



## The Shema and the devotion to only one deity

O Shemá e a devoção a uma só divindade

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the original meaning of the Shema in the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 6:4-5). The central question for this study is whether the Shema constituted a confession of monotheistic faith from the beginning or if this role of the Shema is a consequence of a reinterpretation of the biblical text, due to its reception in later culture and literature. The study focuses initially on the linguistic analysis of Deuteronomy 6:4 and then proceeds to the reading of the co-text of the Shema (chapter 6 of the book of Deuteronomy); it also presents the relevant data of the research on the culture of the Ancient Near East, on the History of the Religion of Israel and on the dating of Dt 6:4-5. This paper shows that the formula of Dt 6:4-5 does not deny the existence of other deities. The conclusion is that it is very unlikely that the Shema was originally a proclamation of monotheistic faith; it was rather a call to monolatry, to the cult and devotion to only one deity, the God of Israel.

**Keywords:** Old Testament; Deuteronomy; shema; monotheism; exegesis.

### Resumo

O artigo discute o significado original da fórmula do Shemá no livro do Deuteronômio (Dt 6:4-5). A pergunta central é se o Shemá constituía inicialmente uma confissão de fé monoteísta ou se esse papel do Shemá se deve a uma reinterpretação do texto bíblico, à sua recepção na cultura e literatura posterior. A investigação se concentra inicialmente no estudo linguístico de Dt 6:4, mas inclui ainda o estudo do co-texto do Shemá, ou seja, o capítulo 6 do livro do Deuteronômio, e recolhe também os dados pertinentes fornecidos pelos estudos sobre a cultura do Antigo Oriente Próximo, sobre a história da religião de Israel e sobre a datação de Dt 6:4-5. O estudo mostra como a fórmula de Dt 6:4-5 não exclui a existência de outros deuses. A conclusão é que o Shemá, muito provavelmente, não era originalmente uma proclamação de fé monoteísta, mas um chamado à monolatria, ao culto e à devoção a uma só divindade, o Deus de Israel.

**Palavras-chave:** Antigo Testamento; Deuteronômio; shemá; monoteísmo; exegese.

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## Introduction

The Shema is a central formula for the religion and spirituality of the Jews of all time: words that have crossed the centuries. These words from the book of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 have been taken up in both Old and New Testament texts; found in the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church and the Jewish sages of yesterday and today, these words continue to resonate in synagogues and in Christian churches. The words of the Shema have also provoked much reflection among Bible scholars.

The importance of the Shema is confirmed by its position in the book of Deuteronomy. As Miller reminds us, they are the first words of Moses' instruction addressed to the people (MILLER, 2008, p. 111). Historically, the formula of Dt 6:4 has been regarded by Jews and Christians as a great monotheistic statement. However, the question of the original meaning of such expression has attracted the attention of many exegetes.

Despite its importance and familiarity, the text of Dt 6:4, שמע ישראל יהוה אחד, is difficult to understand. As McBride states, there are problems in this text regarding the grammar of the Hebrew language as well as problems related to the context of the theology of Deuteronomy (MCBRIDE, 1973, p. 292). This article proposes to investigate the meaning of the formula of Dt 6:4. In particular, we will attempt to answer the question: does Dt 6:4 constitute an affirmation of divine exclusivity, that is, of theoretical monotheism?

In order to achieve this goal, we will first study the linguistic aspects of the formula. Then we will focus our attention on the co-text, that is, on the particular bond between Dt 6:4 and the following verses, as well as the rest of chapter 6. We will see later how the literature of the Ancient Near East can be of help to clarify the meaning of our text, as well as the considerations made by scholars of the history of the religion of Israel and the problems encountered for the dating of the Shema. Finally, as a conclusion, our personal opinion on the issue will be shared.

## 1 Language analysis

The first difficulty we may face in our quest for the meaning of Dt 6:4 is the linguistic issue. The text, despite its brevity, presents several possibilities for translation and a diversity of problems. Regarding syntax, we discuss how many nominal clauses are in the verse, how they are to be divided, and what elements constitute the subject and the predicate. Regarding the lexicon used, the meaning of the term  $\text{יהוה}$  is discussed. Let us turn to the analysis of such issues.

### 1.1 The nominal clauses

According to Waltke-O'Connor, the problems of the text of Dt 6:4 begin after the imperative and the initial vocative "listen, Israel" These authors confine themselves to recognizing the unique character of the grammatical construction of the four following words and cite some of the solutions proposed by several authors, without, however, adopting any position (WALTKE; O'CONNOR, 1990, p. 135). According to Bord-Hamidović<sup>1</sup>, these are the four possibilities for translating  $\text{יהוה אלהינו יהוה אלהינו}$ : A) IHW H is our God, IHW H is  $\text{יהוה}$ ; B) IHW H our God, IHW H is  $\text{יהוה}$ ; C) IHW H our God is  $\text{יהוה}$  IHW H; D) IHW H is our God, IHW H  $\text{יהוה}$  (BORD; HAMIDOVIĆ, 2002, p. 14-15).

