

**ONE GOD IN NICAEA, 1 CORINTHIANS,  
AND DEUTERONOMY:  
THE HERMENEUTIC OF THE BIBLICAL WRITERS AND  
THE EARLY CHURCH**

*Ἐνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα,  
πάντων ὄρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητὴν...*

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of all things visible and invisible...*

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*On the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nicaea, there are some who celebrate this historic creed and others who critique it, claiming that this was a product of an ancient time and a new understanding of the data is warranted. The question of whether Nicaea is accurate is a hermeneutical one, an issue which, ironically, Nicaea itself was originally desiring to address. The strength of Nicaea, reflected by its inter-textuality, is its biblical and precise hermeneutic. This is evident in even the first phrase of the creed, which echoes 1 Corinthians 8:6 which in turn is an exposition of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4. In tracing this line of texts, it becomes clear that the way Nicaea read Paul is the way Paul wrote, and the way he read the Shema is the way Moses wrote it. Exegetical analysis of this chain of passages demonstrates that the notions of essence, personhood, divine simplicity, and the distinction between Christ and the Father from creation are not later formulations based upon Greek philosophy and metaphysics. Though articulated in their own way, these concepts were present in the way Moses spoke of “one Yahweh” in the Shema and the way Paul spoke of “one God” and “one Lord” in contrast with the idols who are merely called gods and lords. Therefore, Christians confess Nicaea not because of the creed itself but for the very reasons that Nicaea did what it did: its careful exposition of Scripture. The hermeneutic of Moses is the hermeneutic of Paul which is the hermeneutic of Nicaea and the Christian.*

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## Introduction

On the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nicaea, we have much to commemorate. Believers everywhere can celebrate the diligent and unflinching defense of the nature and honor of Christ by those who have gone before us. We can value the careful articulation of biblical truth that has withstood the test of time, reflecting the rigorous and thoughtful work of those early on in church history. We can also appreciate that the Nicene Creed not only has endured but also been remarkably effective, shaping confessions and defining crucial lines of orthodoxy and heresy. Seventeen hundred years gives witness to the way the Lord has used the faithfulness of some of the earliest Christians.

While some celebrate this milestone of seventeen hundred years, others raise critique. Certain people allege that the doctrine of the deity of Christ did not arise until AD 325.<sup>1</sup> They argue that Nicaea was not a council that confirmed biblical teaching but one that coerced the notion of the Trinity upon the church.<sup>2</sup> From scholars to cults, people have been skeptical of Nicaea and all that it attests.

As the anniversary of Nicaea approaches, scholarly articles have raised the question whether the technical language used to describe the Trinity—essence, simplicity, persons—is truly biblical or is just in line with historic creeds and counsels.<sup>3</sup> Some contend that essence and persons are an artificial distinction. They note that Scripture uses the phrase “God and Father” (cf. Rom 15:6), seemingly equating the two as absolutely and exclusively identical.<sup>4</sup> Making these observations, skeptics often take a modalistic view, arguing that God revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are at best just anthropomorphic descriptions of God’s manifestations.<sup>5</sup> Such scholarship further claims that based upon New Testament data, “God” (Θεός) merely is a coordinator for His modes of revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Such critics of Nicaea appeal to their exegetical data and argue that their supposition is ultimately hermeneutically justified:

Just as it should not be our priority to try and understand the OT in light of the NT (instead of vice versa), so it should not be our focus to understand the NT (and for that matter the entire Bible) in light of the Creeds, Statements of Faith and Councils. The NT should rather be understood in light of the OT and in light of the NT itself, being self-revelatory. The question, however, could be posed: But what about the Councils then? The

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis A. Beard, *The Errors of the Trinity: The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Indianapolis: 1st Book Library, 2003), 28; Robert Spears, *The Unitarian Handbook of Scriptural Illustrations & Expositions* (London: British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 2012), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Spears, *Unitarian Handbook*, 96.

<sup>3</sup> Willem H. Oliver and Erna Oliver, “Θεός, Father and the ‘Holy Trinity’ in the New Testament,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (December 31, 2024): 3; Thomas Gaston and Andrew Perry, “Christological Monotheism: 1 Cor 8.6 and the Shema,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, no. 2 (December 31, 2017): 176–96; Willem H. Oliver and Erna Oliver, “God as One, with Reference to Barth and the Perichoresis Doctrine,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 1–9.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver and Oliver, “Θεός,” 5.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver and Oliver, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver and Oliver, 8.

Councils can be regarded as an interpretation of the Bible, especially the NT – for its time. However, that time has already passed long ago. Instead of looking at the Bible from an Early Church perspective, the time is ripe for the people of God to convene a new (world) Ecumenical Council and interpret the Bible anew from a 21st-century perspective, also with reference to the Holy Trinity.<sup>7</sup>

The argument proposed here is a mix of two major assertions. The authors of the quote assert hermeneutical consistency where the New Testament does not reinterpret the Old nor do the church councils reinterpret the Scripture. At the same time, the authors also advocate for interpretative relativism where any interpretation is just the product of its time such that the councils might be an ancient way to read the Bible but the modern day must have its own interpretation. The above quote is a combination of objectivity in method yet relativity in practice, and the combination is telling. On the one hand, the notion of hermeneutical consistency is arguably correct.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the above quote also illustrates that the notion of hermeneutical consistency can often be a cover for relativism and undermining theological truth. The quote also raises the consequence of being inconsistent with hermeneutical consistency: if later documents can reinterpret earlier ones (New Testament over Old Testament, creeds and councils overlay Scripture), then why should people not override councils, creeds, and Scripture with their own later interpretative traditions?

The way to combat the above suppositions is to demonstrate the true nature and ramifications of hermeneutical consistency. I have contended elsewhere that the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic.<sup>9</sup> The way the Old Testament prophets read and wrote the Bible with exegetical rigor and theological sophistication is the way the New Testament apostles read and wrote the Bible. Because of the biblical writers' exacting hermeneutical consistency under inspiration, the entire canon is filled with exegetical detail and theological depth. My contention in this article is to emphasize that the hermeneutic of the biblical writers is the hermeneutic of Nicaea. Just as the prophets and apostles upheld the meaning of earlier revelation even while they expounded its significance or inherent implications, so Nicaea upheld the meaning of revelation while expounding upon its inherent implications. While Nicaea of course is not revelatory, it follows the hermeneutical pattern of Scripture of how one reads what has been revealed. Thus, Nicaea is resiliently true because it is faithful to Scripture even to the most fundamental hermeneutical level.

This article will demonstrate such methodological fidelity by examining the opening phrase of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;” (Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἑνὸν Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὄρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων). A significant portion of the language is taken from 1 Corinthians 8:6 (“yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him,”

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver and Oliver, “Θεός,” 8.

<sup>8</sup> See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning Interpretation from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 22–23.

ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν εἰς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν), which itself is taken from the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one,” *דָּבָר יְהוָה אֶחָד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ עָלָיו*). Such inter-textuality gives the opportunity to prove that the way Nicaea used Scripture is the way that Paul used Deuteronomy and the way that Moses himself intended Deuteronomy. The prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea’s hermeneutic.

With that, contra the previous criticism of Nicaea, hermeneutical consistency does not lead to interpretative relativism. Instead, hermeneutical consistency leads to the reality that there is an objective interpretation found in the Old Testament and the New Testament, to even the early church and Nicaea. That is because what Moses meant is what Paul meant and what Nicaea meant. They all used the same hermeneutic, their reading is the same, their meaning is the same, and thus Nicaea matches the substance of Scripture. Thus, the time is *not* ripe “for the people of God to convene a new (world) Ecumenical Council and interpret the Bible anew from a 21st-century perspective.” The 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nicaea should not lead to criticism and revision but celebration and commemoration, because Nicaea is not a product of the issues of their time but a reproduction of what is in holy writ, not only in assertion but even in hermeneutic.

