

The Shema – The Greatest of Commandments

Three passages from the Law (*Torah*) of Moses, collectively known as the *Shema*, are recited twice daily by observant Jews to this day. “According to the Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 42a), Jewish boys were taught this biblical passage as soon as they could speak.”¹

Evidence suggests that this practice existed during the time of Jesus and therefore it is highly likely that the passages known in Jewish circles as the *Shema* would have been the first “Bible verses” learned by Jesus.

The name *Shema* comes from the first Hebrew word found in Deuteronomy 6:4. In Hebrew this passage reads; *Shema yisra’el YHWH [Adonai] eloheynu YHWH [Adonai] echad*. The word *Shema* is translated as **hear!** It carries the idea of active listening and what follows is the central tenet of Biblical faith. It sets forth in unequivocal language the banner for monotheism – the idea that God is One.

Jesus of Nazareth had the following to say of these words:

^{KJV} **Mark 12:28** *And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? ²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: ³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. ³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. ³² And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.*

^{KJV} **Matthew 22:34** *But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. ³⁵ Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, ³⁶ Master, which is the great commandment in the law? ³⁷ Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ³⁸ This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

Any attempt at restoring Christianity must be built first upon this key concept – the oneness of God, for by grasping this concept one advances in the Kingdom of God. The

¹ Quote from, **Our Father Abraham, Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith** by Marvin Wilson, page 123

Shema should be internalized and recited twice daily. Jesus, no doubt did this, and those who seek to follow him should do the same (I John 2:6; Romans 8:28). Note these words in their Jewish / Biblical context.

The Shema

^{KJV} **Deuteronomy 6:4** *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: ⁵ And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. ⁶ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: ⁷ And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ⁸ And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. ⁹ And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.*

^{KJV} **Deuteronomy 11:13** *And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹⁴ That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. ¹⁵ And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. ¹⁶ Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; ¹⁷ And then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you. ¹⁸ Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. ¹⁹ And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ²⁰ And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates: ²¹ That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.*

^{KJV} **Numbers 15:37** *And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ³⁸ Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: ³⁹ And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: ⁴⁰ That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God.*

Jesus of Nazareth said that whoever does and teaches the commandments shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven (*Matthew 5:17-20*). When asked what one must do to inherit eternal life, his answer was; **keep the commandments** (*Matthew 19:16-17*). All who abide in Jesus should walk as he walked (*I John 2:6*), and therefore we should desire to live our lives in the same manner as he lived his – in observance of the commandments.