The solution (A), "IHW H is our God, IHW H is  $\text{יהוה}$ ", is the simplest one and understands the text as two nominal verbless clauses. In this case, the first one, according to Waltke-O'Connor, would be an identifying clause and the second one a classifying clause with a numeral, both in the Subject-Predicate order (WALTKE; O'CONNOR, 1990, p. 135)<sup>2</sup>. This is the preferred solution of Veijola, who perceives here a case of parallelism with two parallel nominal clauses that refer to the same IHW H (VEIJOLA, 1992, p. 531). The first problem of this translation is that, according to Bord-Hamović, the tetragram "IHW H" is often associated with the term  $\text{אלהים}$  in the book of Deuteronomy, with or without pronominal suffixes, but

<sup>1</sup> Just as these authors do, we will address separately the problem of the meaning of  $\text{יהוה}$ .

<sup>2</sup> According to Waltke-O'Connor, other authors see IHW H as a discontinuous predicate and the other words as discontinuous subject, thus the translation "Our one God is IHW H, IHW H" (WALTKE; O'CONNOR, 1990, p. 135).

when there is verbal elision, the terms are separated by הוּא, "He", and, in addition, אֱלֹהֵינוּ is followed by a definite article (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 19). Thus, the translation "IHWH is our God" does not seem correct and we should prefer "IHWH our God". This is also the position of Lohfink (1976, p. 108-109), Braulik (1994, p. 101) and Weinfeld (1991, p. 337), who see "our God" as an apposition to "IHWH". In this regard, however, Barbiero has a divergent opinion. According to this author, the expression should be understood in connection with the beginning of the Decalogue (Dt 5:6-10) and should be translated by "IHWH is our God", because it has a performative force in the almost sacramental renewal of the bond between IHWH and its people (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 113). Block also advocates the possibility of translating "IHWH is our God" and, against Bord-Hamović, he correctly states that אֱלֹהֵינוּ contains the pronominal suffix and therefore cannot be followed by the definite article. Moreover, most cases of "IHWH our God" occur in verbal clauses, as subject or object in the sentence. In Dt 6:4, on the contrary, we have a non-verbal clause. Finally, according to Block, the unique character of the Shema's formulation authorizes the interpreter to see here a use of the expression that differs from the rest of Deuteronomy (BLOCK, 2004, p. 197).

Another problem with the expression אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה is that the passage from the second person singular ("listen, Israel!") to the first person plural in אֱלֹהֵינוּ ("our God") induced some authors such as Félix García López (1992, p. 21), to see here a secondary addition in the text. Weinfeld, on the contrary, defends the expression as an integral part of the text, since this would belong to the liturgical creed proclaimed by the faithful, a fact that would explain the change to the first person plural (WEINFELD, 1991, p. 331). Barbiero proposed a simpler explanation. As in this verse the one who speaks is Moses, he should be included in the confession of faith in IHWH, since the God of Israel is also the God of Moses, and this would justify the change of person (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 111).

These discussions about the expression אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה also apply to the translation (D), "IHWH is our God, IHWH יְהוָה", Tigay's favorite translation, although it is considered vague by the same author (TIGAY, 1996, p. 440). The translation (D) takes the word יְהוָה with the meaning of "alone/only" one of several other proposals of the scholars, as we shall see.

The translation (B), "IHWH our God, IHWH is יְהוָה", considers "our God" as an apposition to IHWH, the most common usage in Deuteronomy. However, for some authors such as Tigay (1996, p. 439) and Veijola (1992, p. 530), this translation has the drawback of making superfluous the second mention of the divine name.

The solution (C), "IHWH our God is יְהוָה IHWH", introduces the verb "to be" between the second and third terms and understands the whole as a single proposition, which would mean "IHWH our God is a single IHWH". Although grammatically possible, the expression seems to be tautological for some exegetes, such as Barbiero (2002, p. 112). This translation, however, was supported by authors who see in this verse a theological polemic against the tendency to divide the worship and attributes of IHWH according to the territory. Bord-Hamidović remind us that the existence of an IHWH from Samaria and an IHWH from Teman were confirmed by the discoveries of the inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud (BORD; HAMIDOVIĆ, 2002, p. 17)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, according to Miller, in the formulation of Dt 6:4 one would find an attempt to unify the figure and the cult of IHWH as opposed to the risk that local IHWH cults would become autonomous and independent (MILLER, 2000b, p. 79). Against this translation, Weinfeld asserts that there is no evidence in the Old Testament of this tendency of IHWH fragmentation in various deities (WEINFELD, 1991, p. 350). Lohfink doubts that this hypothesis can be proved in the book of Deuteronomy (LOHFINK, 1976, p. 109). According to Tigay, many other deities have undergone a process of fragmentation, like the many figures of Baal, Seth, Ishtar, and Amon-Re (TIGAY, 1996, p. 439). However,

