

## What does the Hebrew word “echad” mean?

### **Introduction**

One of the most frequently **recited** verses in Scripture is Deuteronomy 6:4. In other words, that verse is spoken – out loud from memory – on an *extremely* frequent basis. For example, observant Orthodox Jews will recite that verse at least *twice a day* – once in the morning, and once in the evening.

The Hebrew in that verse is pronounced as follows:

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Here is the translation of that verse, from the ESV:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

All of the other common English translations of the Bible have extremely similar renderings of that verse.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is sometimes referred to as “the sh'ma” (or “the shema”) – since it is referenced so frequently.

Interestingly, Jesus *himself* also recited the sh'ma. Note the following passage:

#### **Mark 12:28-30 (ESV):**

<sup>28</sup> And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.**’ <sup>30</sup> And 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.’

At this point, the obvious question is: **why** is that verse recited so frequently? The general answer to that question is that the sh'ma very succinctly summarizes the *difference* between the God of the Bible – Yahweh – and the pagan gods of other religions. Basically, that verse explicitly states that there is only **ONE** Almighty God. This is in stark contrast to the *multiple*, competing gods, in the pantheons of most other religions.

As a result, reciting the sh'ma is a very simple, convenient way for a person to re-confirm that he believes in the God of the Bible – rather than believing in multiple, pagan gods.

### **The Hebrew word “echad”**

The very last word in the sh'ma is the Hebrew word **echad**. That word is rendered as “one” in most English translations of the Bible; some translations use “alone” instead. In either case, the straightforward, common-sense understanding of echad in the sh'ma tells us that only one person is Almighty God – and that one person is our **Heavenly Father** – Yahweh.

Some groups have an *alternate* belief about echad, though. In essence, those groups assert that echad refers to a “compound unity”. In other words, they believe that echad refers to one group, which contains

multiple members. For example, they state that echad means “one” as in “one baseball team”; as opposed to “one” as in “one chair”.

So, according to **that** understanding of echad, the sh’ma could be translated this way:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is a **compound unity**.”

Of course, the reason why this alternate understanding of echad is important is because it allows some groups to “spin” the sh’ma – into an endorsement for the Trinity! In other words, some groups state the following: “The sh’ma tells us that God is one. That is true – but that “one” refers to a *compound unity*. So, the sh’ma is telling us that there is only **one** God – but He is comprised of **multiple** persons.”

### **How is echad actually used in Scripture?**

The crux of the above argument is that “echad” refers to a “compound unity”. Of course, in order to determine if that argument has any merit, it is necessary to examine how that word is actually used in Scripture.

The word echad (and its feminine version achat) appears 970 times in Scripture. In the vast majority of cases – over 600 times – the word echad explicitly refers to a simple, **unitary** one. In other words, in almost every case, echad refers to one single item – rather than to one *group* of items.

This concept is usually expressed in English translations with the word “one”; but the words “single”, “unique” and “first” are used as well, depending on the context. Here are some examples of echad meaning a simple, **unitary** one:

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into **one** (echad) place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. (Genesis 1:9, ESV)

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took **one** (achat) of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (Genesis 2:21, ESV)

We are all sons of **one** (echad) man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.” (Genesis 42:11, ESV)

“My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have **one** (echad) shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. (Ezekiel 37:24, ESV)

It [the Passover meal] is to be eaten in a **single** (echad) house (Exodus 12:46, NASB)

I will remove the iniquity of this land in a **single** (echad) day (Zechariah 3:9, ESV)

For it will be a **unique** (echad) day which is known to the Lord (Zechariah 14:7, ESV)

*But* my dove, my perfect one, is **unique** (achat) (Song of Solomon 6:9, NASB)

The name of the **first** (echad) [river] is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. (Genesis 2:11, ESV)

And the waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the **first** (echad) day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen. (Genesis 8:5, ESV)

Clearly, all of the above examples refer to one single person, place or thing – **not** to one *group* of items.

### What about these cases?

As mentioned, in the **vast majority** of cases, echad refers to one single item. However, in a small *minority* of cases, echad refers to one group of items. Here are three examples of this:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become **one** (echad) flesh. (Genesis 2:24, ESV)

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the **first** (echad) day. (Genesis 1:5, ESV)

And they came to the Valley of Eshcol and cut down from there a branch with a **single** (echad) cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:23, ESV)

Here is a “summary” of the above examples:

Example 1: Echad is used to describe a husband and a wife – together – as **one** flesh.

Example 2: Echad is used to describe an evening and a morning – together – as the **first** day.

Example 3: Echad is used to describe a **single cluster** of grapes.