### Hermeneutics of Nicaea

To prove that Nicaea matched the biblical writers in message and even methodological mentality, one must first understand what Nicaea did. Blaising has some crucial insights into this issue.<sup>10</sup> Setting the scene historically, Blaising notes the testimony of Athanasius who recounted that the bishops at Nicaea desired to construct a creed “from the acknowledged words of Scripture.”<sup>11</sup> Such background indicates that any linguistic associations between Nicaea and Scripture were intentional. Moreover, Blaising notes:

The council deliberation recalled by Athanasius clearly reads as a hermeneutical discussion—that is, a discussion about the language of the biblical text—not as an analysis of philosophical ideas in and of themselves. The introduction of *ousia* language is presented in this very light—as summing up or expressing more or less adequately the sense perceived in a set of biblical texts rather than as language to be evaluated on the basis of its intrinsic rationality or its setting within one of the systems of ancient philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Kannengiesser further contends that the Nicene debate was an “Alexandrian crisis of biblical interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> These assertions have merit in the evidence. For example,

<sup>10</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Reexamination of Nicaea,” *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (December 31, 2010): 371–88.

<sup>11</sup> Blaising, “Creedal Formation,” 377.

<sup>12</sup> Blaising, 377.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, *Holy Scripture and Hellenistic Hermeneutics in Alexandrian Christology: The Arian Crisis* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1982), 1.

some of the debate revolved around the meaning of verbs describing lady wisdom in Proverbs 8:25.<sup>14</sup> The historical background of Nicaea anchors the creed as intentionally inter-textual and hermeneutical in nature.

In light of this, it is no surprise that Nicaea seems to reference 1 Corinthians 8:6. The opening words of Nicaea, “ἐνα Θεὸν Πατέρα,” are nearly verbatim of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians, “εἰς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ.” The only other times in the entire New Testament where “εἰς θεὸς” is used are in Ephesians 4:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5, and neither of those instances uses the exact language of “one God, the Father.”<sup>15</sup> This makes Nicaea’s words quite distinctive to a single passage in the New Testament. Furthermore, the next line in Nicaea (καὶ εἰς ἑνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν) also has the exact wording of the rest of 1 Corinthians 8:6 (καὶ εἰς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς). Later on in the creed, it also states “through Whom all things came to be” (δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο), which matches 1 Corinthians 8:6b (δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα). With such linguistically distinct verbiage, the connection between Nicaea and 1 Corinthians 8 is not in dispute.<sup>16</sup>

Historical correspondence helps to bring forth the precise way Nicaea used 1 Corinthians 8 in the creed. Eusebius of Nicomedia had brought forth a proposal which contended that the phrase “all these things are from God” (2 Cor 5:18) included both the work of Christ as well as Christ Himself.<sup>17</sup> Such language though was Arian, suggesting that Christ was part of the entire created order. First Corinthians 8 was incorporated into the creed to combat such false ideas. Based upon this, we can make the following observations about the use of the passage at Nicaea:

1. The creed incorporated the parallelism of “one God, the Father … one Lord Jesus Christ” from 1 Corinthians 8:6. In the structure of the Nicene Creed, the parallel lines, with their unique descriptions, show the distinction between the Father and Son. The conjunction καὶ separating the two lines demonstrates that they are true parallel lines as opposed to synonymity or apposition. Relative to personhood, the Father is not the Son.
2. The parallel lines also indicate that Nicaea did not subordinate the Son to the Father. One line is not nested within the other. Instead, the lines are truly co-equal, both even beginning with the same preposition (εἰς) showing two parallel objects of faith and thereby presenting two equal persons.
3. The parallel lines also show that while the Father and Son are distinct, something unifies them. There must be a reason that they can be held in parallel as the object of faith (Πιστεύομεν).
4. The repeated term “one,” also brought from 1 Corinthians 8:6 explains the nature of the unity. Though the Father and Son are different persons, that must be held in tension with the notion of their oneness. The

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<sup>14</sup> Blaising, “Creedal Formation,” 377.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 4:6 is close with its language of “one God and Father” (εἰς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ) but adds a conjunction and removes the article from “Father.”

<sup>16</sup> Blaising, “Creedal Formation,” 384.

<sup>17</sup> Blaising, 378.

cardinal number one, as opposed to notions of first, only, or unique, numbers God's essence. Part of the entire point of Nicaea was to prove that Jesus is not merely a person with a similar essence to God or even a person who is a parallel God but a person who is the very essence of the Father.<sup>18</sup> As the creed says, the light of Jesus is not a parallel, subservient, or even reflective light but "light of light" (Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός). Nicaea argued that the Father and Son are absolutely one, and the repetition and parallelism of the term "one" presented that the Father and Son were not merely unique in and of themselves but were completely united in the same absolute oneness of essence. What is called the doctrine of simplicity—that God is God, without parts and therefore does not give His glory to any other (Isa 42:8)—undergirds Nicene contention about the Trinity.<sup>19</sup> Jesus cannot be a parallel or derivative divine being as God's oneness precludes it. If Christ is one Lord, as Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 8:6, then He must be the very same God as the Father.

5. This oneness in essence is brought forth by how "all things" (τὰ πάντα) is used. To counter the notion that Christ was part of "all things," as was being suggested at the time of Nicaea, the creed quotes from 1 Corinthians 8 that "through Christ are all things." This makes Christ distinct from "all things" similar to what is seen in John 1:2 and Colossians 1:16.<sup>20</sup>

Nicaea used 1 Corinthians 8:6 to argue for unique persons, equality, oneness, uncreatedness, and simplicity of the godhead. Blaising notes how formative this Scripture was to Nicaea:

Kinzig and Vinzent have suggested that the Nicene Creed developed by means of a building-block model employing a principle of *antilogie* against Arian formulas and a principle of tradition in its positive statements. What I have attempted to show is that there was a blueprint for this building block model, the New Testament confession of 1 Cor 8:6. The choice of this blueprint for the first declaratory creed puts it in a direct line with the Shema as interpreted by the New Testament. Secondly, the "tradition blocks" used to build onto the framework consisted of biblical material and language chosen by means of a process of hermeneutical convergence within a thick collection of texts. This material added onto the 1 Cor 8:6 framework may also be shown to be a further interpretation and clarification (or exposition) of the framework, so that even the antilogic is hermeneutically driven (for example, the replacement of *ex hou ta panta* from 1 Cor 8:6a with *pantōn*

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<sup>18</sup> Nathan Busenitz, "Did Constantine Invent the Trinity?: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Writings of the Early Church Fathers," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 24, no. 2 (December 31, 2013): 225–27.

<sup>19</sup> Busenitz, "Did Constantine Invent the Trinity?," 223–24.

<sup>20</sup> Blaising, "Creedal Formation," 387.

... *poiēten* to eliminate the Eusebian ambiguity between the Son and everything else being “from God”).<sup>21</sup>

In so utilizing 1 Corinthians 8:6 (even as it incorporated so many other scriptural texts), Blaising rightly contends that Nicaea was more a hermeneutical and exegetical exercise than a philosophical one:

This use of 1 Cor 8:6 is obviously intentional, and it reveals to us the ultimate origin of the Nicene Creed. Its origins lie in the New Testament restatement/interpretation of the *Shema*.<sup>22</sup>

Relative to the formula of the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea's hermeneutic. Blaising's observations demonstrate Nicaea definitely had a hermeneutic. They believed that 1 Corinthians 8:6 was a rich statement of theological truth about Christ and that they were following what Paul said and how he interpreted the *Shema* so that this is the one true faith revealed by God about Himself from the beginning.