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<sup>3</sup> A translation of these inscriptions in English can be found in: Hallo and Younger (2003, p. 171-172)

according to Braulik, if there was the danger of IHWH decomposition in many IHWH linked to the various localities, as it happened to other deities of the Ancient Near East, this would have been indicated also in the texts on the centralization of the cult (BRAULIK, 1987, p. 50). Braulik, in another text, asserts that this hypothesis presupposes that IHWH would have assimilated several local deities in their respective sanctuaries and then would have disintegrated into several IHWH figures. The book of Deuteronomy presents no evidence in favor of this hypothesis of poly-javism, although it cannot be completely excluded (BRAULIK, 1994, p. 102). In this regard, Bord-Hamidović maintains that the whole of chapter 6 does not speak of the only IHWH as opposed to the plurality of the local IHWH but speaks of the confrontation between IHWH and the gods of other peoples (BORD; HAMIDOVIĆ, 2002, p. 25-26). In our view, although interesting, the hypothesis of the controversy against poly-javism remains less plausible than that of the polemic against the gods of the neighboring peoples.

Before we present our opinion on the correct way of dividing the clauses, we will reflect on the meaning of  $\tau\eta\aleph$  in our verse.

## 1.2 The meaning of $\tau\eta\aleph$

The meaning of this term is of great importance for our purpose, that is, to discover if in Dt 6:4 we find a profession of monotheistic faith. The first possible translation is to read here "one". Naturally, this would be the first meaning of  $\tau\eta\aleph$ , the numeric one. There are, however, several ways of understanding this translation. In rabbinic and Christian traditions, the translation "one" was understood as an affirmation of divine unity, an expression of a monotheistic faith. However, Barbiero correctly pointed out that the unity of God is not the theme of chapter 6. The concern, instead, is that Israel is with IHWH and not with the foreign gods (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 114).

Janzen accepts the translation "one" but proposes a different understanding of it. The unity of IHWH here means its internal integrity, the coherence between

its desire and its action, between intention and execution (JANZEN, 1987a, p. 287). In another article published the same year, Janzen mentions the background of the Mesopotamian religion in which the gods had contradictory attitudes toward humanity, in contrast to the integrity and coherence of IHWH expressed in Deuteronomy (JANZEN, 1987b, p. 58-59). In contrast to the deities of the neighboring peoples, the text of Dt 6:4 would speak of the moral unity of God; IHWH is absolutely trustworthy (JANZEN, 1987a, p. 291 and 295). Therefore, according to Janzen, the following verse, Dt 6:5, would be an invitation to mirror this divine fidelity in one's own life, loving IHWH with all one's heart, soul and all its own strengths (JANZEN, 1998, p. 252, 255). Against Janzen's proposal, Block states that it is forced. If it were the intention of the text to affirm the integrity of IHWH, there would be clearer modes and expressions for doing so (BLOCK, 2004, p. 200). In fact, Janzen's hypothesis seems artificial and indemonstrable. Herrmann maintains, on the contrary, that "one" in this verse means one undivided personality (HERRMANN, 2000, p. 51), an explanation that sounds even less convincing than Janzen's preceding proposal.

Another possibility is to translate  $\text{לְבַד}$  as "alone/only". However, an objection against this translation has often been raised. In Hebrew, the term to say "only (he)" would be  $\text{לְבַדוֹ}$ . Weinfeld responded to this objection with Ehrlich's argument, stating that since  $\text{לְבַדוֹ}$  is an adverb, it would not be adequate in a nominal clause (WEINFELD, 1991, p. 337-338). Subsequently, Bruno demonstrated the inappropriateness of these considerations by quoting 2Re 19:15 and Is 37:16 as examples of OT texts where  $\text{לְבַד}$  appears in a nominal clause followed by the second person pronominal suffix (BRUNO, 2009, p. 320-322). Besides that, against the translation "only", Bord-Hamović adds the objection that it has not been verified in Scripture clear parallels of the use of  $\text{לְבַד}$  with the meaning of "only" applied to the tetragrama (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 15-18). McBride, on the contrary, defends the legitimacy of the translation "only" considering the parallels of this use in the former North-Western Semitic and the Akkadian (MCBRIDE, 1973, p. 293). This is the preferred translation also by Tigay (1996, p. 440).