Some groups point to those *specific* examples, to try to prove that echad – in the sh’ma – refers to the *Trinity*. In other words, they assert the following:

Echad, in the sh’ma, is used to describe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – together – as **one** God.

However, is the above assertion really true? Do the three examples listed above actually describe the doctrine of the Trinity?

Consider those three examples again. In example 1, Scripture states that a husband and wife – together – **become** “one flesh”. This means that the husband – by himself – does **not fully** comprise the one flesh; and that the wife – by herself – also does **not fully** comprise the one flesh. Instead, the husband and the wife, by themselves, are only parts – or “halves” – of the one flesh.

Similarly, in example 2, Scripture states that an evening and a morning – together – became the “first day”. This means that the evening – by itself – does **not fully** comprise the first day; and that the morning – by itself – also does **not fully** comprise the first day. Instead, the evening and the morning – by themselves – are only “subsets” of the first day.

The same principle applies to example 3. One single grape – by itself – does not fully comprise the entire cluster; one grape is just a single member – a **subset** – of a cluster of grapes.

The reason why the above items are important is because the doctrine of the Trinity asserts the following:

The Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, and the Holy Spirit is fully God. However, there are not three Gods, but one God.

Of course, that doctrine is **entirely different** than the examples provided above. Consider example 1 again – it states that the husband and the wife – by themselves – are **NOT** fully the “one flesh”. The Trinity doctrine, though, states that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – by themselves – **ARE** fully the “one God”.

To make the contrast even more clear, consider the following: In order to cause example 2 to *agree* with the Trinity doctrine, Scripture would have to say something like this:

The evening fully comprised one **entire** day, and the morning fully comprised one **entire** day. However, there were not two days, but one day.

Of course, the above assertion is pure nonsense. What Scripture *actually* states is that the evening was just part of the day, and the morning was just part of the day – and that the two of them, together, comprised one full day.

Now, consider this: In order to cause the Trinity concept to *agree* with the examples above, one would have to say something like this:

The Father is “one third” of God, the Son is “one third” of God, and the Holy Spirit is “one third” of God; and the three of them – together – comprise one God.

However, most Trinity proponents strongly **disagree** with the above statement. This is because they are *completely* focused on the idea that **each** “person” of the Trinity is fully God – and that there are not three Gods, but one God. That concept is **not expressed** by the word echad at all – not in *any* of the places where it appears in Scripture.

## Conclusion

Some mainstream expositors make the following type of blunt assertion, whenever they discuss the sh'ma: **Echad means a compound unity – period.**

The *implication* of that assertion, of course, is that echad only means a compound unity. In other words, that assertion implies that in every case where echad is used, it always refers to one **group** of items – rather than to one single item. However, as mentioned above, in the vast majority of cases, echad actually refers to just one **single item**.

So, the implication that echad always refers to a “compound unity” is *demonstrably false*.

Not only that, but even in the minority of cases where echad *does* refer to a compound unity, the meaning still does **not** conform to the doctrine of the Trinity. Basically, in the cases where echad refers to one group of items, it is clear that each **member** of the group is only a subset of the listed “compound unity”.

For example, Scripture states that a husband and a wife – together – **become** “one flesh”. This indicates that the husband and wife are each “subsets” of the one flesh – but that together they comprise a “complete” one flesh. This is the opposite of the Trinity doctrine – which states that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are **each** fully God – but there is *still* just one God.

The final item to note is that many other passages in Scripture state that **only** our Heavenly Father is Almighty God. That, in turn, tells us that echad – in the sh'ma – refers to just one person: our **Heavenly Father**.

First of all, note that the phrase “God the Father” does appear in Scripture – in *many* places – but the phrases “God the Son” and “God the Holy Spirit” do NOT appear *anywhere* in Scripture. (The terms that are actually used in Scripture are the Son **of** God and the Spirit **of** God.)

Next, consider the two passages below. In the first, Jesus himself states that our Heavenly Father is the only true God, while Jesus is the one who was **sent** by God. Similarly, Paul tells us that the Father is our **God** – while Jesus is our **Lord** – i.e., our “master”, or “boss”:

**John 17:1-3 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

**1 Corinthians 8:5-6 (ESV):**

<sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—<sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Finally, Jesus explicitly **denied** that he was Almighty God; and he even stated that our Heavenly Father was his God – just like He is our God. Consider the following passages:

**Mark 10:17-18 (ESV):**

<sup>17</sup> And as he [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

**John 20:17 (ESV):**

<sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

The information in this article will hopefully prove useful, if one encounters the argument of “Echad in the sh'ma proves the Trinity”.