#### Hermeneutics of Paul

The question becomes whether what Nicaea believed comes even close to what Paul intended in 1 Corinthians 8. Certain scholars, including Bauckham, Hurtado, and Wright, would at least advocate that the passage asserts a high Christology as Paul reworked the *Shema* to show that Jesus is divine.<sup>23</sup> These scholars maintain that Paul (re)conceptualized Jewish monotheism to make clear that it included God the Son.<sup>24</sup> From a historical perspective, Hurtado observes that assigning worship to Christ and paralleling Him with God (as 1 Cor 8:6 does) makes Him out to be equal to God. Observant Jews (and Christians) would never have worshipped anyone other than God nor held anyone on par with God unless that One is God.<sup>25</sup> Consistently, Wright contends that given Jewish insistence on monotheism at the time, the original audience would be highly sensitive to the *Shema* and Paul's rephrasing of it. As a result,

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<sup>21</sup> Blaising, “Creedal Formation,” 388.

<sup>22</sup> Blaising, 384.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See Chris Tilling, “Paul, the Trinity, and Contemporary Trinitarian Debates,” *The Pacific Journal of Theological Research* 11, no. 1 (December 31, 2016): 20.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Turner, “Paul and the Old Testament: His Legacy and Ours,” *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1032 (December 31, 2010): 140. See also Larry W. Hurtado, “‘Ancient Jewish Monotheism’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4, no. 3 (December 31, 2013): 379–400; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no. 71 (December 31, 1999): 3–26.

There can be no mistake: Paul has placed Jesus within an explicit statement, drawn from the Old Testament's best known monotheistic text, of the doctrine that Israel's God is the one and only God, the creator of the world. The Shema was already, at this stage of Judaism, in widespread use as the Jewish daily prayer. Paul has redefined it Christologically, producing what we can only call a sort of Christological monotheism.<sup>26</sup>

Such a view (even with certain modifications) is widely accepted in evangelical scholarship.

However, other scholars have heavily contested such findings. Some outright reject that Paul alluded to the *Shema*.<sup>27</sup> Still others believe that while Paul did use the *Shema* and while his view may be one of the canon of Scripture, it is based upon suspect hermeneutical ground as Paul's reading stretches the limits of the nature of the *Shema*.<sup>28</sup> Yet others contend that 1 Corinthians 8 simply demonstrates that there is one God, the Father, and Jesus is a parallel lord or master to God Himself.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Paul's use of the *Shema* does not put Jesus within the "oneness" of God but alongside of it. This touches on the grander scholastic issue of whether the biblical writers had a high Christology. Concerning that issue, views range from that the biblical writers had a high Christology to that they did not have a high Christology but it evolved rapidly and early on in a Jewish context (in the days of Paul), to that it was a later development in a Jewish context, to that it came later in a Gentile context as the Jews would never be able to conceive of Jesus as God.<sup>30</sup> One's view of a high Christology in the New Testament determines the way one perceives what Paul asserted in 1 Corinthians 8. So, people have objected to the claim that Paul incorporated Christ into the *Shema* on a variety of grounds.

### Background of 1 Corinthians

Because the interpretation is far from assumed, it is necessary to trace a thorough exegetical case for the normative evangelical view. The epistle of 1 Corinthians itself was written in a grouping of Pauline epistles sometimes known

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<sup>26</sup> N. T. Wright, "One God, One Lord, One People: Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment," *Ex Auditu* 7 (December 31, 1991): 48. See also Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 121; Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 97–98; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 100–101; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 180; N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (December 31, 1998): 51; James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2006), 189.

<sup>27</sup> See discussion in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 374. A Hellenistic background may root this phrase in a different light. See also Thomas Gaston and Andrew Perry, "Christological Monotheism: 1 Cor 8.6 and the Shema," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 39, no. 2 (December 31, 2017): 178.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, "Paul and the Old Testament," 141.

<sup>29</sup> Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 177, 185–86.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Chester, "High Christology - Whence, When and Why?," *Early Christianity* 2, no. 1 (December 31, 2011): 31.

as the “doctrinal epistles.”<sup>31</sup> Situated around AD 55–56, epistles like Romans (and some would add Galatians) as well as 1 and 2 Corinthians, all revolve around theological matters which are at the heart of Paul’s work.<sup>32</sup> Romans regards the gospel in God’s plan whereas Galatians deals with the gospel in the life of believers in sanctification. The Corinthian epistles discuss a doctrine of Christian ethics (1 Corinthians) and the nature of ministry and leadership (2 Corinthians).<sup>33</sup> Because life and ministry are seen so much as practice, it may seem foreign to have a doctrine of Christian ethics and ministry. Nevertheless, this is absolutely necessary. Such doctrine establishes what is right and wrong in life and ministry, how they should be conducted, their purpose, and their mentality in decisions and discernment. The Corinthians particularly required this, as their pagan background left them decoupled from any biblical rationale of the ramifications of theological truths upon life.<sup>34</sup> They used spiritual gifts to show off (1 Cor 12:14–31), gathered knowledge to puff themselves up (1 Cor 8:1–3), and employed Christian liberty to offend their brothers (1 Cor 8:11–13). Such practices may seem laughably off the mark given the reality of the nature of true Christian love, humility, and service. However, that very framework is established from 1 Corinthians itself (cf. 1 Cor 13), illustrating why a doctrine of life and ministry is necessary. The church needed to know theologically the way God ordained His promises, gifts, and truth to be applied among His people, and 1 Corinthians establishes such a theology.

Within this, 1 Corinthians begins by tackling the immediate issue of factitiousness among the Corinthians, which exposes their lack of understanding of the true nature of the gospel. The gospel is not a message that produces pride but humility, as the gospel is foolishness before the world and yet the power of God (1 Cor 1:11–17). Having tackled this issue, which deals with the way one views the message (1 Cor 1:18–25), conversion (1:26–31), preaching (2:1–5), wisdom (2:6–16), ministry (3:1–23), one’s self (4:1–5), and others (4:6–21), Paul proceeded to address specific questions the Corinthians had raised. Using the phrase *περὶ δὲ*, Paul worked through topics including marriage (7:1), Christian liberty (8:1), and spiritual gifts (12:1). These issues of life in the church go back to a theological mindset revolving around the New Covenant, including living as one was called (1 Cor 7:17) and the nature of biblical love (1 Cor 13:1–7). Per the purpose of the book, Paul was inculcating into his readers how life in the church worked based upon the way the New Covenant is and operates.

A key part of Paul’s discussions in 1 Corinthians, which is pertinent to the discussion on 1 Corinthians 8:6, is Paul’s emphasis on trinitarian theology in the epistle. For example, the way Paul spoke of the church presumes trinitarian realities. He called the church, the “church/churches of God” (1 Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22) even while also labeling it the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16; 12:27) and the “temple of the Spirit” (3:16–17; 6:19). The church is put in direct relation with the three

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<sup>31</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, “Paul,” in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 197.

<sup>32</sup> Betz, “Paul,” 197.

