

7-16-2018

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Repository Citation

Sabbath, R. (2018). Iterations of One: The Shema as Polemic Trope in the Synoptic Gospels and Qur'an. *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of the Bible and Culture*, 48(3), 133-147.
<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107918781280>

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Iterations of One: The Shema as Polemical Trope in the Synoptic Gospels and Qur'an

Biblical Theology Bulletin, Vol 48, Number 3, 2018

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Abstract

This brief overview addresses the use of the Shema as polemical trope in the Synoptic Gospels and the Qur'an. The specific time and geographies of the development of these foundational sacred works places them in conflict with indigenous ideologies both religious and political as their confessional and political identities unfold. Through its use in these texts, the Shema serves to correct, unify, and warn opposing hegemonic forces.

Key words: Shema as polemic, intersection of indigenous and developing Christianity and Islam, Shema as hegemonic trope, Shema and Synoptic Gospels, Shema and Qur'an

Considered central to the confessional faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Shema is also a powerful political tool, enlisted as developing faiths distinguished themselves from their host communities. As we can see in the discussion below, the choice to use the Shema in a variety of ways was a self-conscious gesture by active social and political leaders for garnering favor, devotion, and submission.

The Shema appears in the Jewish liturgy at the climax of confessional expression:

- Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" [Deut 6:4–5]

So central is the Shema to Jewish understanding of itself that, according to tradition, Rabbi Akiba recites this prayer as he dies in flames, his shroud ignited by the Romans. The Shema carries political weight. The oneness of God includes the oneness of the Jewish people, of the law, and of the covenant with God. The oneness of God and people also includes oneness of the unified individual that the Deuteronomic religion constructs (Geller: 296). In the Tanakh, the Shema is a banner for unification against the opposing hegemonic forces of multiple empires, cultural heresies, and individual tyrants.

Oneness has always been an imperial dictum. Whether the audience spoke Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Persian, or Arabic, the words found in the Shema are carefully selected to trigger a ring of familiarity and hegemonic domination. Whether suzerain treaty or monotheistic covenant, oneness of ruler or G(g)od served a polemical purpose. In the earliest of Jewish traditions, several references in the Tanakh explicitly connect unity of God with a unified body politic: Jer 32:39a—I shall give them a single heart and a single nature to revere Me for all time; Ezek 11:19—I will give them one heart and put a new spirit in them; Ps 86:11—Let my heart be undivided in reverence to your name; Zech 14:9—And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord with one name. And in the Persian period an appellation for God was “the King of kings of kings” to top the names given Persian emperors.

In analogous rhetorical fashion, during the primal stages of Christianity and Islam, the Shema and its several mutations served as a familiar declaration of oneness for these burgeoning confessional and political forces with three notable goals: to correct a

previous understanding, to proclaim the unity of followers, and to warn against detractors.

Proto-Christians had their hands full. Rejection by the Jews sent them to Gentile audiences (Carr; Carroll; Griffith: 307-9; Marcus: 212). The Apostle Paul uses his corrected understanding of the Shema to mold a new understanding of the nature of God: Christology. In this understanding, belief in God as both Jesus and the ancient divinity offers eternal life through the salvific miracle of Christ. Faith abrogates the Mosaic law (Sanders: 680-1).

According to Paul, believers are unified by baptism and faith, not by obedience to the Jewish law. Non-believers are cursed. They are warned about the divine punishment that awaits them at death. Roman governance is acknowledged while Jewish disputations are met with vituperative onslaught. Through its use in these texts, the Shema serves to correct, unify, and warn opposing hegemonic forces (Homolka: 15-35).

Linked to Pauline Christology and the exclusivity of faith in Jesus as Christ is the social action to help the poor and disenfranchised. From the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls onward through the Greco-Roman Palestinian period, Paul's understanding of the Shema reflects the Jewish traditions articulated by Rabbi Hillel (Meyers: 155). Hillel famously claimed that the whole Torah could be expressed when standing on one leg by this understanding: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor—this is the Torah;

the rest is commentary” (BT Shabbat 31a). Hillel insisted that the way to express love and humility before God was through social action in helping the poor.

