God

The Shema is commonly associated with the command to love God with all of one’s being. Jesus responded to the teacher of the law by first citing the Shema (“Love the Lord your God”) and then adding a second commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself”; Mark 12:28-31).

The commandment to love God with all of one’s being is expressed in a variety of ways. Deuteronomy 11:13 expresses loving the Lord in terms of serving God “with all your heart and with all your soul.” Today, we often associate the heart with emotions and intuition. In contrast, ancient Israel understood the heart as the center of the intellect and rational thought, similar to how we might view the mind. The Hebrew term which is commonly translated “soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*) refers to the unity of a person, as opposed to later Greek dualistic concepts of a separate soul and body.

Accordingly, the command to love the Lord in Deuteronomy 11:13 calls for serving God with a rational commitment and with one’s whole life or self. Similar expressions for loving the Lord with all one’s heart and soul are found

in 13:3 (v. 4 in the Hebrew Bible); 30:6; and Joshua 22:5. The text most directly associated with the Shema adds “strength” or “might” to the expression for loving God: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5).

In the New Testament, when Jesus responded to the inquiry from the teacher of the law regarding the greatest commandment, only Mark 12:29 records Jesus’ response beginning with the phrase *shema yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel”) and followed by the statement that the Lord is one. This in turn is followed by the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (v. 30). This echoes Deuteronomy 6:5, except that it adds “with all your mind.” As implied above, the Deuteronomy passage can be understood as commanding that one love the Lord “with your whole mind, your

whole being, and all your strength” (Deut. 6:5; NET).

Jesus’ quote in Mark seems to reflect a Greek mentality by including heart, soul, mind, and strength. The parallel text in Matthew only includes heart, soul, and mind (22:37). In a similar passage in Luke, an expert in the law asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). Jesus responded by asking the law expert: “What is written in the Law?” (v. 26). In response to Jesus, it is the expert in the law who cites the Shema with the words, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (v. 27).

It seems clear that each of the expressions of the command to love the Lord are intended to include every aspect of a person. The command calls for a complete dedication of love to God. A contemporary way of expressing the command might be to say

that you should love the Lord your God with all of your mental, emotional, and physical capacity—even your whole being.

### BY THOMAS KING

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### Think about it . . .

- ✓ What is the relationship between hearing, listening, and obeying?
- ✓ What is the significance of God being “one” or “alone” as God?
- ✓ What aspects of the Jewish Shema prayer do you find most meaningful?
- ✓ How do you love God with the various aspects of your being/self (heart, mind, strength, whole person)?

## COMMENTARY *Mark 12:28-34*

Our passage for this week sits near the conclusion of a series of conflict stories. At the end of chapter 11, after Jesus cleared the temple (vv. 15-18), the chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law interrogated Him about His authority to do such things (vv. 27-33). Jesus stirred the pot with a targeted parable of judgment (12:1-11), which His opponents knew to be spoken against them (v. 12). What follows are three attempted tests—or perhaps traps—for Jesus: first, on paying taxes to Caesar (vv. 13-17); second, on marriage in the resurrection (vv. 18-27); and, third, on which commandment is the greatest (vv. 28-34). Each of these questions hinged on legal interpretation. Although they had vastly different allegiances, these groups—Jesus’ fellow Jews—each tried to pin Jesus down or trip Him up on how best to follow biblical precepts. Jewish groups varied widely about how best to interpret their Scriptures; the differences of opinion ranged widely, like differences between church denominations or political parties.

### 1. The Most Important Commandment (12:28-34)

**28** *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”*

**29** *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

**30** *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’*

**31** *The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’*

**32** *“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.*

**33** *To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’*

**34** *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

**28.** The Greek word (*grammateus*) translated here as *teachers of the law* literally means “scribe.” There are 63 mentions of a scribe or scribes in the New Testament. Of those times, 20 are in close association with Pharisees (e.g., Matt 23:2; Mark 7:1, 5). “Scribe” describes the role, as it

encompasses the variety of tasks associated with the term. A scribe had to be able to read and write, as the title itself refers to capacity with words and letters (*gramma* in Greek). Scribes functioned as secretaries, taking down dictation and writing up formal documents. Their skills in writing and reading were highly valued in a largely illiterate society. Jewish scribes were well versed in Hebrew and thus experts not just at writing but in reading and copying sacred texts as well. “Scribe” is an umbrella term that could point to a simple copyist or a well-respected scholar like Gamaliel (Acts 5:34).

The scribes in this passage might better represent a sub-group whose primary role was education and expertise in interpreting the law (e.g., Gamaliel). The precise term for this sub-group, *nomodidakalos* (*nomos* = law; *didaskalos* = teacher) can be literally translated “teachers of the law,” though this term does not appear here and appears only three times in the rest of the New Testament (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34; 1 Tim 1:7).

