THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD: THE YOKE OF THE KINGDOM

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Surely in an essay on the theology of Deuteronomy one does not have to identify what is the most important word. Jesus did that long ago when he was asked what is the first or greatest commandment, and about the same time the rabbis were giving the same answer. It is the *Shema*: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Among the reasons why it is indeed the most important word is the fact that it is the primary link between Christianity and Judaism. When land and law, Messiah and mission become matters of contention that push apart the children of Abraham, they come together in agreement about the great commandment, the most important word. That in itself is sufficient reason for Christian theologians to take up this word and ask for its intention and its demand. The Book of Deuteronomy will certainly not allow one to escape its intention and demand. If there is any validity to the claim that Deuteronomy is the center of OT theology, then one must go on to say that the *Shema* and its content are the center of Deuteronomic theology, and by extension, the cornerstone of biblical faith. Did not Jesus himself say that all the law and the prophets hang upon this word? So our intention in these pages is to look at this most important word and think about its meaning for faith and life.

There are two primary clues to the centrality of the "Hear O Israel . . ." in Deuteronomy. One is provided by *location*, the other by *repetition*. In terms of location, the *Shema* is the first word of Moses' instruction to the people after the Decalogue has come as direct word of God to the people and they have requested Moses to stand between them and God, receive the divine word, and then teach

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The Walter G. Williams Lectureship was established to honor Dr. Williams, who was Professor of Old Testament Literature and Religion at the Iliff School of Theology from 1942 until his retirement in 1973, and since Dr. Williams' death in October of 1983 constitutes a fitting tribute to the memory of this beloved professor.

them.[1] That teaching begins in Ch. 6 with the command to hear and love. The Lord approves Moses' role and says to him, "I will tell you all the *commandment* and the statutes and the ordinances which you shall teach them" (5:31), and then Moses says: "Now this is the *commandment*, the statutes and the ordinances" (6:1). The statutes and the ordinances will be spelled out in detail in Chapters 12ff. The commandment is the first word which will be the object of attention in Chapters 6-11, i.e., the "Hear O Israel."

The location of the *Shema* points further to its character as a bridge between the Decalogue and the other instructions given in the statutes and ordinances. It serves to catch up what the Ten Commandments are about.[2] In turn the statutes and ordinances of chs. 12ff. explicate in specific and concrete ways the meaning of the "Hear O Israel" commandment for the life of Israel. This is why Jesus can later say that all the law and the prophets hang on this commandment. One may speak of these verses as a summary of the law or of the Ten Commandments. More specifically, they are a positive expression of what Israel heard commanded of them in the Prologue and the First and Second Commandments. The First Commandment is in every sense the *first* commandment, the *first* word, the most important word, and the *Shema* is a positive restatement of that primary commandment. What the first and second commandments prohibited and the *Shema* required is without question the touchstone for Israel's faith and life as one learns of it in the OT, the plumbline by which their relationship to the Lord of history was constantly being measured. One can virtually write the history of Israel as a history of this primary commandment and its effects. It is often a negative history, but the negative judgment is made on the basis of this canon, this measuring rod. That is why later Judaism set this *Shema* as a word to be recited by every Jew each morning and each night. This was not a legalistic, literalistic, or merely pious gesture. It was a true apprehension that those who live under the rule of the Lord of Israel are to set their lives under this norm and shape their daily conduct and their interior direction by this most important and primary word. The struggle of faith was a constant effort to discover afresh in each new situation the experience of the confession that is made and the requirements of the demand that is imposed.

I have said that *repetition* as well as location indicates the centrality and primacy of this word in Deuteronomy. Even a quick reading of the following chapters with attention to the repeated expressions will enable one to see that the language of the *Shema* as well as of the Prologue to the Ten Commandments and the first two commandments appears over and over again in phrases: "the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt," "out of the house of bondage," "with all your heart and with all your soul," "other gods," "bow down (or worship) and serve them," and the like. Moses' speech in these chapters is in effect a kind of

[1]Cf. C. W. Nicholson, "The Decalogue as the Direct Address of God," *Vetus Testamentum*, 27 (1977), pp. 422-33.