Another possibility is to translate  $\text{יְהוָה}$  as "unique". It is the preferred translation by Bord-Hamović (2002, p. 17-18). According to Miller, to say that IHWH is "unique" means to say that it is the only one worthy of ultimate fidelity and that it is the foundation of being and feeling (MILLER, 2008, p. 114). The incomparability of IHWH is, then, indicated in this translation.

Miller, however, maintains that the renderings "one" and "unique" are both possible and that the interpreter should accept their ambiguity, since difficulties in translating that word have not been solved (MILLER, 2008, p. 112-113). In another text, Miller also admits the translation "only" and states that it is not necessary to choose between the latter and the translation "one", even though he prefers the latter (MILLER, 2000a, p. 389). Christensen is another author who prefers to avoid a decision about the translation of this verse. He states that each of the various proposals bears some truth about the poetic form of the text (CHRISTENSEN, 1991, p. 143).

### 1.3 Results of the linguistic analysis of the formula of Dt 6:4

As we have seen, there are several possibilities for translating Dt 6:4. It is interesting to note that since the very phase of understanding the expression in its linguistic peculiarities, questions of a historical, archaeological and theological nature come to intervene, since it is not possible to completely separate these aspects of the problem.

Our point of view is that the most plausible translation, though uncertain, is the option (B), with the word  $\text{יְהוָה}$  having the meaning of "unique" that is, incomparable. We would thus have "IHWH our God, IHWH is unique" this translation respects the more common usage of the expression  $\text{יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ}$  and has the advantage of translating  $\text{יְהוָה}$  in a quite attested sense in Scripture. Moreover, it does not appeal to unproven hypotheses, like that of Janzen or that of the fragmentation of IHWH in various local deities. This translation does not imply monotheism and, in this sense, seems more adequate to the literary and historical



context, as we shall see. However, we do not exclude the possibility that the ambiguity of the formula is intentional and thus forms part of its meaning.

Of all the hypotheses discussed above, only the translation of the expression  $\text{יהוה יהוה}$  as an independent nominal clause and of  $\text{יהוה}$  in the sense of "one" could make the verse a monotheistic statement, although, as we have seen, "one" does not necessarily refer to divine unity. The first conclusion is that the formula, from the linguistic point of view, is not clearly monotheistic. In any case, in the syntactic and semantic analysis of the verse it is seen that monotheism is affirmed only in one of several translations and possible interpretations.

For this reason, the authors who defend the monotheistic character of the formula refer to an implicit monotheism. Weinfeld, while admitting that the formula of Dt 6:4 does not explicitly mention divine exclusivity, supposes that it implies monotheism. The special context of Deuteronomy and the liturgical nature of the proclamation would give it a monotheistic tone, though similar formulas exist in pagan, polytheistic religions (WEINFELD, 1991, p. 349-350). Christensen also defends the implicitly monotheistic character of the formula (CHRISTENSEN, 1991, p. 145). Therefore, even the authors who defend the monotheistic character of the Shema do so with caution, thus avoiding to regard it as a great monotheistic statement, seeking to read in the expression "only" the fact that IHWH is the only one with true divine attributes, as did Driver more than a century ago (DRIVER, 1902, p. 90).

In Bovati's opinion, on the contrary, in Dt 6:4 we do not have a monotheistic statement, for it is not said that IHWH is the only God, but that IHWH is one/unique. This statement is linked to the context of worship centralization: a single temple, a single people, a single covenant, and a single IHWH. There is only one Lord of all Israel, the country and its inhabitants (BOVATI, 1994, p. 82-83). According to Lohfink, the formula means something like "for Israel, of all the gods, IHWH is the only one that deserves consideration" (LOHFINK, 1976, p. 110).

According to Braulik, the statement "IHWH is one" in Dt 6:4, exists within a polytheistic referential system of the late monarchic period (BRAULIK, 1994, p. 121). The formula does not speak of theoretical monotheism, but it means that of all the gods, only IHWH is the only God for Israel (BRAULIK, 1987, p. 50). He is the only one as the God loved by Israel (BRAULIK, 1994, p. 103). This author, quoting Ct 6:8-9, recalls that the term "only/unique" is typical of the language of love (BRAULIK, 1986, p. 56). In the current redactional form of Deuteronomy, however, the reader reaches Dt 6:4 after having read chapter 4, where IHWH is considered the only existing God. According to Braulik, Dt 4:39 is clearly monotheistic and this text influenced the readers to see also in Dt 6:4 a monotheistic text (BRAULIK, 1994, p. 101 and 121). Tigay makes the same considerations and says that, unlike Dt 4:35-39, Dt 6:4 is not monotheistic because it speaks of the relationship with God, not of his nature (TIGAY, 1996, p. 76)<sup>4</sup>.