<sup>33</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Fee, 2.

members of the Godhead showing their divinity and unity.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, in reminding the Corinthians of their status, Paul declared they were justified and sanctified (by God) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11).<sup>36</sup> In discussing spiritual gifts, Paul outlined that gifts come from the same Spirit, Lord, and God (1 Cor 12:4–6).<sup>37</sup> For Paul, understanding one’s relationship with the Triune God was crucial in understanding the way the Corinthians should deal with each other as the Triune God empowers, models, and grounds holiness, unity, and love.<sup>38</sup>

### Immediate Context of 1 Corinthians 8:6

The context of 1 Corinthians 8:6 should factor in Paul’s discussion of ethical doctrine and a latent trinitarian theology. The passage falls into the section dealing with Christian liberty (8:1) in the case study of meat sacrificed to idols. First Corinthians 8:6 itself is part of Paul setting a theological foundation about idolatry (8:4–6) before giving the doctrine of how those weak and strong in this truth should interact with each other (8:7–13).<sup>39</sup> So 1 Corinthians 8:6 is not merely just the position of the “strong” in the situation of Corinth but presented as accurate theological truth.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of meat sacrificed to idols, the theological claims about God in 1 Corinthians 8:6 are set in contrast with idolatry. Given that Paul consistently referred to the Trinity in this epistle, it should be no surprise that his discussion of idolatry versus the true God would involve such truth. Paul wrote in the verses leading up to verse 6, “We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4). The assertion that an idol is nothing (*οὐδὲν*) is not about its physicality as the Corinthians knew idols were physical objects. Paul also did not mean that an idol had no supernatural or spiritual association (cf. 1 Cor 10:10).<sup>41</sup> Rather, an idol (*εἰδωλον*) is nothing in that it is not what it claims to be: divine.<sup>42</sup> An idol may be made of impressive material or even represent a demon (cf. 1 Cor 10:20). But neither its own essence nor the being it represents is divine.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Michael J. Gorman, “Traces of the Trinity in 1 Corinthians,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 294.

<sup>36</sup> Gorman, “Traces of the Trinity in 1 Corinthians,” 299.

<sup>37</sup> Gorman, 302.

<sup>38</sup> Gorman, 292.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 631; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 368; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 379. See also, David G. Horrell, “Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20, no. 67 (December 31, 1998): 91; B Wynand De Wet, “Knowledge and Love in 1 Corinthians 8,” *Neotestamentica* 43, no. 2 (December 31, 2009): 317.

<sup>40</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 373; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375.

<sup>41</sup> Joel Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” *Interpretation* 60, no. 2 (December 31, 2006): 161.

<sup>42</sup> BDAG accurately defines idols as “cultic image/representation of an alleged transcendent being.” BDAG, 280. By saying that an idol is nothing, Paul asserted that such a definition of an idol is empty.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Homer Giblin, “Three Monotheistic Texts in Paul,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 31, 1975): 531. As Giblin states, “Another admissible translation would be: ‘An idol is a non-entity (meaningless thing) in the world.’”

Relative to its claim of exuding divine presence, it is nothing “in the world” (ἐν κόσμῳ). In the real world (as opposed to the world of fantasy or myths), an idol does not exert divine power or bearing.<sup>44</sup> Any impression to the contrary is simply one’s imagination.

Paul supplied a complementary truth to show why an idol has no divine essence in any fashion: “there is no God but one” (οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἰς). The reason that idols and that which they represent are not divine is because none of them are God (οὐδεὶς θεὸς). In the next verse, the apostle will acknowledge that many are called gods and that many entities have a sort of power and authority as gods and lords (1 Cor 8:5). Nevertheless, 1 Corinthians 8:4 makes it clear that none of them are actually God. Based upon Paul’s argument, the term θεὸς is not merely a title, because as verse 5 makes clear, many may be called “gods” (λεγόμενοι θεοὶ). Rather, the anarthrous term θεὸς focuses upon His essence, the quality of what it means to be divine.<sup>45</sup> That complements the grammar of the phrases which are all predicative. In other words, Paul was not speaking about what idols or gods *do* (ποιέω) but what they *are* or *are not*. That is the language of being as opposed to praxis. In saying, that “no one is God except One,” Paul declared that even if something might be called a “god,” it *is* not the one true God because an idol or that which it represents is not what God *is*.

That the anarthrous θεὸς emphasizes divine essence helps to define the term “one” (εἷς) in verse 4. Paul was not saying that there is only One who possesses the title “God” because he acknowledged many are called gods. The apostle was also not merely saying that only One occupies the position of God (i.e., “no one is God except Him alone”). That is true, but there is an underlying reason why that is the case. The reason why God is God is the same reason why Paul earlier said that idols are nothing. God has divine essence whereas idols do not.<sup>46</sup> While the number “one” in context establishes God’s exclusivity, it does so with a view to His singularity and indivisibility of His essence. With the number “one,” Paul asserted that one being has the essence of God (θεὸς) and no one else does because such divine essence is wholly His and thereby cannot be not shared with any other. The divine essence itself then is a singular, integral, and indivisible whole. That truth drives an emphatic and categorical monotheism.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, while the pagans might identify many gods, and the title of “gods” and “lords” is even applied to human beings (Exod 22:8–9; Ps 82:6), Paul states what true Christians believe: “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist*

<sup>44</sup> The anarthrous construction (ἐν κόσμῳ) in Pauline literature may have the emphasis of the entire created order as opposed to just the physical world (cf. Rom 5:13; 1 Cor 14:10; 1 Tim 3:16). See the arthrous constructions that are definitely speaking of the physical environment (ἀνεστράφημεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, 2 Cor 1:12 and ἀθεοὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, Eph 2:12).

<sup>45</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 244 (sec. 9.e.2.a).

<sup>46</sup> See Giblin, “Three Monotheistic Texts in Paul,” 530. Giblin’s analysis is helpful: “The second of the paired assertions in vs. 4bc, ‘No one is God but One,’ or ‘No God exists but One,’ is unambiguously monotheistic. But it admits nuanced emphases: either ‘no one deserves the appellation “God” but One’ — which would stress God’s uniqueness in a qualitative sense by insisting that there is no one like him; or ‘no god (divine being) exists except One’ — which would underscore the point that other gods simply do not exist, and that only one God enjoys the prerogative of existence.”

<sup>47</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 360.

through Him" (1 Cor 8:6). In contrast to the ideology of the pagans, Paul affirmed the *Shema*. Though some are skeptical of this allusion, most scholars accept it for good reason.<sup>48</sup> The language of "one God" or "one Lord" linguistically goes back to Deuteronomy 6:4, not only in the New Testament (Mark 12:29) but even in the Old (cf. Eccl 12:11; Ezek 34:23; Mal 2:10).<sup>49</sup> It is linguistically distinct. From a historical perspective, Jewish insistence on monotheism amplified sensitivities of this phrasing.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Jesus explicitly quoted the *Shema* in Mark 12:29 as well as other verses in its context (cf. Mark 12:32).<sup>51</sup> From a historical, linguistic, and even ecclesiastical perspective, the church was familiar with Deuteronomy 6 and a statement of "one God" would only go to the text of the *Shema*.<sup>52</sup>

Though most acknowledge the allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4, some contend that the apostle merely made the first part (One God, the Father...) an adaptation of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the rest (One Lord, Jesus Christ...) is just a parallel addition.<sup>53</sup> However, that is unlikely. The *Shema* in Greek reads, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἰς ἐστιν, involving both θεὸς and κύριος. So technically, the phrase "one Lord" is part of the actual quote from the *Shema*. To view "one Lord" as an interpolation would be the opposite of what is linguistically taking place. So, both lines of "One God, the Father" and "One Lord, Jesus Christ" are interconnected with Deuteronomy 6:4.

### Paul's Use of the *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6

Initially, Paul used the *Shema* as a framework to elaborate on monotheism. In contrast to unbelievers who had many gods and even lords, Paul declared that there was "one God" (εἰς θεὸς). He further specified that this singular divine being and essence is the Father (ὁ πατὴρ), a title for God found throughout Scripture (Isa 63:16; 64:8; Matt 6:9). The title emphasizes headship, possession, generation, and care of His people.<sup>54</sup> That is Paul's very focus as he wrote about the Father, "from whom are all things" (ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα). The ἐκ preposition presents the Father as the source of everything, which implies His responsibility for them.<sup>55</sup> All things (τὰ πάντα) shows that the Father is the source of creation exhaustively; there is nothing that can claim any other ultimate origin. The phrase "all things" also reinforces that the Father is distinguished from His creation. There is the Father, and then there is everything else.