[2]The antiquity of the association of the *Shema* with the Decalogue is exemplified in the Nash Papyrus which contains the Decalogue followed immediately by the *Shema*. See E. Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*[4] (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 33 and 132.

sermon on this most important word, explicating and elaborating it, shaping Israel's identitity as a people defined by this confession, "Our God is the Lord, the Lord alone" and this demand, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

What then is the force of this primary and most important word? For two reasons, I am not using the common designation from the New Testament and traditional usage, i.e., "Great Commandment." One is that that rubric tends to confine our thinking to the *Shema* alone when it is clear from Deuteronomy that the *Shema* is a mirror image of the first part of the Decalogue, which should also be in our thinking when we seek to understand what is most important. And secondly, "Great Commandment" as a descriptive phrase tends to focus our attention on this word only as something one has to do, as command. That is indeed part of this word, but not the starting point of either the *Shema* or the Decalogue. Both of these begin with claims, not demands. It is easy to lose that dimension, to forget that these formulations begin with "Hear, O Israel," and "I am the Lord" and then move immediately to make claims about both realities, Israel and the Lord, as well as the yet more important reality — the relationship between the two. The initial function, therefore, of the *Shema* and of the Decalogue is to *identify* and *to create identity*. The first words of the Decalogue are a self-presentation formula, "I am the Lord." It is set to *identify* the one who for this people will be the center of being and value and to begin to characterize the nature of the relationship between God and people. As the people are addressed with the words "Hear O Israel, Our God is the Lord," they, too, are being identified. More broadly, the *Shema* serves to *create an identity* for this people. They are the ones who make the confession that their God is the Lord. That confession itself does not fully create an identity. That does not happen apart from the words that follow about loving this one who is your God. There is an identifying, a distinguishing, a characterizing going on here, but it is not all wrapped up and tended to in the self-presentation formula of God in the Decalogue or the confession of the people, "Our God is the Lord." It is only as the people move on to deal with the implications of that confession and that relationship that their identity will be fully spelled out.

In the opening words, "The Lord is our God," a claim is laid on them, a confession is made by them that will serve to shape their identity and their way in the world in the profoundest way possible. They are the ones who say that we find God for us in the Lord. They are the ones of whom the Lord claims to be God for them, your God. Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy when we hear the Lord referred to, we hear also the words "our God," "your God" — over and over, so that the expression the Lord your/our God becomes a kind of shorthand for the identifying claim that is in the *Shema* and the Prologue of the Ten Commandments.

And if the identity of *this people* is shaped not only by the claim that the Lord is their God but also by the way in the *future* they respond to that claim, it is also the case that the identity of *the Lord*, the one who is God for them, is uncovered, revealed by the way in the *past* the Lord has responded to their human situation.

The answers to the identity-creating question for Israel, i.e., What does it mean to call the Lord "our God" or "your God"? and to the identifying question about the Lord, i.e., "Who is the Lord?" are one and the same and are found in the relative clause that modifies the divine self-presentation of the Decalogue: I am the Lord your God, *that is*, the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. There is no clearer, more precise, more to-the-heart-of-the-matter way of identifying this God than as one who has set free a people upon whom an oppressive slavery has been inflicted. The first part of the Book of Exodus is set primarily to show that this God reveals name and nature as one who hears the cries, the groans, the sufferings of people who have been enslaved and treated oppressively. One must not miss the clear fact that the Lord is fully presented and identified this way, and it is as the God who sets an afflicted and enslaved people free that the Lord creates and claims a relationship with the people. The single ground for identifying the Lord and explaining why that one claims to be "your God" is the clause "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." From beginning to end this clause speaks of the liberation of slaves, not only in the expression "house of bondage of slavery," or even in the reference to Egypt, which remains a primal symbol of the experience of slavery and oppression, but even the expression "who led you out" — "Exodus." "Going out" is technical or juridical language for release of slaves or land, as one sees from the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21:1-11) and the Holiness Code (Lev. 25:41), which speak of "going out" when slaves are released. A slave goes out, is set free, according to the statutes, or is "brought out/led out" by another party by a price of redemption or by force.[3] It is this last that happens in the Exodus and is the defining word about the Lord's relationship to the liberated people. As one scholar has properly said: "This profession of faith comes very close to a theology of revolution."[4] To the extent that liberation theology roots itself in this story of the Lord setting Hebrew slaves free, it is on the right track, for that story is profoundly theological, i.e., speaks about God, as the Prologue to the Ten Commandments makes clear, and as one sees in the Exodus story an intentional answer both to the question of Moses: "What is the name of the God who has sent me?" and that of Pharoah: "Who is the Lord?" Indeed both Exodus and Deuteronomy provide the materials for a paradigm of the liberating work of God that defines a theological understanding of liberation.