For Veijola, the phrase "IHWH is unique" does not imply absolute monotheism but should be seen in connection with the preceding statement "IHWH is our God", meaning "IHWH is our only God" (VEIJOLA, 1992, p. 533-534). This is most probably the meaning of the expression, as we shall see from the following discussion.

## 2 The co-text (Dt 6)

If, as Lohfink says, the formula of Dt 6:4 does not necessarily imply monotheism, we should take a look in its context, for it is only in this way that we can discover its exact meaning (LOHFINK, 1976, p. 109). We will limit our study to the analysis of some elements of chapter 6 of the book of Deuteronomy, the near literary context (co-text) of the formula of Dt 6:4.

According to Barbiero, verses 4 and 5 are connected. This bond is clearly established by the *weqatalî* which opens verse 5, indicating that loving is the

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<sup>4</sup> Heiser argues that not even Dt 4:35 constitute monotheistic statements, but affirmations of the incomparability of IHWH (HEISER, 2008, p. 4-6).

conclusion or continuation of what has been said before; to the only God follows undivided love. The two verses form a dense rhythmic formula with a liturgical tone (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 109-110). This indissoluble bond between the two verses is also emphasized by Herrmann. The two verses allow each other to clarify and show that the priority is not the affirmation of God's unity but the commandment to love him with all one's heart (HERRMANN, 2000, p. 52-54). Along the same line, Block explains that verse 5 confirms that the theme of the Shema is total and exclusive devotion to IHWH (BLOCK, 2004, p. 204). For Block, it would be a mistake to read Dt 6:4 out of its context as a monotheistic confession. The Shema is, instead, the expression of Israel's commitment to IHWH and the answer to the question "who is the God of Israel?" (BLOCK, 2004, p. 211). The opinion that the formula of Dt 6:4-5 does not speak of theoretical monotheism is shared by Barbiero, who speaks, instead, of monolatry (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 115-116).

According to Block, to understand Dt 6:4 it is important to read also verses 14 and 15. Block believes that while Dt 6:4a is developed and explained in verses 10-13, the same happens between Dt 6:4b and verses 14-15 (BLOCK, 2004, p. 205-206). In fact, Braulik reminds us that verse 14 refers to other gods, and thus excludes the possibility of considering verse 4 as monotheistic (BRAULIK, 1986, p. 56). According to Bord-Hamović, the content of verse 14 obliges us to still refuse the hypothesis that the goal of Dt 6:4 is to oppose a poly-javism of the local sanctuaries, as discussed above. The concern is the relationship and opposition between the God of Israel and the foreign gods (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 20-21). Some authors attribute the verses mentioned, Dt 6:10-15, to a later redactional stratum than verses 4-5 (MACDONALD, 2017, p. 781), but this would simply mean that the existence of other gods is also admitted in texts later than the Shema.

Some authors have understood Dt 6:4-25 as a commentary on the Decalogue. According to Lohfink, the section of Dt 6:4-25 takes up and enlarges the Decalogue, thus constituting a commentary on its principal commandment (LOHFINK, 1968, p. 63). In this sense, as Miller explains, the Shema would be a

reaffirmation of the first commandment, the prohibition of worshiping other gods (MILLER, 2008, p. 111). These hypotheses depend, of course, on the dating of chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Deuteronomy. As Barbiero explains, if we consider Dt 6:4-25 as older than Dt 5-6:3, we should abandon the interpretation of Dt 6:4-25 as a commentary on the Decalogue or postulate, in this text, redactional rework that is subsequent to the insertion of Dt 5-6:3 (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 97-98).

After this consideration of chapter 6 of the Book of Deuteronomy, we may conclude with Gerstenberger that the formula of Dt 6:4 does not imply the objective unity of IHWH binding on all other groups, but Israel's belonging to that God and his separation of all other deities from the pluralistic religious environment (GERSTENBERGER, 2005, p. 25 and 265). As Brueggemann sums up, the Shema is a statement pro IHWH in the context of polytheism (BRUEGGEMANN, 2008, p. 123).

### **3 Dt 6:4 and the literature of the Ancient Near East**

A brief consideration of the relationship between the Book of Deuteronomy and the literature of the Ancient Near East will also be useful for understanding the formula of Dt 6:4.

The first aspect to be taken into account is that the use of the one/unique/only vocabulary is attested in texts that refer to pagan deities in the clearly polytheistic context. Bord-Hamović cite an Ugaritic text in which Baal declares himself the only one who will rule over men and gods (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 24). Willoughby recalls that in Egyptian literature we also find statements that Amon is one/only (WILLOUGHBY, 1977, p. 78). Weinfeld mentions a Sumerian text in which the god Enlil is acclaimed as lord of heaven and earth and in which it is declared that he alone is king. Weinfeld also cites examples of proclamations by the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus as "one" (WEINFELD, 1991, p. 338). We see, therefore, that the expressions "one" and "only" appear in the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greco-Roman religious environments, patently

polytheistic. The conclusion is that the expression one/unique/only does not belong exclusively to monotheistic language or vocabulary.