<sup>48</sup> Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter with Deuteronomy," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21, no. 4 (December 31, 2011): 567–68; Kim Huat Tan, "The Shema and Early Christianity," *Tyndale Bulletin* 59, no. 2 (December 31, 2008): 188; Jon Laansma, "'Some Have No Knowledge of God': The Resurrection and the Knowledge of God in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (December 31, 2024): 100–108.

<sup>49</sup> Kyle C. Dunham, "Intertextual Links between Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes as a Pointer to Qohelet's Positive Message," *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament* 6, no. 1 (December 31, 2020): 55.

<sup>50</sup> Hurtado, "First-Century Jewish Monotheism," 3–10.

<sup>51</sup> Tan, "The Shema and Early Christianity," 188.

<sup>52</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375.

<sup>53</sup> Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 177.

<sup>54</sup> Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 692; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 612. Paul at times has this same focus in using the title for God (Eph 3:14–15). See David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 186.

<sup>55</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 375; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 383.

God is truly one because there is no one else like Him. Paul also stated that “we exist for Him” (ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν), demonstrating that the Father is not merely the source of creation but its purpose, the beginning and the end of all things. In specifying that “we” (ἡμεῖς) are for Him, Paul stressed God’s particular purpose of redemption and that all true Christians confess one God, the Father, a fitting assertion given that this is an expansion of the confession of the *Shema*.<sup>56</sup> The pronoun “we” also reminds believers that God defines their existence, which is crucial as Paul was about to exhort them to unity in using their Christian liberty.<sup>57</sup> Overall, in affirming the confession of the *Shema* of “one God,” Paul reinforced God’s exclusivity and singularity in position (“Father”) from beginning (“from whom”) to end (“unto whom”).

While any Jewish contemporary of Paul might have been comfortable with the first part of 1 Corinthians 8:6, the second half of the statement would have surprised them. The apostle completed the formula of the *Shema* by incorporating Jesus Christ into its framework. Against any of those who oppose such an assertion,<sup>58</sup> the grammar in 1 Corinthians 8:6 yields at least four counters to any who argue against Christ’s incorporation into the *Shema*:

1. Fundamentally, the lines are aligned as synonymous parallelism. Each begin with the cardinal number “one,” followed by a title of deity, a title of a person, and then two prepositional phrases, each having “all things” and “we” (τὰ πάντα … ἡμεῖς). As synonymous parallelism, the lines are not to be read as separate or subordinate but two parallel expressions of the same reality. God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are one.
2. As noted above, the use of Lord (κύριος) completes the formula of the *Shema*. The Greek of the *Shema* reads Ἀκούε, Ἰσραὴλ, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἰς ἐστιν, which was even used by Christ as such (Mark 12:29). The first part of the *Shema* includes ὁ θεὸς and the latter half includes κύριος. Paul has the same structure in 1 Corinthians 8:6 discussing the Father with “God” and Jesus with “Lord.” Given this framework of the *Shema*, it would be odd for Paul to use the same language that parallels the *Shema* but not intend the inter-textuality. If that was what he desired, he would have used language that would preclude the allusion. Furthermore, in the verse before, Paul went out of his way to broaden the discussion from “gods” (λεγόμενοι θεοὶ) to “gods and lords” (θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί). Paul intentionally expanded the discussion in verse 5 to set up viewing verse 6 as a single unit and not as one part belonging to the *Shema* and the next part separate.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Andrey Romanov, “Εἰς Κύριος and Ήμεῖς in 1 Corinthians 8:6: An Investigation of the First Person Plural in Light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ,” *Neotestamentica* 49, no. 1 (December 31, 2015): 47–74.

<sup>57</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 374.

<sup>58</sup> Gaston and Perry, “Christological Monotheism,” 177.

<sup>59</sup> Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382. “While some have suggested that Paul has a distinction in mind between *gods* and *lords*, it seems more likely that Paul is simply setting up the interpretation he wants to provide of Deuteronomy 6:4, so that the *one Lord* and *one God* are contrasted with the *many gods and many lords* of the pagan world.”

3. In speaking of “gods and lords” in verse 5, Paul used those titles to refer to the same class of individuals (Exod 22:8–9; Deut 10:17; Ps 82:5–8).<sup>60</sup> Just as the titles “gods and lords” are not two different categories but refer to the same group, so “one God … one Lord” do not have to refer to two different beings but the same entity. Paul intended to generate such union between “God and Lord” in verse 6 because he already established such synonymity in verse 5.
4. That Jesus is incorporated into the *Shema* and is seen as the single essence of the one God is further supported by the fact that “God” and “Lord” in verse 5 are not purely titles but descriptions of God’s essence. Several reasons support this assertion. First, as noted, verse 4 already defined “God” (anarthrous θεὸς) and “one” (εἷς) in relation to God’s divine essence, an essence that is indivisible, that cannot be shared with another, and that thereby makes every idol “nothing.” Second, the emphasis of essence is consistent with the way the terms “gods” and “lords” are used in verse 5. Though the terms “gods” and “lords” in that verse are titles, the reason those titles are used is because those who hold those titles possess certain qualities. In contrasting the “one God … one Lord” with these many “gods … lords,” Paul makes the point that the Father and the Son stand out because they possess those qualities exceptionally and exclusively, a uniqueness that can only be justified by their divine essence.<sup>61</sup> Third, that the emphasis of “Lord” deals with divine essence and not just mere title or position accords with the very way the Lord Jesus used the Old Testament. The Greek of the *Shema* in Mark 12:29 translates “Hear O Israel, the Lord God is one Lord.” The translation does not merely bring out monotheism (“there is one Lord” or “the Lord God is only one”). It also stresses that God is “one Lord,” emphasizing the oneness of God’s lordship or nature. That is a oneness of essence. Likewise, Christ quoted Psalm 110 saying, “The Lord said to my Lord” (Matt 22:44). In Greek, the Hebrew words יהָיָה and יְהָוָה are all translated as “Lord” (κύριος), equating the title “Lord” with the name and essence of Yahweh.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Christ defined the term “Lord” not merely as a title of authority but the very essence of Yahweh.<sup>63</sup> Fourth, Paul’s usage of κύριος outside of Corinthians also evidences that he maintained what the Lord Jesus established. The term κύριος in Pauline literature refers to God’s unique essence (cf. Rom 10:13; 11:34; Phil 2:11; 2 Tim 1:16). All these observations evidence that the terms “God” and “Lord” are not merely titles but refer to God’s essence or

<sup>60</sup> Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382.

<sup>61</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 374; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 372–73; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 382. Garland rightly observes that the distinction of possession is between ones who are *believed* to possess deity versus the One who actually does (Father and Son).

<sup>62</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 566.

<sup>63</sup> This further refutes any notion that Paul distinguished “god” and “lord” as two different essences or beings. Paul’s usage of “Lord” refers to Yahweh who is clearly God in both OT and NT. See point 3 above.

nature. In saying that Jesus is “one Lord,” it presents Him as having not just a title or authority but having the very essence of Yahweh, the same divine essence of the Father, who is “one God.”

5. That Paul viewed Jesus as part of the divine essence accords with the prepositional phrases used of the Father and the Son in 1 Corinthians 8:6. Paul spoke of the Father as the source (ἐξ) and purpose (εἰς) of all things and spoke of the Son as the instrument (δι'). In assigning these prepositions, there is a single act from the Father through the Son back to the Father. Christ is part of this single divine act, which makes Him one with God. This is also known as inseparable operations.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, in the same phrases, Paul distinguished both the Father and the Son from “all things” (τὰ πάντα) made from and through them. Neither the Father nor the Son is part of creation, but, being distinct from creation, is co-equal with the other as uncreated. The prepositional phrases that describe the Father and the Son further interlock them together, showing their inseparableness and consubstantiality.