That paradigm begins in Exodus 3:7-8, where one finds two of the three aspects of the paradigm:

Deliverance from slavery and oppression
Provision of means and place for life

a. good and broad land
b. a land flowing with milk and honey

[3]N. Lohfink, *Great Themes of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982, p. 45.

[4]Ibid.

c. displacement of others, which may happen in God's liberating work, but reasons are given in Deuteronomy.

The third dimension occupies the attention of the rest of Exodus and all of Deuteronomy. One can see already, however, its development and centrality in the Exodus story in Chapters 1-15, particularly in the plague narrative beginning in chapter 5. Moses is sent with a command from the Lord to Pharoah, a liberating command that has been the basis for the hope of slaves down to our own time: Let my people go. One should note first of all that in every case where this call for liberation of the slave people is given there is specifically stated a purpose that is the goal of the liberating act. Note further the difference between the first two times this command is given in 5:2-3 and 7:16 and the further occasions. In the first encounter between Moses and Pharoah and the first plague, the purpose of God's liberating intention is: Send my people out that they may serve me in the wilderness. (That is expanded in 5:3). The story indicates at the beginning the deception that is involved as these slaves seek to break free, i.e., the request is to allow the people to go out to the wilderness to sacrifice to and worship God *for three days.* Pharoah in *his* remarks preserves this notion of the purpose of the request. But as the story goes on and the phrase "in the wilderness" is dropped (Exodus 8:1, 20; 9:1; 10:3), the command becomes *an absolute command* — and no longer just a matter of sacrifice — that calls for a liberation of the people to become God's people, to obey and serve him: "Let my people go, *that they may serve me.*" The Sinai pericope indicates that is what happened in the Exodus and the wilderness. The Book of Deuteronomy then reinforces this third dimension of the theological notion of liberation: The people are led out with the goal of service in response and gratitude to the one who sets people free. Deuteronomy in the *Shema* and the Decalogue makes the response as markedly a characteristic of their identity as the broken chains of their freedom. (That this identity as a God who brings release to his people is not just an Old Testament phenomenon but remains the defining mark of the work of God in Christ is made very clear in Jesus' reading from the Scriptures in Capernaum in Luke 4. See the following essay.)

The confession of God's people in Deuteronomy 6:4, however, is not only "Our God is the Lord." It goes a step further: yahweh ʾᵉlōhênû yahweh ʾeḥad. The second clause is ambiguous but not problematically so. It is capable of being understood as either "the Lord is one" or "the Lord alone." Either translation is able to marshal arguments, which I shall not go into. I am more interested here in the meaning and implications of both and regard the ambiguity as desirable and probably unresolvable, though I lean in one direction if forced to a translation.