The second aspect we would like to emphasize is the relation of Deuteronomy to the diplomatic language of that time. As we have seen, Dt 6:4 forms a unit with verse 5 and these verses are to be understood together. The theme of the love of God, which appears in Dt 6:5, was studied by Moran. This author challenged the notion that the reciprocal love between Israel and IHWH in Deuteronomy is linked to the prophet Hosea because the prophet mentions only God's love for Israel (MORAN, 1963, p. 77). Love in Deuteronomy is love that can be ordered and associated with reverence and fear, loyalty and obedience (MORAN, 1963, p. 78). Moran explains that the language of love is found in international treaties of the Ancient Near East since the eighteenth century until the seventh century BCE and that the term "love" expresses the fidelity and friendship between the sovereign king and the vassal king, or the love between the subject and the king (MORAN, 1963, p. 78-80). If, on the one hand, Deuteronomy is the biblical document par excellence of love, on the other, it is the biblical document par excellence of the covenant, the covenant between Israel and IHWH, and the influence of the language of the Assyrian vassal treaties is found throughout the book (MORAN, 1963, p. 82-84).

The pact establishes an exclusive relationship that forbids the vassal to go to another sovereign. The dependence of the concept of love in the Deuteronomy on the ancient Eastern vassal treaties was widely recognized by the exegetes (LOHFINK, 1968, p. 67; 1976, p. 110; BRAULIK, 1986, p. 56; BARBIERO, 2002, p. 118 - 119)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, as stated by J. L. Ska, we find in the Shema the theme of the exclusive love for the sovereign himself; Israel has only one God because it cannot have more than one sovereign (SKA, 2008, p. 143).

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<sup>5</sup> Barbiero takes for granted the strong influence of the language of Eastern treaties on the notion of love in Deuteronomy, but he also accepts the contributions of McCarthy and McKay which will be presented below.

McCarthy, while accepting Moran's reflections, adds the consideration that the love of obedience and reverence of Deuteronomy constitutes the same posture required of Israel in the OT when it is referred to as the son of IHWH. It is possible that the idea of the father-son relationship also influenced the book of Deuteronomy (MCCARTHY, 1965, p. 145 and 147). The language of family conduct could reinforce the behavior that the covenant wanted to inculcate (MCCARTHY, 1978, p. 161).

Lapsley states that the parallels established between Deuteronomy and the political documents of the Ancient Near East are convincing, and that the people's love for God implies obedience to the law. However, this consideration does not rule out the emotional connotation of the love for God (LAPSLEY, 2003, p. 352). This author criticizes the consensus obtained by Moran. The first criticism is that, while on the one hand form criticism finds common elements between the biblical texts and the literature of the Ancient Near East, on the other hand it obscures the elements particular to the Bible. The second problem, according to Lapsley, is that Moran starts from a modern notion of emotional life, in which emotions are part of a category distinct from action, that of feelings. However, it is possible that obedience to law and affectivity were both signified by the term love. Lapsley rejects the reduction of the love of God to the concept of obedience with the usual justification that obedience can be ordered. This idea would depend on a modern conception according to which emotions exist in the private world of the individual and are uncontrollable. Moran made no mistake in explaining love in Deuteronomy as obedience, but the explanation is incomplete (LAPSLEY, 2003, p. 353-354, 365). According to Lapsley, the term love in the treaties of vassalage was imported from the family background and thus it cannot be assumed that the expression in Deuteronomy was deprived of affective connotations (LAPSLEY, 2003, p. 355). Following the same reasoning, Carasik admits the connection between love in Deuteronomy and the language of international relations but rejects the reduction of it to legal language. The term love retains the emotional and psychological sense and is the result of Deuteronomy's view of the functioning of the human mind (CARASIK, 2006, p. 200; 206-207).

McKay, in turn, highlights the bond between Deuteronomy and wisdom literature. The initial expression of Dt 6:4, "listen, Israel" parallels the introductory phrase of the teacher/father's teaching to the disciple/son, "listen, my son", and there are several parallels between Dt 6:6-8 and the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East and the Bible, even if the treatises of vassalage predict also the duty to teach the stipulations of the covenant to children and grandchildren (MCKAY, 1972, p. 427-432). Although love in Deuteronomy is an old notion of pact and covenant, the deuteronomist gave the expression another nuance in considering Israel son/disciple of IHWH, father/master; love is filial obedience, *pietas* (MCKAY, 1972, p. 435).