Overall, grammar, inter-textuality, context, and lexicography argue that Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:6 incorporated the Lord Jesus into the *Shema* and into the singular essence of the one true God.

But the parallel of the Father and the Son raises a problem with the emphatic term “one.” Paul was insistent that there is only one God yet equally speaks about two: the Father and the Son. It appears that Paul has a numerical dilemma unless the number “one” refers to something different than the two persons he discussed. And that is exactly what is happening in 1 Corinthians 8:6. As discussed above, Paul used the terms “one,” “God,” and “Lord” to discuss divine essence. By contrast, as he did throughout his epistles, Paul used the language of “the Father” and “Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7; 15:6; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:3; 5:20; 1 Thess 1:3) to distinguish between two distinct yet simultaneously existing persons/relations (cf. Rom 1:7, 8; 3:22; 5:1; 7:25; 16:27; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:17; Phil 1:11). The apostle had no problem whatsoever with speaking of what may seem like an outright contradiction within the very same verse because he could make the distinction between essence and person.

Such distinctions are absolutely necessary for Paul’s argument in context. As Wright and Hurtado point out, the apostle established a clear line between an idol and the one true God. An idol is nothing because it does not have the divine essence. God alone possesses such essence because He is God. So in this discussion, Paul sets up two categories: the one true God and idols. If Paul was not thinking about divine essence in speaking of the oneness of the Father and Christ, then by the apostle’s own definition, Christ would be an idol. If Paul did not include Jesus into the *Shema*, he would be claiming that those who follow Christ would be going against a key tenet of God’s revealed truth. Such ideas are the very opposite of what Paul asserted

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew Barrett and Scott R. Swain, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 291; Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John (1–40)*, ed. Allan D Fitzgerald (New York: New City, 2009), 7:137; Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 895.

(cf. Acts 23:1; 1 Cor 12:2; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 1:9). By Paul's definition in context, the only way Jesus is not an idol is if He does not merely have a similar or even parallel nature to God but *is* the one essence of God. To put this in the terms of the *Shema*, Jesus must be the "one Lord" that the "Lord God is." And that is exactly what Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Returning to the discussion of Nicaea, the church fathers incorporated 1 Corinthians 8:6 claiming that the Father and Son are distinct yet co-equal persons absolutely unified in a singular essence and thereby distinct from creation. This is Paul's exact intention. The unique titles of "Father" and "Jesus Christ" distinguish the divine persons. The parallelism demonstrates they are co-equal. The incorporation of Jesus into the *Shema*, the terms "one," "Lord," and "God," and the complementary prepositional phrases anchor this equality in the singular divine essence. Paul's use of "all things" distinguishes the Father and Son from anything created. These observations are squarely part of Paul's intention as Paul, dealing with meat sacrificed to idols, sought to define the nature of idolatry and used the *Shema* to distinguish between pagan idolatry and the truth about the Father and the Son that all Christians believe.<sup>65</sup> In Nicaea's own battle against false theology, they used the same text to do the same. Their logic follows the exact logic and purpose of Paul.

### Hermeneutics of Moses

The early church read Corinthians the way Paul wrote Corinthians, and the early church understood the *Shema* the way Paul read the *Shema*. The final question is whether all of this is consistent with the way Moses wrote the *Shema* (and even whether the Old Testament read it that way). Such a question demands exegetical analysis of the text.

In thinking about the context of Deuteronomy as a whole, some contend that the book is a covenant renewal whereas others observe that it is a sermon.<sup>66</sup> Understanding Deuteronomy as an expositional sermon accounts for both sets of observations.<sup>67</sup> Moses gave a final exhortation to his people as he sequentially expounded upon each aspect of the covenant, elucidating the nature and ramifications of what God had revealed. Viewing Deuteronomy as an expositional sermon on the covenant provides the structure and nature of the book.

Moses began his sermon by explaining the first part of Israel's covenant: the nation's covenant history (Deut 1–4).<sup>68</sup> Having made observations on certain salient points of their past, Moses then proceeded to explain the general stipulations of the

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<sup>65</sup> See above discussion on the pronouns used in 1 Cor 8:6. Romanov, "Εἰς Κύριος and Ἡμεῖς in 1 Corinthians 8," 47–74.

<sup>66</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 30; S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner's, 1902), lxxxv; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 34–36.

<sup>67</sup> Ronald M. Hals, "Is There a Genre of Preached Law," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (January 1, 1973): 1–12.

<sup>68</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 57.

law, which revolve around the Ten Commandments.<sup>69</sup> In discussing these foundational principles, Moses explained the very heart of the law's theology and commands. In Deuteronomy 6:1, the very context of the *Shema*, Moses declared, "Now this is the commandment" (נָאָזֶן הַצְדָּקָה). As opposed to the many commands God gave Israel (cf. Deut 12:1), there is one command that drives them all. That singular command is the very center of the general precepts of the law and thereby the ruling reality of the entire law itself. There is a reason that the *Shema* has so much import from the prophets (Eccl 12:11; Zech 14:9), to the nation of Israel (John 10:30–31), and to Paul (1 Cor 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5). There is a reason that the Lord Jesus regarded it as part of the greatest commandment (cf. Mark 12:28–30). Moses, under inspiration, declared that the *Shema* is that seminal statement.

Two intertwined exegetical issues surround this foundational declaration. First, how should the phrase be translated? Second, what does the phrase exactly mean? Concerning the question of translation, Block and Fuhrmann provide a summary of options including:

1. Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one;
2. Yahweh our God is one Yahweh;
3. Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is one;
4. Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone;
5. Our God is one Yahweh;
6. Our one God is Yahweh, Yahweh;
7. Yahweh, Yahweh our God is unique.<sup>70</sup>

Fuhrman observes that the first four options are most legitimate.<sup>71</sup>

The various translations bring forth four major interpretative emphases of the text:

1. The *Shema* could stress the uniqueness of God. As opposed to the many deities of the ANE, He is "the one" in that He stands above the rest. In other passages, "one" often stands in contrast with "many." There are many shepherds but one good Shepherd (Zech 14:9), many lords but one Lord, many gods but one God (1 Cor 8:6).<sup>72</sup> With the distinctive term "one," all of these examples are actually echoes of the *Shema*. Based upon this, those who advocate the uniqueness view argue that the way Scripture views the oneness of God does not necessarily emphasize monotheism (though that can be true). Rather, they contend that Scripture views "one" as God's distinctiveness. In the same way that

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law* (Santa Monica, CA: Western Academic, 1979).

<sup>70</sup> Justin Fuhrmann, "Deuteronomy 6–8 and the History of Interpretation: An Exposition on the First Two Commandments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 51; Daniel I. Block, "How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 196.

<sup>71</sup> Fuhrmann, "Deuteronomy 6–8 and the History of Interpretation," 51.

<sup>72</sup> Dunham, "Intertextual Links between Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes as a Pointer to Qohelet's Positive Message," 53–55.

God is a unique shepherd, lord, and God, so He is “one” in the *Shema*.<sup>73</sup> This may allow henotheism but does not demand it. In this view, the notion of “one” simply emphasizes the exceptional character of God.