Paul’s Christology and soteriology are taken up by the first Gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Shortly after Paul’s death, the temple is destroyed. The earthly apocalypse is happening. The urgency to prepare is palpable in the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the three Synoptics and likely simultaneous with the destruction itself, whether known or unknown to its author. The corrected Shema of the Gospel emphasizes the love of the neighbor but abrogates the law. Likely addressing a Gentile audience, Mark describes Jesus working miracles and forgiving sins, deeds that presumably endear him to the dubious and alienate him from the majority of his Jewish peers. These latter are the rivals, the opposition, the threat to the credibility of the developing creed. Mark is full of attacks against the Jews, a gesture that serves to congeal a body politic of believers. The Jews earn the warnings, not the Romans. Above all Jesus as God is part of the monotheistic creed understood as a corrected Shema, as a sign of unity, and as warning to disputants:

- The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (12:29-33)
- John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed: ‘The one who is more powerful than I

is coming after me...I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (1:6-8)

- Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send his angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, ...the earth, ...heaven (13:26-37)

In another couple of decades, the Synoptics Matthew and Luke enlist very different strategies regarding the historical narrative of Jesus, even though much of their material is shared. Matthew continues the apocalyptic intensity of Mark. The Jews in fact are the audience for his polemic. They understand the laws, the practices, the Temple hierarchies that Mark attacks. Matthew understands Jesus as the culmination of expectations expressed in the Tanakh. Jesus is the messiah who fulfills what has been promised. The Gospel again corrects the Shema to express kindness to the neighbor as the fulfillment and abrogation of the law. It embeds the Shema in critique of the Jews whom he claims defame the covenant's proper import by their hypocritical observance, thus solidifying an "us/them" binary. Again the Jews earn the warning by not accepting the mutation of the Shema. Here we see the correction, unity, and warning in Matthew:

- Jesus replied, 'You must love the Lord Your God with all your Heart, with all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (22:37-9)
- In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (5:14-16)

- Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices. . . But you have neglected the most important, matters of the law-- justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:23)

For Matthew's author, the apocalypse and the eschaton are imminent. A sense of urgency pervades the Gospel. For the author of Luke, the apocalyptic moment has not brought the eschaton. Thus Luke de-eschatologizes the apocalyptic message, making the question of salvation a personal, liberating one. Oneness expressed in the Shema or its suggestion includes Jesus as a divine avatar; the oneness of the body politic of believers; the warning; to the Jews. The events surrounding Jesus earthly life are all meant to have been part of a divine plan. Consistent with Paul, Mark, and Matthew, the message of kindness to neighbor is emphasized. Divine oneness only appears once (Baron). Again the Shema assumes a polemic role to correct, unify, and warn:

- No one is good--except God alone
(18:19--only reference to oneness of God)
- The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me. . . to set the oppressed free (4:18)
- [Peter to Jesus, you are] God's Messiah. [Jesus] said, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life' (12:56)

We can see the consistent polemical service that the Shema performs as early Christianity shapes its identity against both Jewish religious foreground and the political totalitarian Roman state. By 325 CE, Constantine declares the Roman Empire a unified, body politic, the Roman Christian Empire. But the reality on the ground thwarted the unity that the Shema proclaims. Less than one hundred years later, that empire divides into two. While retaining its Christian identity, the eastern Byzantine Empire suffers religious fragmentation with persistent and unresolvable disputations about divine identity. The pugnacious tone of the discourse is undeniable.

As time and geographies influence the development of Christian sects, they differ on the nature and relationship of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and Mary among other conflicting doctrines and relationships (Ohlig: 22, 52, 62). To combat the discrepancy, the burgeoning Catholic institution convenes six councils beginning with the 325 CE Council of Nicea and continuing to 680 CE. In addition to the religious discord, military conflict over the Levant continues for these formative centuries between the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires.