According to Barbiero, Dt 6:4-25 does not allow itself to be classified in a single literary genre, as Treaty of Vassalage, Etiological Catechesis or Frame of the Law, but in the text several traditions converge (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 104). However, even though ancient Eastern diplomatic language does not explain the richness of the Deuteronomy text alone, since other traditions converge in it, its influence is undeniable and left many traces in chapter 6. What matters for the purpose of this article is precisely this fact, that is, the influence of the language of international treatises on the text of Deuteronomy, an influence that is not denied even by authors who do not consider it enough explanation for our passage.

According to McCarthy (1978, p. 160-161), the section of Dt 6:4-19 presents a structure typical of diplomatic language in the treatises: 1) presentation of a duty (Dt 6:4-9: to love IHWH, to remember his commandments and pass them on to successive generations); 2) Exhortation to fidelity (Dt 6:10-13: monition not to forget God in the promised land); 3) Threat and promise conditioned to faithfulness (Dt 6:14-19: threat of jealous God's wrath and promise of happiness on earth in case of fidelity). Willoughby, quoting Mendenhall, speaks of the elements of the Hittite treatises present in Deuteronomy: Preamble; Historical Foreword; Stipulations; Provisions for the Temple deposit and public reading; list of witnessing gods; curses and blessings (WILLOUGHBY, 1977, p. 75).



As often happens in the treatises of vassalage, Dt 6:16 forbids the vassal Israel to test the sovereign IHWH, as Block (2004, p. 207) reminds us. According to Lohfink, the prohibition of "following" foreign gods in Dt 6:14 is typical of political-military language and corresponds to the choice and obedience of a chief (LOHFINK, 1968, p. 70). According to McCarthy, the idea of "serving" God in Dt 6:13 is derived from the tradition of the treatises (MCCARTHY, 1978, p. 161n). For Kalluveetil, the promise of the land in Dt 6:3.10.18.23 belongs to the category of royal concessions, common in the ancient Eastern decrees which were intended to stimulate the loyalty of subjects to the sovereign (KALLUVEETIL, 1982, p. 180-181). The conclusion is that it is impossible to properly understand Dt 6 without reference to the context of international relations and the treaties of vassalage of the Ancient Near East. The notion of exclusivity of devotion to IHWH that we find in the Shema depends on this connection. Again, it seems unlikely that the Shema formula should be understood, in its original intent, as an assertion of theoretical monotheism.

#### **4 History of the religion of Israel and the dating of Dt 6:4-5**

Another objection to the interpretation of Dt 6:4 as a monotheistic confession was underlined by historians, who consider a monotheistic statement in the pre-exilic period unlikely. The first aspect of the problem, therefore, is the dating of Dt 6:4, a problem to which we briefly waved up.

For Barbiero, the historical-critical study established the fact that the book of the law in 2 Kings 22-23 was a primitive form of Deuteronomy (Urdeuteronomium) and that, as sustained by M. Noth and A. Alt, it began with Dt 6:4 (BARBIERO, 2002, p. 93-94). Thus, the Shema would be a text of the late monarchic period, although, as Bord-Hamović asserts, the synthetic formula of Dt 6:4 would not be the result of a pure literary invention, but would have known a long oral history before (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 27-28), an opinion supported by McBride (1973, p. 297). The Shema is linked to the theme of the centralization of worship: worship of one God, in one sanctuary, in one city.

For Bord-Hamović, the formula of Dt 6:4 belongs to the literary genre of the preaching of the Covenant, a genre influenced by cultic sources. The concern of the editors of Dt 6:4 was to summarize, in short, the whole of Israel's theology (BORD; HAMOVIĆ, 2002, p. 21; 27-28). Following this line of reasoning, Braulik asserts that it is likely that Dt 6:4 would form the initial proposition of a previous edition of the law, that used by King Josiah in 621 BC at the covenant renewal ceremony (BRAULIK, 1987, p. 50). What is requested in this context is the practice of monolatry, not the negation of the existence of other gods (BRAULIK, 1994, p. 100). According to von Rad, Deuteronomy would be marked by cultic forms and would be connected to the liturgical celebrations of renewal of the covenant (RAD, 1956, p. 14-15). In turn, the formula "listen, Israel" would be the opening of the assembly for worship (RAD, 1966, p. 63). According to Weinfeld, Dt 6:4, it sounds as a solemn enunciation of a declaration of faith while the introduction "listen, Israel" would show the rhetoric-didactic and parenetic character of the text (WEINFELD, 1972, p. 40, 176 and 355). The bond with the liturgical context is found in chapter 6 of Deuteronomy, whose exhortative character was also admitted by Loftink (1968, p. 58). In fact, von Rad states that in Deuteronomy we find no divine law in codified form, but preachings about the commandments. It is a feature of the book, the long homiletic passages (RAD, 1956, p. 15 and 22). It should be noted that the traditional consensus of the scholars of Deuteronomy supports both a pre-exilic dating for Dt 6:4-5 and its connection to the centralization of worship. This conception is also found in more recent authors such as T. Römer (2005, p. 59-60).