2. The *Shema* might stress the exclusivity of God relative to Israel's affection and worship. This view is also known as monolatry. This viewpoint states that the term "one" stresses that Yahweh alone is Israel's God. Given the context of Deuteronomy and the call for Israel's loyalty to Yahweh (see even Deut 6:5), Block contends that God must be the one in Israel's affections.<sup>74</sup> Janzen also notes that God's oneness might refer to His oneness of thought and action for Israel (cf. Job 23:13).<sup>75</sup> The idea would be that since God is so singularly for Israel, Israel should reciprocate that back to Him.<sup>76</sup> To further illustrate this point, Block cites Zechariah 14:9 which speaks of "On that day Yahweh will be one," an allusion back to the *Shema*. According to Block, the issue in Zechariah 14:9 is not God's essence (since He is always one) but rather "expanding the boundaries of those who claim only Yahweh as their God to the ends of the earth."<sup>77</sup> Thus, like the uniqueness view, this view of monolatry does not preclude monotheism but places emphasis not on His exclusive existence but His exclusive relationship.
3. The *Shema* could assert monotheism, that Yahweh is the one and only God that exists. In contrast with monolatry, the *Shema* asserts that God is not merely the only God for Israel but only One at all.<sup>78</sup> This view emphasizes God's oneness relative to that which is outside of Him. He is the only one because outside of Him there is no other. Already in context, Moses made emphatic statements that Yahweh is not merely a God but *the* God of heaven and earth and there is no other (יהָוָה הוּא אֶלָּוּ�ִים בְּשָׁמִים מֶלֶעַ וּלְאָרֶץ מֶתֶה אֵין שָׁוֹد; cf. Deut 4:39). In addition, the term אֶחָד can have the sense of "only" (cf. Josh 22:20).<sup>79</sup> Brichto also observed that a person is "one" whole (whether human or otherwise) is self-evident and so describing him as "one" is not really that controversial as much as if the emphasis is upon the exclusivity of existence.<sup>80</sup> The view accords with Ecclesiastes 4:8 which states, "there was one man and not a second" (וְאֵין שָׁנָء נִשְׁתָּחַד). The term "one" contrasts a "second" individual and thereby emphasizes exclusivity.

<sup>73</sup> Gaston and Perry, "Christological Monotheism," 187.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel I. Block, "How Many Is God?: An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (December 31, 2004): 193–212; Jeffrey. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 76.

<sup>75</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, "The Claim of the Shema," *Encounter* 59, no. 1-2 (December 31, 1998): 254.

<sup>76</sup> Janzen, "The Claim of the Shema," 254.

<sup>77</sup> Block, "How Many Is God?," 209.

<sup>78</sup> Gerhard Langer, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord Our God, the Lord is One” (Deut 6:4), *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1, no. 2 (December 31, 2010): 220–22.

<sup>79</sup> Block, "How Many Is God?" 199.

<sup>80</sup> Block, 200; Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 232–33.

The reading of monotheism has been a longstanding tradition within Jewish interpretation and even in the second temple period.<sup>81</sup>

4. The *Shema* could declare that God is one internal to Himself. While the third option uses “one” to define a “unit” (God is one single entity as opposed to any other), this option emphasizes the “unity” within God. His nature and essence are a unified and unique totality, singular and indivisible.

The key to resolving the question of emphasis is to first resolve the question of translation, and the first step in resolving this question concerns the phrase “Yahweh our God.” Throughout Deuteronomy the phrase has been a title for Israel’s God. It never is translated predicatively (“Yahweh is our God”). Thus, the first part of the *Shema* should be translated, “Yahweh our God,” the main covenant title for God and the subject of the entire phrase. As a title, “Yahweh our God” personally distinguishes the God of Israel (“Yahweh”) from anyone else, identifies Him as the One who has total supremacy (“God”), and establishes that Israel has an exclusive relationship with Him (“our”). With that, “Yahweh our God” as a title already subsumes a lot of the nuances mentioned above, including uniqueness and monolatry. Furthermore, in context, Moses already used the title to declare that “Yahweh our God is God in heaven above and on earth beneath and there is no other” (Deut 4:39). Thus, the emphasis of monotheism has already been associated with this title as well. Three of the four options are already expressed in the first half of the *Shema*. For the sake of argument, it would be tautological to have the latter half say the same idea as the first half. In that way, this observation already suggests that the latter half should be the fourth option concerning divine essence.

Nevertheless, such an argument must be proven. Accordingly, the next issue is to understand how the next phrase “Yahweh is one” should be translated and how that connects back with the title “Yahweh our God.” When examining the usage of the term “one” (אֶחָד) with other nouns in the Pentateuch, a pattern emerges. Fundamentally, אֶחָד is a cardinal or counting number. The number “one” with the article is usually used to count an entity in a series.<sup>82</sup> However, when the word is singular and anarthrous following a noun that is also in the singular (like it is here), the number “one” is essentially always attributive.<sup>83</sup> The translation of the latter phrase of the *Shema* should be “one Yahweh.” The anarthrous construction shows that Moses’ intent is not to count Yahweh as one of many (or the only one) but rather to speak of His unity or wholeness.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” 3–10; Wright, “One God, One Lord, One People,” 45–48.

<sup>82</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §15.2.1b, 274.

<sup>83</sup> Out of the approximate 180x this occurs in the Pentateuch, only Gen 41:25–26 and Exod 26:6; 36:13 are predicative. However, in those cases, other syntactical factors create the predicative situation. Gen 41:25–26 contains the pronoun אֲنֹה which often signals predicative constructions. See Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §16.3.3, 297–298. Cf. Exod 26:6; 36:13 as both contain the verb אָנֹה.

<sup>84</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §15.2.1c, 274. IBHS labels this as “integer” as in a “whole” number. YHWH’s oneness refers to such integrity or wholeness; indivisibility or unitedness.

Parallel constructions help to reinforce the consistency of this pattern and its nature. The Pentateuch speaks of one day (Gen 1:5), one place (Gen 1:9), one flesh (Gen 2:24), one people (Gen 11:6), one bull (Exod 29:1), one basket (Exod 29:3), one ram (Exod 29:15), one house (Exod 36:13), or one voice (Exod 24:3). The attributive construction is not rare or unfamiliar in the Pentateuch. The notion of “one” does not inherently demand exclusivity or even uniqueness. Saying “one ram” or “one bull” certainly does not mean they were the only ram or bull in Israel and equally does not mean that they were necessarily unique among all the animals in the nation. That said, the construction does not preclude the implications of exclusivity or uniqueness either. In Genesis 1:5, the waters are gathered to “one place” as opposed to another. The term “one” also does not preclude multiple entities becoming unified. Multiple components unite in one house in Exodus 36:13, multiple people join together with one voice in Exod 24:3, and two become one flesh in Genesis 2:24. Thus, the description of “one” neither deals fundamentally with exclusivity or uniqueness nor excludes the notion of a complex unity.

Instead, the term “one” simply identifies a singular whole and within that, can be used to emphasize the unity within that unit. That the people have “one voice” (Gen 24:3) was not merely commenting that they had a singular sound but expressing the unanimity of their confession and volition.<sup>85</sup> That those at the Tower of Babel were “one people” (Gen 11:6) does not merely express that they are a people group but also that they were absolutely united. This is why God declared in the same verse, “So now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.” That two become “one flesh” does not merely express that husband and wife are a married unit or even exclusive with each other, even though that is all true. “One flesh” in context (cf. Gen 2:23) speaks of the deepest kinship and merging together as if they were one new person.<sup>86</sup> Such a unique unity and inseparable bond are why husband and wife are a unit and exclusive.

These last few examples help to elucidate the nature of the *Shema*, especially since they are the closest grammatical parallels to the confession.<sup>87</sup> Just as the Hebrew phrases are translated “they shall become one flesh” (וְיַעֲשֶׂר אֶחָד; Gen 2:24) or “they are one people” (וְיִהְיֶה אֶחָד אֶתְנָהָר אֶחָד; Gen 11:6), so the best translation of the *Shema* is “Yahweh our God is one Yahweh” (יְהָוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהָוָה אֶחָד). It conveys that “Yahweh our God,” the distinctive God that Israel alone worships, is “one Yahweh,” unified and indivisible in His nature as Yahweh. Just as the two becoming one flesh in marriage points to the absolute, intimate unity in marriage, so Yahweh being one Yahweh declares the absolute united whole of His essence.