It is sometimes said that the affirmation of the oneness of Yahweh, of the Lord, was not an issue for Israel and, therefore, the unity of God is not what is confessed in the *Shema.* It is clear from all the data we can gather that the Lord's oneness is not *the* issue and certainly not in Deuteronomy, but there are some clues from extra-biblical material of tendencies, in popular religion at least, to identify

Yahweh with particular places or locales,[5] a tendency that had the potential for bringing about a splitting and multiplying of the divine manifestation — a tendency that may have been even more explosive if, as one plausible theory suggests, the origins of the worship of Yahweh may have been in the splitting off of Yahweh as originally a cultic name of the high god El.[6]

What does it mean to say that the Lord is one? Fundamentally and theologically it leads in the same direction as "the Lord alone." But while to confess "the Lord alone" serves to remove any other direction or recipient of our ultimate loyalty, "the Lord is one" serves to underscore that the one who receives our ultimate allegiance and is the ground of being and value for us is consistent, not divided within "self" in any way, comprehensive and inclusive. We do not encounter the reality of God in one time or place or experience that is not wholly conformable with all other moments and experiences. The presence and involvement of God in the world and in shaping history and human destiny is not in one guise now and another guise elsewhere. In purpose and being God is one and the same though open and hidden to the future, becoming as well as being.

The alternate translation of the confession, i.e., "our God is the Lord, the Lord alone" clearly speaks to *the* issue of Israelite faith and the issue toward which the Prologue and the first two commandments of the Decalogue are directed, which is less the question whether the Lord is divided than it is whether Israel's loyalties are divided. The Shema is a radical confession that Israel's loyalty is one, that it finds no other God than the Lord, and the *Shema* and the first commandments set forth commands and prohibitions to safeguard this claim as a reality determining Israel's life and creating her identity: "The Lord alone," "You shall have no other gods before/besides me." The relatively minor force this commandment and claim seem to have in interpretations of the Christian life (or so it seems to me — after all, none of us is a polytheist, and we can work out fairly satisfactory Trinitarian constructions that avoid possible problems in this area, although it is a little harder for us to hold unflinchingly to the oneness of God as Trinitarians[7]) is somewhat surprising in light of the fact that the most important word did indeed identify the most troublesome area of Israel's way with the Lord. Israel frequently — and I am

[5]This possibility is at least suggested not only by evidence pertaining to Baal and Resheph in Canaanite religion, but by reference to "Yahweh of Samaria" and "Yahweh of Teman" in Hebrew inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud, where there is present also evidence for an incipient reverence of the asherah, first as a Yahweh symbol before becoming a separate object of devotion (note the phrase "Yahweh and his asherah" in these inscriptions). On these matters see J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 94 (1982), pp. 2-20.

[6]F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 71.

[7]I would want to agree with Jurgen Moltmann in his study of the Trinity (*The Trinity and the Kingdom*, New York: Harper and Row, 1981) that the Trinity is not just a necessary device to solve a theological problem but is clearly the Christian way of understanding the (mono) theistic reality. It is only in its trinitarian character with all that that tells us about the one God and the oneness of God that Christian faith can explicate a monotheistic doctrine of God.

admittedly generalizing about a history that was clearly more complex than can be expressed here — found other gods more attractive, whether because they seemed to offer the promise of a more productive, richer land and life, or because they belonged to national powers with which Israel sought or needed to align itself, or whether it was because human loyalties are truly fickle and easily seduced away even by would-be lovers who in fact offer very little by way of reward for shifting loyalties. The issue was a real one in Israel's life, and, as in so many other ways, Israel's story here is probably more paradigmatic for our own than we may acknowledge.

In the First and Second Commandments and the ongoing almost monotonous Deuteronomic interpretations of them, the Old Testament says a number of things about the nature and meaning of this loyalty as a demand that belonged to the identity of the Lord vis-a-vis all other claims to be God and to the continuing shaping of Israel's identity.

