

## Notes on Deuteronomy 6:1-9

The 5 steps:

1. **Grasp the Text in Their Town** – Here we seek to discover what the passage meant to the biblical audience.
2. **Measure the Width of the River to Cross** – What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
3. **Cross the Principlizing Bridge** – What is the theological principle in this passage?
4. **Cross into the New Testament** – Does the New Testament teaching modify or qualify this principle, and if so, how?
5. **Grasp the Text in Our Town** – How should I apply this principle to my life?<sup>1</sup>

### a. Promised blessings of obedience (6:1-3)

**6:1.** The legislation in chapters 6-11 may be viewed as an expression of one great command, namely, to "love **the LORD** your God with all your heart . . . soul, and strength" (6:5). Therefore obedience on the part of the Israelites demonstrated that they loved **God**. Jesus laid down a similar principle for Christians (cf. John 14:21).

**6:2-3.** The Law was given so that the people could express their reverence (**fear**; cf. comments on 4:10) for and obedience to **the LORD** in a concrete manner. (The need to **obey** Him is stressed repeatedly in Deut.) By fearing and obeying Him they would find prosperity (on the words **so that it may go well with you**, see comments on 4:40) and a **long life** in their new land (cf. 4:10; 5:33) which flowed **with milk and honey** (see comments on Ex. 3:8).

### b. The command and its importance (6:4-9)

**6:4.** This verse has been called the *Shema*, from the Hebrew word translated **Hear**. The statement in this verse is the basic confession of faith in Judaism. The verse means that **the LORD** (Yahweh) is totally unique. He alone is **God**. The Israelites could therefore have a sense of security that was totally impossible for their polytheistic neighbors. The "gods" of the ancient Near East rarely were thought of as acting in harmony. Each god was unpredictable and morally capricious. So a pagan worshiper could never be sure that his loyalty to one god would serve to protect him from the capricious wrath of another. The monotheistic doctrine of the Israelites lifted them out of this insecurity since they had to deal with only one God, who dealt with them by a revealed consistent righteous standard. This confession of monotheism does not preclude the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. "God" is plural ('ēlōhîm), possibly implying the Trinity, and **one** ('eḥād) may suggest a unity of the Persons in the Godhead (cf. Gen. 2:24, where the same word for "one" is used of Adam and Eve).

**6:5.** To **love the LORD** means to choose Him for an intimate relationship and to obey His commands. This command, to love Him, is given often in Deuteronomy (v. 5; 7:9; 10:12; 11:1,

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<sup>1</sup> From *Journey into God's Word* by Duvall and Hays

13, 22; 13:3; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20). Loving Him was to be wholehearted (**with all your heart**) and was to pervade every aspect of an Israelite's being and life (**soul and strength**).

**6:6-9.** God's people were responsible to meditate on **these commandments**, to keep them in their **hearts**. This enabled them to understand the Law and to apply it correctly. Then the parents were in a position to **impress them on** their children's hearts also. The moral and biblical education of the **children** was accomplished best not in a formal teaching period each day but when the parents, out of concern for their own lives as well as their children's, made God and His Word the natural topic of a conversation which might occur anywhere and anytime during the day (v. 7).

The commands to **tie them** and **write them** were taken literally by some later Jewish readers. However, the commands are probably emphasizing symbolically the need for the continual teaching of the Law (cf. Ex. 13:9, 16).<sup>2</sup>

#### **More Notes:**

**6:1 The commandment** refers to the instruction to love the Lord (v. 5). **commanded to teach you:** Moses was God's instrument in giving His law to Israel (5:22, 23). It was not really "the Law of Moses" but the Law of God.

**6:2 The fear** of the Lord includes awe for His greatness and holiness, love for Him, and submission to His will. Initially, the fear of God may involve fright. Yet it leads to a sense of wonder, a commitment to worship, and delight in knowing God. **you ... and your grandson:** Since God promised to bless generation after generation (Gen. 17:7, 8), He expected His people to follow His ways from generation to generation as well.

**6:3 that it may be well with you:** God instructed His people so they might live good lives full of meaning and peace. They would live in His glorious presence. **A land flowing with milk and honey** indicates a fruitful and blessed land (11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20). The land promised to the Israelites was better than the land of Egypt to which they had wanted to return (Num. 16:12-14).

**6:4** This verse is the celebrated Shema, the basic confession of faith in Judaism (see Matt. 22:37, 38; Mark 12:29, 30; Luke 10:27). **Hear:** The Hebrew word is *shemà*. The verse starts with a command for the people to respond properly to God. They must listen and obey. **The LORD our God** indicates the people's relationship with the living God. He had come into the lives of His people; it was not that they had ascended to Him. He had saved them from slavery in Egypt, guided them through the wilderness, and given them His instructions. Further, He was about to give them His land. **The LORD is one** means "the Lord alone." There is only one God.