So God as “one Yahweh” is the very doctrine of divine simplicity. As “Yahweh,” God is “I am who I am” (cf. Exod 3:14), an essence that can only be ultimately defined by who He is. And as “one” Yahweh, God’s essence as Yahweh is a singular unified whole, without parts and undistributable. The *Shema* summons God’s people

<sup>85</sup> Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 423.

<sup>86</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 23. “‘One flesh’ echoes the language of v. 23, which speaks of the woman’s source in the man; here it depicts the consequence of their bonding, which results in one new person.”

<sup>87</sup> The examples of voice, people, and marriage all have the attributive use of “one” in the larger context of a predicative sentence.

to think on God in a certain way. Man is prone to view God as a creature which can be put together by using certain parts or to distribute who He is to other entities or parties (polytheism or pantheism). But that wickedly distorts and demotes God. One cannot derive God by putting together a list of characteristics or abilities. He is not the sum of powers or parts. Rather God is God, “I am who I am.” And His Godness is singular and whole, indivisible and inseparable, pristine and distinct, which means He and His essence cannot be split apart, divided up, spread out, or shared. God does not fit into human categories and classifications, and the call of the *Shema* is to view God as God on His terms and by His own self-definition. And by focusing upon God’s singularity, the *Shema* calls Israel to focus upon God alone for since He possesses this unique essence so wholly, no one else does.

All the interpretative options mentioned above about the *Shema* are legitimate implications. He is unique; He is the only true God; and He is the only God for Israel. But all of that is because of the very essence of who God is. He is one Yahweh, indivisible and whole, which means no one else has that nature, there are no other gods, and there is no other god for God’s people. Put simply, just as “two becoming one flesh” demands a unique, exclusive, and monogamous relationship, so Yahweh being one Yahweh dictates that He is unique, exclusive, and monotheistic. There can be no other god, and idols are nothing because the divine nature is indivisible and one, and Yahweh alone possesses it. All the implications mentioned above are driven by the most fundamental reality, the very nature of God Himself.

Such singular unity of divine essence does not preclude multiple persons or the notion of the Trinity. After all, in the other parallel constructions, “two become one flesh” (וְהַיְתָה לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד; Gen 2:24) and “they are one people” (וְהַיְתָה מִשְׁמָרָה אֶחָד; Gen 11:6), the number “one” does not rule out a complex unity but actually embraces it. Because the number “one” sets up for an absolute unity without precluding complexity, the *Shema* is the perfect base to discuss the tri-unity of God, which is a reality that Moses himself expressed throughout the Pentateuch (cf. Gen 1:26; 11:7; 19:24; Exod 13:19; 14:19, 24; Deut 4:35, 39).<sup>88</sup> Moses intended the *Shema* to describe the singular essence of the God that he himself recounted as multiple persons, which perfectly sets up for Paul’s discussion. Paul read Moses the way Moses intended; and in fact, the apostle depended upon Moses’ concept of divine simplicity in the *Shema* to make Paul’s point. Jesus cannot be truly all that God the Father is unless God’s essence is truly one and indivisible and the Son possesses that one essence just as the Father does. That is Paul’s point as he speaks of “one God” and “one Lord,” and that proves the way Nicaea read the *Shema* is the way Paul read the *Shema* which is the way Moses wrote the *Shema*.

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<sup>88</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*:26, 163; Paul Niskanen, “The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אָדָם in the Image of בָּנָה,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 417–36; T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 268; Bill T. Arnold, *The Book of Deuteronomy, Chapters 1–11*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2022), 281.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity was not due to Greek thought or a cultural metaphysic but rather because of what the biblical writers intended. Concepts, like simplicity, essence, or persons, were not just present in the unconscious logic of the prophets and apostles but in their very writing and wording. After all, in writing the *Shema*, Moses did not use the terminology for first (אָרֶךְ), only (כָּל), alone (מְלֹכָה), or unique (מְלֹאָה), but used the word “one” (אֶחָד) in reference to Yahweh. As opposed to any other possibility, this integer brings out the integrity of God’s essence, and parallel usages in Moses’ own style confirm that this was his emphasis. Thus, the notion of divine simplicity is present in Moses himself, established by a singular word choice. Later biblical writers paid attention to this detail, maintaining its theological ramifications (Eccl 12:11; Isa 42:8; 45:5; Zech 14:9; 1 Cor 8:6), and Nicaea in turn picked up on it as well. The same is true of inseparable operations (cf. that all things are from [ἐκ] God and through [διά] Christ) and the notion of consubstantiality (cf. that Christ and God are distinguished from all things [τὰ πάντα]). While there are different ways to express these notions, the concepts themselves were present in Scripture, and later discussions only more explicitly articulated all that was intentionally part of holy writ. Put simply, contrary to skeptics, ideas like the Trinity, simplicity, and essence were not inventions of Nicaea but the very intention of Scripture.

The hermeneutical precision of Nicaea provides insight into the modern-day question of how one is to use the historic creeds. At present, people wrestle with whether the creeds are the source of doctrine or should be read back into the meaning of Scripture.<sup>89</sup> Before coming to such methodological conclusions, one should know what Nicaea actually did. Nicaea did not believe that an external metaphysic or philosophy was required to understand the Bible or articulate its assertions. They did not believe that their creed was the source of doctrine. Instead, they believed that the biblical writers carefully articulated doctrine by the precise wording they chose under inspiration. Discerning the exact meaning of the prophets and apostles, they set forth the conclusions they read out from Scripture, incorporating and appealing to the very words of the oracles of God. Their method was opposite of what is being proposed. If one wants to support Nicaea, he should not only believe what they believed but do what they did. They did not go back to the creeds to base their theology but back to the text. That is what every believer should do, analyzing Scripture carefully and discerning all its theological ramifications with exegetical precision. That is why the saints align with Nicaea, because the prophetic hermeneutic is the apostolic hermeneutic, which is Nicaea’s hermeneutic and the Christian’s hermeneutic.

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<sup>89</sup> See discussion in D. A. Carson, “Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 1–62; D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 187–207; Bernard M. Levinson, “You Must Not Add Anything to What I Command You: Paradoxes of Canon and Authorship in Ancient Israel,” *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 1–51; Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 316; Daniel J. Treier, “What Is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 144–61; Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

Christians regard Nicaea as a historic norm not just because it is a creed but because it so aligned with Scripture, which is what Nicaea intended all along.

After all these years, why has Nicaea withstood the test of time? It is not merely because of its correct conclusions, precise wording, or philosophical nuance. Its strength lies fundamentally in its level of scripturality. Nicaea is not merely biblical in its assertions but even in its hermeneutical approach. Those at Nicaea did not merely agree with the ideas of Scripture or even use proof texts. Rather, they deployed carefully chosen passages and drew attention to details of those passages, all of which were anchored with a consistent hermeneutic that flows from Old to New. The opening statement, “Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἥντα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὄρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων;,” is case in point. Nicaea's statement about “one God, the Father” appeals to the way the apostle Paul read the *Shema*—even the term “one,” which is the way that Moses intended the *Shema*. Nicaea read Scripture precisely, paying attention to individual words and sweeping contexts, the very way the biblical authors read and wrote Scripture. What makes Nicaea so resilient is that it made its opponents not just wrestle with theological ideas but the very words of Scripture even while showing that the reading of Nicaea was the way the Scripture was intended, and there is no other reading. Nicaea drew upon Scripture with such exegetical precision and pushes its readers back, not to the creed, but to Scripture. Its hermeneutical approach is truly *sola Scriptura*. That is what makes the creed so resilient, because it draws on that which is most resilient and true—the very Word of God. Nicaea is effective because it is biblically precise even to the most fundamental hermeneutical level, and on this 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nicaea, believers everywhere should celebrate and be supportive of the creed because of its faithfulness to Christ and Scripture.