One of the ways that Deuteronomic literature expresses the demand of the First Commandment is in the expression/language "following after" or "going after" as in Deuteronomy 13:4, "You shall go/walk after the Lord your God and fear him." Most often this expression appears negatively in the prohibition against going after other gods. The language may have some of its roots in the ritual of processing behind the image or standard of a deity, but it fundamentally refers to the servant who follows a master, the soldier who follows a general, the subject who follows his or her lord.[8] In the First Commandment the people of Israel heard themselves called to follow after the one who had led them out. That decisive act of leading out, which was the overthrow of the divine-human ruler, the king of Egypt, was the *abrogation once and for all* of any human rule or other divine claims over the final allegiance of this people. It is here that the language and the notion of *discipleship* have their OT roots, and it is worth noting that Israel hears its call to discipleship in primarily negative warnings against the constant options for other lords to be followed that it encountered in its environment, warnings that come also from the one whom Christians follow after as Lord when he says, "You cannot serve God and mammon."

Another way in which the First and Second commandments give expression to the claim that the Lord alone is God for this people who have been led out is with the language and imagery of *the jealous God* (a notion that is more fundamental for biblical theology than we sometimes acknowledge). That is an attribute of God that is not especially appealing, and indeed it is often associated with the wrath or anger of God. Two things need to be said about the imagery of the jealous God:

a) The jealousy of God is the point or way in which the most important word of the First and Second Commandments is expressed in terms of the *attributes*, the *perfections*, the *character* of God. One does not find in many denominational doctrinal standards a listing of the jealousy of God among the attributes of God, but the Old Testament gives some weight to

[8]Lohfink, op. cit., pp. 45-49.

this characteristic, identifying the name of God as Jealous (Exodus 34:14) and regularly calling upon this image as the ground for the First and Second Commandments whenever they come into play. The *absolute* attribute of the *holiness* of God as one who is apart from all others, transcendent and distinguished from all other reality, has its correlate in the *relative* attribute of *jealousy*.

b) To speak of the Lord as a jealous God is to make a covenantal claim about God and to express a very positive word about the proper and inherent exclusiveness that belongs to the nature of the relationship between God and God's people, or to the nature of covenant. As a covenantal claim the jealousy of God has a double force: 1) jealousy for Israel's full and exclusive worship of God (Deuteronomy 32:16, 21; Psalms 78:58, Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5, etc., and 2) jealousy or zeal for God's powerful commitment to and love for his people as one sees, for example, in such contexts as Isaiah 9:6 [Eng. 9:7]; 37:31-32; 26:11 ("Let them see thy zeal for thy people"); 59:17 (where the armor of God is righteousness, salvation, vindication, and zeal or jealousy — all to do battle for justice). The jealousy of God, therefore, is that dimension within the divine encounter with the Lord's people that brooks no other final loyalty and ensures no other recipient of such unbounding love and grace. It is God's way of saying: I will have nothing less than your full devotion and you will have nothing less than all my love. It is the kind of attribute that belongs to a marriage relationship. There is a proper convenantal jealousy in marriage.

The third dimension of the claim that the Lord alone is God for Israel as we find it expressed in the First and Second Commandments is the *prohibition of images*, the aniconic element in biblical religion. This prohibition against making and worshiping idols was one of the primary ways in which Israel's religion cut against the grain of the religious world of which it was a part. That such a prohibition was of major importance in Deuteronomic theology is signaled by the fact that Deuteronomy 4, which is in various ways a *commentary* on the Prologue and First and Second Commandments of the Decalogue, focuses major attention on the prohibition against images, especially in verses 9-31. In this extended theological interpretation Deuteronomy points us to the fundamental intention of the second commandment and its intimate relation to the First Commandment. The theological basis for this commandment is to be found in the mystery, transcendence, ineffability, and wholly "otherness" of God who does not reveal God's self in transparent ways or in ways that allow one to see (as one sees the astral bodies) or touch (as in humanly created objects) God. (Note the claim twice made: "You saw no form.") Such is the reality of God, and no human action can alter that. The commandment is to ensure and guard Israel's continuing realization of that transcendence. The shape of the Second Commandment in 4:16-18, which is the most elaborated form of it in the Scriptures, indicates that Deuteronomy has in mind the exclusion of any possible object of worship. But the motivation given