Finally one dominant power explodes from the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabic military force with its proto- Islamic worldview. Within 30 years after the traditional death of Mohammed in 632 CE, the Arabian Empire conquers the Levant and the Sassanian Empire. Within one hundred and fifty years, the Arabian Empire spans from the borders of Anatolia, east to today's western Indian through northern Africa to today's Spain.

As the new political and military force develops, so do its proto-religious ideas and its foundational sacred text, the Qur'an (Wansborough: 139; Rippin: Section II, 160-1; Reynolds 2011: 22; Reynolds: 477-502; Sinai: 713). The Shema is once again corrected (Azaiez: 113; Zakaria: Ch. 1; Zelletin: 450, 455; Sinai: 713). The oneness of God, *Tawid*, represents total rejection of Christian soteriology and the Trinity (Houssein: 651). The acceptance of both Jesus and Mohammed as human prophets asserts the inadequacy of Jewish ideology (Wheeler: 85; Segovia: 183). Like Judaism, humanity has no divine intermediary; like Christianity, Jesus has a messianic function at the eschaton (Archer: 1; Firestone). Those who do not embrace these doctrines are cursed.

Here is the same function of an identifiable Shema used as polemical trope in the suras of the Qur'an, serving to correct, to unify, and to warn:

- Unity against literalists (2.116): They say God has taken a son! No!
- Unity against dualists (5.116): Remember when God said, "Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to the people, 'Take me and my mother as two gods instead of God (alone)'? He said, '. . . I have no right (to say)'"
- Unity against Trinitarians (5.73): Certainly they have disbelieved who say, 'Surely God is the third of three,' when (there is) no god but one God.
- Unity against polytheists (72.2): We shall not associate anyone with our Lord.

- Unity of believers (2:62): Those who believe and those who are Jews and those who are supporters of Jesus and whoever believes in the Allah and the Last Day and do right, surely their reward is with their Lord
- Warning: As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help

By 685-705 CE, the Arabian Empire's caliph, `Abd al-Malik, builds the Dome of the Rock atop a Catholic Church which itself sat atop the ruins of the Second Temple, a clear sign of hegemonic domination. And appearing on the exterior and interior of the Dome of the Rock is the Shema, clearly as a polemic trope. Once again, the Shema serves the function to declare a correction to the dominant Christian indigenous understanding of the Shema, the unity and power of its Arabian believers, and the political warning of Arabic political control (Archer: 402; Gotein: 139; Heidemann).

On the outside, the Dome of the Rock repeats the Shema five times:

- In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. | There is no god but God alone. He has no associate. | {112} Say, "He is God, the One! – God, Indivisible!" He does not beget nor was he begotten, and no one is equal in rank to him.
- Mohammed is his messenger {33:56}

The interior of the Dome of the Rock continues the polemic:

- The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is but the messenger of God and his Word, which he conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from him. So believe in God and his messengers and do not say “Three!”

While the Hadith, the sayings of Mohammed, and the Sunnah, the daily practices of the prophet, are not traditionally collected and written down until centuries later, the reconstituted doctrine of the Shema serves, in its clarity, to distinguish the newly forming religion from its indigenous, religious Others: Judaism and Christianity.

A close reading of the formulation of the Shema by proto-Christianity and proto-Islam founders not only highlights the discrepancies between the primal phases of the two religions in opposition to their indigenous ideologies. A close reading highlights the difference between the simplicities of the early doctrines from the later developments of each religion. What made the trope so powerful was at once its familiarity to the sensibilities of its target audiences and its hegemonic clarion call as political and religious weapon. A close reading also highlights just how interwoven were the fates of the developing religions and their indigenous foundations, a contentiousness of familiarity that continues.

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