This consensus was challenged in a recent article by MacDonald. According to this author, Dt 6:4-5 is not the introduction of the Urdeuteronomium, which would have motivated the reform of Josiah, but a text later added to the book. His arguments are based on lexical differences between these verses and the other texts attributed to the pre-exilic form of Deuteronomy and on the fact that the Shema seems to have a real impact on biblical and extra biblical literature only in late texts (MACDONALD, 2017, p. 774-779). However, contrary to MacDonald's opinion, we should take into account that the greater influence of the Shema on late texts does

not necessarily indicate that the Shema itself is late. In our view, MacDonald has not put forward enough arguments to change the consensus regarding the dating of the Shema. We will see in the years to come how exegetical research will react to MacDonald's proposal, but even if the traditional hypothesis presented above can be problematized in several details - it is discussed, for example, how much of the material traditionally attributed to the Urdeuteronomium should be considered, on the contrary, as later - it is still probable that the text of Dt 6:4-5 is pre-exilic. In any case, although MacDonald defends a late date for the Shema, he maintains that Dt 6:4-5 is a monolatrous affirmation, thereby, not an expression of mono-Yahwism (MACDONALD, 2017, p. 779 and 782).

The dating of the text of the Shema prior to the exile is relevant to the comparison with historical data on the religion of the Ancient Near East and Israel. Smith states that it is difficult to speak of monotheism in biblical texts before the seventh century BCE and that most references to monotheism are from the exilic or post-exilic period. The Shema is not clearly monotheistic because it does not exclude the reality of other gods and it would be difficult to say how much the monotheistic interpretation of the Shema is due to later re-readings (SMITH, 2001, p. 150 and 153). According to Merlo, there was no true monotheistic conception in the monarchical period of Israel and Judah, but a territorial henotheism, with a patron deity of the king and the people that did not exclude the existence of the other deities, as occurred among the neighboring peoples of Amon, Moab and Edom. In addition, there are documents that speak of Asherah, Baal and other deities besides IHWH in Israel during the pre-exilic period. This author affirms the absence of monotheism throughout the monarchical period and that it developed much later, only in the Persian period (MERLO, 2009, p. 43, 46 and 177). For Albertz, Dt 6:4 was a slogan of Josiah's reform and meant either monolatry or mono-Yahwism in the context of the centralization of worship. It was only in the post-exilic period, when the battle for the exclusive worship of IHWH had already been decided, that the other gods passed from effective powers to impotent idols (ALBERTZ, 1994, p. 206 and 216). The same opinion is expressed by Lemaire, who

defines the religion of the monarchical epoch as monolatric, not monotheistic, a characteristic shared by the neighboring peoples (LEMAIRE, 2003, p. 63-66).

The conclusion is that the history of the religion of Israel does not endorse the notion of a monotheistic faith in the period in which the text of the Shema was probably written. In this perspective, it can be said that it is very unlikely that this formula was initially a proclamation of a monotheistic faith.

## Conclusion

In light of what has been discussed in this article, we conclude that the formula of Dt 6:4 is not an affirmation of monotheism. Even if a monotheistic reading of the verse should not be completely excluded through linguistic analysis, it appears to us as unlikely at this level of investigation.

Moreover, the reading of chapter 6 of Deuteronomy as a whole indicates the polytheistic context of the formula whereas the reading of parallels in the literature of the Ancient Near East shows that the language of exclusivity is compatible with polytheistic religious conceptions and that this exclusiveness is found in the relation with the God of Israel, not in denying the existence of other gods and sovereigns. Finally, if the pre-exilic dating of the Shema is admitted, one should consider that historians point out as unlikely a defense of theoretical monotheism in the pre-exilic period.

The Shema is in fact a call to exclusive, monolatric devotion to IHWH. Thus, as Janzen asserts, long before Israel became monotheistic in the ontological sense, the invitation to love IHWH with all one's heart was a step forward in that direction (JANZEN, 1998, p. 248).

The investigation presented in this article is not intended to be exhaustive. Because of the limits set forth for this work, the history of the reception of the Shema, its Wirkungsgeschichte, was not discussed. The history of its re-reading as a proclamation of faith in the one God, its use in the liturgy and in private prayer,

and all the literature that has commented it for so many centuries, constitutes a wealth not reducible to the points discussed in this article. In any case, in our view, remembering the original meaning of the Shema can also illuminate our contemporary spirituality: there can be no authentic faith in the one God unless there is first a choice to serve Him alone; and there is no true monotheism where there is no exclusive devotion to the Lord.

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