here points very much to the *Yahweh* image as the primary focus of the prohibition. It is not only that the worship of other gods or images of other gods is prohibited, but any iconic form of the worship of the Lord. The commandment in its contextual usage here thus points the people away both from those objects that by their desirability and tangibility, their potential claim on our lives, their seeming power and greatness (e.g., sun and stars) replace or contend with the Lord of life and nature and history for our fullest loyalty and surrender, but also from those objects that by their tangibility, visibility, and attractiveness serve to represent God for us and thus obscure the true relationship that belongs between Creator and creature, dissolving the mystery, eliminating the transcendence, reducing the God above God to an available God, and opening up all our instincts to seek control over that which truly controls us. Thus the true danger of all symbols, metaphors, and images (tangible, visible) is that they may reduce the irreducible reality that stands behind them all. That is even possible for the word in some form, but the word has a differnt character to it — both power and elusiveness, identification with the speaker and distinctiveness from the speaker. The word speaks and tells but it does not eliminate the mystery. And of course here also is laid part of the ground for that understanding of revelation through the word that reaches its culmination in the word made flesh that dwelt among us.

It is neither accidental nor surprising that within the history of doctrine one of the major figures who made the protest against idolatry a central theme was John Calvin. For Calvin, as my colleague John Leith has pointed out, the absence of faith was not seen as a possibility.[9] The only options for human existence are faith in the living God or idolatry, or, as Reinhold Niebuhr has put it, "the worship of contingent elements in history as the ultimate centers of meaning."[10] Calvin knew the primacy of the First and Second Commandments, for he saw in the human creature a propensity to try to tie God to the finite and the determinate in order to domesticate and control God.

> For just as soon as a visible form has been fashioned for God, his power is also bound to it. Men are so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him; and hence they cannot but adore. And there is no difference whether they simply worship an idol, or God in the idol. It is always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done. And because it does not please God to be worshiped superstitiously, whatever is conferred upon the idol is snatched away from Him.[11]

[9]The following discussion is directly indebted to Leith's essay, "John Calvin's Polemic Against Idolatry," in *Soli Deo Gloria: New Testament Studies in Honor of William Childs Robinson*, ed. by J. M. Richards (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968, pp. 111-124 (notes, pp. 151-53).

[10]Quoted by Leith, op. cit., p. 152, n. 5.

[11]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Book I, Ch. 11, para. 9.

In Leith's summary of Calvin's argument in Book I, Chapters 11 and 12 of the *Institutes*:

> Idolatry is the attempt to get control of God by objectifying his power and presence and fixing them in some "thing." Idolatry is the transference of something that belongs to God to some created reality. It is the indiscriminate transference to the creature of what belongs to God alone.[12]

In Calvin's terms, God is his own proper witness. No image can bear that witness, but will ultimately pull us away from the center of meaning and value and being. In his circumstances Calvin saw the clearest manifestation of idolatry in the paganisms of the Roman Catholic Church — veneration of saints, relics, icons, and the like. But he was well aware that the problem was a broader one and not fully overcome by the removal of images and icons from all the churches. Calvin saw a strong tendency toward idolatry even in the view of church and sacraments existing in the Roman Catholic Church of his day.[13]

But worship and liturgy he knew could also be the means to attempt to manipulate God, to objectify and localize the Lord of history. Calvin even sensed the very serious potential for turning our theological endeavors into idol factories, a danger that never leaves us. Perhaps more than any other temptation to idolatry, those of us who serve in the ministry are prone to turn our theological systems and constructs into idols that represent once again an effort to see the hidden, uncover the mystery, objectify the transcendent so that we deceive ourselves into thinking that theologically we can see God. Even there the word of Deuteronomy is clear: You saw no word but only the voice of God out of the fire. The fire is the *key symbol* of chapter 4 — and it is a powerful one, in this context to be understood as both *illuminating* and *consuming*. It is bright, light, revealing, a radiance like the *kabod* or glory of God and thus appropriate for indicating the presence and revelation of God. But fire also is mysterious. It repels as much as it draws. One is unable to touch it, and one is destroyed in touching it. It can be clearly seen but not approached and touched. In the face of the Second Commandment as Deuteronomy interprets it, pastors and theologians hear a warning about the theological efforts that consume our energies. We may be playing with idols or playing with fire.