In our passage, the scribe surely demonstrated interest in Jewish legal interpretation, but his profession and expertise was not mentioned. The fact that any trained scribe would turn to Jesus, a carpenter—one without formal training in copying or teaching scriptural law, as far as we know—for His opinion on a matter of interpreting commandments should attract our attention. It may be that this scriptural professional noticed in Jesus the kind of authority to which the untrained masses also testified (see 1:27-28).

There are at least two good reasons to pay attention to the diversity among Jesus’ debate-partners from 11:27—12:37. First, we misunderstand Jesus if we separate Him entirely from His own time and His own people. Various Jewish sects were not targeting just any wandering teacher for theological dispute, but one of their own. Jesus’ answers mattered to them, as they were concerned with the accuracy of what He was teaching their neighbors, siblings, and young people. Second, we misunderstand Jesus if we miss that He was the object of suspicion by just the Pharisees or high priests. This series of interactions reminds us that Jesus faced opposition and investigation by a wide range of contemporary Jewish groups. At the same time, in a time of Roman occupation, no Jewish group had sovereignty—even the most powerful Jewish sect was subject to Roman authority.

While this passage is situated in a series of adversarial conversa-



A modern-day Jewish scribe painstakingly copies the Hebrew Bible. “One of the teachers of the law . . . asked [Jesus], ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’” (Mark 12:28). This teacher is better described as a “scribe.” Jewish scribes—then and now—were well-versed in Hebrew and thus were experts at reading and copying sacred texts.

tions, this interaction between Jesus and His examiner is the least argumentative. This time, Jesus’ interrogator was not described as wanting to trap Jesus, but rather as being appreciative of Jesus’ previous answer. Mark says that this scribe saw that Jesus answered well. So the scribe asked Him another question. Which commandment *is the most important?* The Greek says, more literally, “Which commandment is first of all?”<sup>†</sup>

Here, the term “first” does not mean, “Of the Ten Commandments, which comes first?” Instead, the question is one of primacy and importance. Thus, the NIV’s translation gets at the heart of the scribes’ interest: Of all the things commanded, which is foremost in importance? This question seems to have been a common one in Jesus’ day. Perhaps it functioned as a gateway into many other issues of importance. There are modern questions like this that seem to be a perpetual subject of interest in modern theological conversation: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and “If God knows everything, do people really have choices?” The question of the *most important* commandment reached to the heart of the real lives and faith of Jesus’ contemporary Jews.

**29-30.** Given the way that Jesus often answered by shattering the expectations of those asking questions, we might have expected Jesus to undercut the question or outsmart the interrogator. In the previous debate scene, for instance, Jesus refused to answer the question: “Whose wife will she be?” (v. 23). Instead, Jesus nullified the whole premise, because the Sadducees questioning Him did “not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (v. 24). However, Jesus’ conversations were not “one size fits all.” Instead, Jesus took the scribe’s question at face value. Jesus’ biggest challenge to the question as posed was to answer with two commandments. Even so, He answered directly which was *the most important one*.

Jesus quoted from a passage known as the *Shema* (pronounced sheh-MAH), a title derived from its first word in Hebrew (*Hear*): Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the heart of the Jewish confession about the identity of God. These two short verses underscore the unity (oneness) of God and God’s particular relationship to Israel, which entail a call for human response. The *Shema*, which encompasses Deuteronomy 6:4-9, continues to be the central confession of Judaism, recited in private devotion and in synagogue gatherings.

In some ways, Jesus’ quote was just that: a direct quotation from Scripture with which He would have been familiar since boyhood. The Greek that Mark records would not have been what Jesus said—as Jesus spoke Aramaic—but the Greek matches nearly exactly to the most common Greek version (called the Septuagint) of the Old Testament we have, which is a very literal translation from the Hebrew. There is a difference in one section at the very end. In the Hebrew and in the Septuagint, the hearers are commanded to “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your power”<sup>†</sup> (Deut. 6:5). Three nouns (heart, soul, power) indicate that the whole of the person’s life is to be directed to God in love. Jesus uses four nouns: *heart, soul, mind, and strength*. The first two are identical, while the last, “strength,” is a slightly different Greek word (*ischuos* in Mark 12:30 versus *dynamis* in Deut. 6:5 in the Septuagint). The meanings of these two Greek words are basically identical. If one wishes to identify a slight difference in *ischuos*, strength, it is that it is more limited to physical strength than *dynamis*, which can refer to power or ability of any sort.