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<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 1:274-275.

**6:5** Moses repeatedly exhorted the Israelites to respond to God’s love with devotion. In this context, the word translated as **love** may mean “to make one’s choice in.” God commanded His people to choose Him with all their being, and in the process to deny all other supposed deities.

**6:7 talk of them when you sit ... and when you rise up:** God’s revelation should be so central to a godly family that they should naturally talk about Him while they perform other activities.

**6:8, 9 a sign ... frontlets:** In later years the Jews interpreted these instructions in a physical way. They instructed men to wear phylacteries, boxes containing passages of Scripture, when they prayed (Matt. 23:5). In any case the idea is that God’s laws should be close to the mind and hands of His people at all times (compare Ex. 13:9, 16; Prov. 3:3; 6:21). **write them on the doorposts:** Jewish custom is to attach a small vessel called a *mezuzah* to the doorpost. In it is placed a small scroll containing the text of Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21 and God’s name Shaddai.<sup>3</sup>

**If you want more details:**

<sup>1</sup>These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, <sup>2</sup>so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. <sup>3</sup>Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

**6:1** The formula “commands, decrees and laws” as an expression of the covenant document as a whole appears here as a response to the command already given by the Lord to Moses that he should teach it to the nation (5:31). In line with such “command-response” formulae elsewhere, one can observe the similarity of language between 5:31 and 6:1, especially in the connection in both places between the technical terms of the covenant and the need to observe it in the land they were about to enter as an inheritance.

**6:2–3** The similarity extends beyond this initial comparison, though the precise wording of 5:32–33 differs from that of 6:2–3. Thus the exhortation not to turn to the right or to the left (5:32) becomes an injunction to fear the Lord, a fear that results in obedience to the decrees and commands for generations to come (6:2). The command to walk in the ways of the Lord (5:33) is also restated, this time in the appeal to hear and obey (6:3). In both cases it is with the end in view that God’s people might live (5:33) and do so with success, prosperity, and for many years. This would be in a land flowing with milk and honey as God had promised the patriarchal ancestors (6:3b) and had reaffirmed to Moses on the occasion of his call to liberate his people (Exod 3:8, 17).

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<sup>3</sup>Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen and H. Wayne House, *The Nelson Study Bible : New King James Version*, Includes Index. (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Dt 6:1.

The phrase “milk and honey” is a hyperbolic way of describing the richness of the land of promise. These two commodities, the one the product of human labor, or agriculture, and the other the product of nature, represent the fullness of blessing associated with the fulfillment of God’s promises. Though obviously not to be taken literally, the description of Canaan’s bounty and fertility is much in line with the reality of the situation in that day and time, especially in comparison to the deprivations of the desert and even of Egypt, a land whose fields had to be irrigated by foot (Deut 11:10; cf. Num 13:23, 27; Deut 8:7–10; 11:9, 11–12, 14).

**(2) *The Essence of the Principles (6:4–5)***

**<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.**

**6:4–5** The Decalogue (or Ten Commandments) of Deut 5:6–21 (= Exod 20:2–17) embodies the great principles of covenant relationship that outline the nature and character of God and spell out Israel’s responsibilities to him. It is thus an encapsulation or distillation of the entire corpus of covenant text. The passage at hand is a further refinement of that great relational truth, an adumbration of an adumbration, as it were. It is the expression of the essence of all of God’s person and purposes in sixteen words of Hebrew text. Known to Jewish tradition as the Shema (after the first word of v. 4, the imperative of the verb *šāma*κ, “to hear”), this statement, like the Decalogue, is prefaced by its description as “commands, decrees, and laws” (or the like) and by injunctions to obey them (6:1–3; cf. 4:44–5:5).

The sentence itself commences with the imperative of *šāma*κ in the second person singular form. “To hear,” in Hebrew lexicography, is tantamount to “to obey,” especially in covenant contexts such as this. That is, to hear God without putting into effect the command is not to hear him at all. The singular form of the verb emphasizes the corporate or collective nature of the addressee, that is, Israel. The covenant was made with the nation as a whole and so the nation must as a unified community give heed to the command of the Lord.

The plurality of the people is also noted here, however, in that it is “Yahweh *our* God” who is the subject of the following clause. Despite a variety of ways of viewing that clause (“Yahweh our God is one Yahweh,” “Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one,” and the like), the structure of the line, almost poetic, favors the rendering “Yahweh (is) our God, Yahweh is one.” That is, the Divine Name should be construed as a nominative in each case and the terms “our God” and “one” as parallel predicate nominatives. However, as the following discussion points out, there is sufficient ambiguity as to allow the idea of God’s oneness as well as his uniqueness.

Postbiblical rabbinic exegesis understood the role of the Shema to be the heart of all the law. When Jesus was asked about the greatest of the commandments, he cited this (and its companion in Lev 19:18) as the fundamental tenet of Jewish faith, an opinion with which his hearers obviously concurred (Matt 22:34–39; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–28). So much so did the centrality of this confession find root in the Jewish consciousness that to this very day the observant Jew will recite the Shema at least twice daily.

It is possible to understand v. 4 in several ways, but the two most common renderings of the last clause are: (1) “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (so NIV) or (2) “The LORD our God is one LORD.” The former stresses the uniqueness or exclusivity of Yahweh as Israel’s God and so may be paraphrased, “Yahweh our God is the one and only Yahweh” or the like. This takes the noun *ehād* (“one”) in the sense of “unique” or “solitary,” a meaning that is certainly well

attested. The latter translation focuses on the unity or wholeness of the Lord. This is not in opposition to the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity but rather functions here as a witness to the self-consistency of the Lord, who is not ambivalent and who has a single purpose or objective for creation and history.<sup>4</sup> The ideas clearly overlap to provide an unmistakable basis for monotheistic faith. The Lord is indeed a unity, but beyond that he is the only God. For this reason the exhortation of v. 5 has practical significance.

The confession of the Lord's unique oneness leads to the demand that Israel recognize him as such by obedience to all that that implies. In language appropriate to covenant, that obedience is construed as love; that is, to obey is to love God with every aspect and element of one's being. This equation has already been made clear in the Decalogue itself, where the Lord said, in reference to the second commandment, that he displays covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) to the thousands who love him and keep his commandments (Deut 5:10). In covenant terms, then, love is not so much emotive or sensual in its connotation (though it is not excluded in those respects), but it is of the nature of obligation, of legal demand. Thus because of who and what he is in regard to his people whom he elected and redeemed, the Lord rightly demands of them unqualified obedience.

The depth and breadth of that expectation is elaborated upon by the fact that it encompasses the heart, soul, and strength of God's people, here viewed collectively as a covenant partner. The heart (*lēb*) is, in Old Testament anthropology, the seat of the intellect, equivalent to the mind or rational part of humankind. The "soul" (better, "being" or "essential person" in line with commonly accepted understanding of Heb. *nepeš*) refers to the invisible part of the individual, the person qua person including the will and sensibilities. The strength (*mēōd*) is, of course, the physical side with all its functions and capacities. The word occurs only here and in 2 Kgs 23:25 as a noun with nonadverbial nuance, and even here the notion is basically that of "muchness." That is, Israel must love God with all its essence and expression.

Jesus said that this was "the first and greatest commandment" (Matt 22:38), an observation that is profoundly correct in at least two respects. First it qualifies as such inasmuch as it constitutes the essence of the Deuteronomic covenant principle and requirement. As stated before, the Shema is to the Decalogue what the Decalogue is to the full corpus of covenant stipulations. But it also is first and greatest because it is a commentary on the very first of the Ten Commandments—"You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut 5:7). This affirmation of the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Yahweh as Israel's Sovereign and Savior finds full endorsement and explication in the Shema, for to recognize Yahweh's unity and solitariness and

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<sup>4</sup> *Ehad* can mean "compound unity" such as "They became one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). *Yahid* means singular, so the phrasing is careful not to exclude the later revelation of the Trinity. Moses did not use the Hebrew word *yahid* under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. MacArthur notes: **The LORD ... LORD is one.** The intent of these words was to give a clear statement of the truth of monotheism, that there is only one God. Thus, it has also been translated "the LORD is our God, the LORD alone." The word used for "one" in this passage does not mean "singleness," but "unity." The same word is used in Gen. 2:24, where the husband and wife were said to be "one flesh." Thus, while this verse was intended as a clear and concise statement of monotheism, it does not exclude the concept of the Trinity.<sup>4</sup>

to respond to that confession with total obedience is the strongest possible way of demonstrating adherence to the first commandment.

Jesus' use of the Shema is attested in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 22:37–38; Mark 12:29–30; Luke 10:27). Matthew and Mark placed it immediately after the denial by the Sadducees of a resurrection whereas Luke recorded it as a response to the lawyer's question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" In fact, in Luke's account it is the lawyer who quotes the second half of the Shema (Deut 6:5) in answer to Jesus' follow-up question to him, "What is written in the law?"