Jesus’ addition of the term *mind* does not parallel either the Hebrew or the Greek of the Deuteronomy passage. It is possible that Jesus is simply expanding on what might have been meant by *heart*. In Hebrew thought—as in English today—heart does not refer to the muscle used to pump blood throughout the body’s circulatory system, but is the seat of emotion and intention. By expanding the list to include *mind*, Jesus included both emotion and thought explicitly. No matter how we divide up the human person, the right response to relationship with the one true God calls for the whole of human life to be directed in love and devotion to God. Love of God is not a mere *heart* matter; we cannot miss that the love God commands of us involves the body and the intellect as well.

**31.** Jesus transitions to the second commandment without further explanation. The second command in importance turns the *love* toward the *neighbor*. This, too, is a quotation from Scripture. In total, Leviticus 19:18 reads: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” In its context in Leviticus, it is significant that this commandment of forbidding revenge and requiring love is connected to the identity of the one commanding it (“I am the Lord”). This is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, where God’s nature requires the love of the whole human person. If God is the God of all, then all people deserve love.

These two commandments are some of the most frequently quoted in Jesus’ teaching. Yet, the all-inclusiveness of these two commandments, with love directed vertically (to God) and horizontally (to neighbor), illustrates Jesus’ point: *There is no commandment greater than these*. In each instance, the totality of love is required: Love toward God requires all of one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, while love toward neighbor should match love for oneself.



Implicit—but often ignored—in this second commandment is that it is proper to *love* oneself. Christians have sometimes erred by emphasizing only one part of Jesus' teaching and example: the selfless sacrifice on the cross. That self-emptying example is very real and present in Jesus' teaching and in Christian reflection on His life and death (e.g., Phil. 2:7). Yet in this passage we have another aspect of Jesus' teaching: that love for neighbor draws on the kind of love one has for oneself. This love should not be one of self-indulgence or false pride. The *love* under discussion refers to seeking the best for someone. Jesus evidences this sort of care and protection of himself many times throughout His ministry, retreating to prayer and solace (e.g., 6:31-32, 46; Luke 5:16), refusing futile self-deprivation (e.g., Mark 2:18-20), and seeking the company of friends (e.g., 3:13-19; John 15:9-17). Ultimately, as we see in the cross, Jesus chose love for and faithfulness to God over love for himself. Yet, here Jesus takes it as a given that a person should love him or herself. It is out of these resources of love that one must love a neighbor.

**32-33.** The scribe praised Jesus' answer. For the most part, these two verses repeat back to Jesus what He had just said. In conclusion, however, the scribe put Jesus' answer in context. In choosing these two commandments above all others, Jesus implied that there are other commandments that are lesser in importance. By naming *burnt offerings and sacrifices*, the scribe upheld Jesus' implication that the love of God and neighbor is primary, even over the sacrificial system. This sentiment, that one's right orientation toward God superseded even the most rigorous system of sacrifices is found numerous places in the Old Testament (e.g., Amos 5:21-25; Isa. 1:11-20). Yet we should not presume that many Jews in Jesus' time would have seen love of God and neighbor as excluding the necessity of temple sacrifices. That

was not Jesus' meaning, but rather that first comes love of God and second love of neighbor. Jesus did not explain any further, as Mark tells it. Matthew's version of this interaction explains that the whole law and prophets depend on these two commandments (22:40).

**34.** In Mark's gospel, Jesus' praise for His followers is notoriously sparse. Not even Peter received the affirmation that we find in Matthew's account (16:17-19). Mark does not depict Jesus as harsh, as there are several people whom Jesus commended (e.g., Mark 5:34; 14:6-9). However, as Mark paints it, real understanding and true faith are scarce among those whom Jesus encountered (see 8:11-21). This overall narrative theme, then, makes Jesus' response to the scribe difficult to pin down. Is this a compliment? When Jesus says, *You are not far from the kingdom of God*, is this instead reinforcing that the scribe had some distance to go? The narrator's comment shows us that Jesus' overall estimation of the scribe's response was positive: Jesus saw that he answered *wisely*. The term for *wisely* can also mean "sensibly" or "discreetly."

As with many of Jesus' encounters in Mark, the scribe's response indicated that he was on the right track. One interaction or one conversation, however, is not sufficient for the sort of discipleship that the kingdom requires. Jesus is persistent to direct toward the kingdom even those who seem far from "getting it" and those who are reluctant to follow Him to the cross, let alone take up their own (see 8:34-35; 14:50). We do not know any more about this scribe, but Jesus seems hopeful.

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Jesus answers questions from the religious leaders in this painting by James Tissot. It is significant that a trained scribe would turn to Jesus—a carpenter without formal training in scriptural law—for an opinion on the law. It may be that this professional also noticed in Jesus the kind of authority attested to by the untrained masses.