What seems clear here is that the Shema was cited on two different occasions, once by Jesus in his reply to the Pharisee lawyer concerning the greatest commandment and once by the seeker who desired to know the way of life. Doubtless these instances are not exhaustive of all the citations of the Shema in Jesus' public ministry; indeed, they may reflect a widespread recognition of its centrality in Jewish religious thought. It is striking, to say the least, that the "great commandment" (so Matthew) or the "first of all" (so Mark) is the very one which, if followed, leads to life (so Luke 10:28). All this must be understood against the background of the Shema in Deuteronomy, where, as noted already, it serves as the essence of the Decalogue and, indeed, of all the law. It is first and most important precisely because it encapsulates all of God's saving intentions and provisions. To love God as it commands is to place oneself within the orbit of his saving grace because the Shema, the heart and core of the Old Testament law, was designed, as Paul said, to be "put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal 3:24).

### *(3) Exhortation to Teach Them (6:6–9)*

**<sup>6</sup>These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup>Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.**

As noted already (4:9–10; 6:2), an important demand of the covenant relationship was that it be perpetuated beyond the immediate generation of those with whom the Lord made it, for its promises and provisions were for generations yet unborn (4:25, 40; 5:9–10, 29). In practical terms this necessitated a regular routine of instruction. Father must educate son and son the grandson so that the fact and features of the covenant might never be forgotten.

**6:6** The whole is here described as "these commandments" (lit., "these words"), a term that encompasses the full corpus of the covenant text as communicated by Moses but which is encapsulated especially in the Shema of vv. 4–5. This is evident in the instruction to "tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (v. 8) as well as to "write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (v. 9). In the larger sense they are to be committed to memory as the idiom "upon your hearts" (v. 6) makes clear. In the psychology of the Old Testament the heart is not the center of emotional life and response but the seat of the intellect or rational side of humankind. To "be upon the heart" is to be in one's constant, conscious reflection.

**6:7** So much so is this the case that the covenant recipient must impress the words of covenant faith into the thinking of his children by inscribing them there with indelible sharpness and precision (thus the *piel* of *šānan*). The image is that of the engraver of a monument who

takes hammer and chisel in hand and with painstaking care etches a text into the face of a solid slab of granite. The sheer labor of such a task is daunting indeed, but once done the message is there to stay. Thus it is that the generations of Israelites to come must receive and transmit the words of the Lord's everlasting covenant revelation.

In less figurative terms and yet with clear hyperbole, Moses said that the way this message is made indelible is by constant repetition. Thus whether while sitting at home or walking in the pathway, whether lying down to sleep or rising for the tasks of a new day, teacher and pupil must be preoccupied with covenant concerns and their faithful transmission (v. 7). The pairing of these sets of contrasting places and postures forms a double merism (using opposing terms to express an all-encompassing concept). Sitting suggests inactivity; and walking, of course, activity. Together they encompass all of human effort. Likewise, to retire at night and rise up in the morning speaks of the totality of time. So important is covenant truth that it must be at the very center of all one's labor and life.

In what was apparently intended to be another figurative way of expressing the centrality of the covenant to everyday life, Moses instructed the people to tie the words of covenant to their hands and foreheads (v. 8). In the former instance—the binding to the hands (or forearms, as *yad* clearly means here)—the purpose is that the words might be “for a sign” (*le'ôd*). That is, they would identify their bearer as a member of the covenant community. When attached to the forehead (thus NIV as opposed to the literal “between the eyes”), the words function as bands wrapped around the head at the level of the forehead, the purpose of which, as the Hebrew parallelism makes clear, was also to serve as symbols of covenant affiliation. In postbiblical Judaism and to the present day a miniature box containing verses of the Torah (Exod 13:1–10; 13:11–16; Deut 6:4–9; and Deut 11:13–21) were placed inside the four chambers of the box, the whole being known as the *tēpillîn* (“prayers”) or phylactery (cf. Matt 23:5). A similar box with only one chamber but containing the same texts was worn on the forearm as a “hand phylactery.”

**That this binding on arm and forehead was originally intended to be figurative (more precisely, metaphorical) is quite clear from the context of the instruction, where there can be no doubt about the nonliteral meaning (“upon the heart,” v. 6; “at home,” “along the road,” v. 7).** Moreover, the practical impossibility of wearing such objects in everyday life suggests the figurative nature of the injunction as, indeed, does the fact that they are worn only on special worship occasions in modern Judaism. Such restriction to special times is not to be found in any of the four passages where the *tēpillîn* are discussed (see above).

The covenant words also were to be written on the doorframes of Israelite houses and on the gateposts of their villages (v. 9). Once more this should be understood metaphorically, but in postbiblical practice observant Jews placed a *mēzûzāh* (the same word as that for “doorpost”), a small metal receptacle containing Deut 6:4–9 and Deut 11:13–21 in twenty-two lines, at the right of the doorway in obedience to Moses' instructions here. The form of the commandment is in any case most significant. After ordering that the covenant commandments be worn on the person of the faithful Israelite, Moses expanded the sphere of covenant claim to the house and

then to the village. In this manner the person and his entire family and community become identified as the people of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, vol. 4, *Deuteronomy*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1994), 160.