There is a postscript to this discussion of images and idols. When Deuteronomy 4 forbids making and worshping the likeness of anything, male or female, any beast of earth, any winged bird that flies, anything that creeps on the ground, etc. (Deut. 4:16-18), at least in part we hear the language of the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1 which reminds us that there is one permissible image of God according to the biblical story. That is in the human creature. There one finds no human artifice to try to domesticate God or penetrate the mystery. Rather in the

[12]Leith, op. cit., p. 113.

[13]Ibid., pp. 117ff.

human persons around us we encounter *God's* artifice, the divinely created image of God's self which the Lord has set in the world as ruler and steward. If we would look for something that in some way "images" God in a way accessible to our experience, then we will find we have to deal with one another. It should also be all the more clear why it is that the fullest revelation of God should come to us in categories of *word* and *incarnation.*

The Command: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The confession of the *Shema* leads to its demand. The negative formulations of the first and second commandments have their positive counterpart in the command of the *Shema*: You shall love the Lord your God. It is really out of this command as formulated and repeated in Deuteronomy that the biblical injunction to love God has its roots. The use of the term "love" to define the relationship to God is essentially a distinctive contribution of Deuteronomic theology. Its usage both in Deuteronomy and in extra-biblical materials suggests strongly that the love of God is essentially a covenantal notion, a way of speaking of that full devotion of one partner in the covenant for the other, and especially the subordinate to the superior, subjects to the king. In this context also love does not connote primarily affective dimensions, nor is it vague or abstract in its context. It does assume a personal, intimate, trusting relation. While it is responsive or reciprocal in that it is rooted in the prior love of the One who loved the fathers and mothers of Israel (Dt. 4:37) and led their children out of oppressive slavery, it is not dependent entirely on a feeling of gratitude for its creation. As the *Shema* indicates, it is a love that can be commanded. Its various associations and contexts in Deuteronomy tell us something of the character of the love that identifies the people who say "Our God is the Lord." It is closely related to fear and reverence. It is expressed in loyalty and services. Its primary manifestation is in obedience to the demands of the law, which are spelled out quite specifically in Deuteronomy. To love God is to be loyal to the Lord, to keep the Lord's commandments (10:12, 11:1, 22), to walk in the way of the Lord (19:9, 30:16), to do or heed the commandments, statutes, and ordinances. Israel was never left unclear how to manifest love toward the Lord. In worship and obedience to the requirements of the covenant the love of the Lord could be demonstrated.

And as the final words of the *Shema* make clear, the love that is called for is a *total* commitment. Time and again Deuteronomy underscores its injunctions with a call for loving, obeying, keeping, etc. "with all your heart and with all your soul." Only here does Deuteronomy heap up three expressions to try to convey the totality of being and commitment that is appropriate to the love of the one Lord. The three parts of this expression have been interpreted in different ways:

1) Early Christian exegesis saw here complementary aspects of the human personality — mind, soul, and spirit which together make up the person.

2) Jewish exegesis has seen here "distinct but complementary ways of manifesting love toward God."[14]

heart — with an undivided loyalty, both good and evil impulses
soul/life — commitment even to point of death or martyrdom
might — substance, wealth, property given in the service of God

3) It is most likely that the three phrases express a totality in a climactic fashion: heart = will, the whole self, to excess or "muchness." The intention, as McBride has put it, is to express "the superlative degree of total commitments."[15]

The most important word, therefore, in its character as a demand that shapes our identity, is: Love the Lord your God wholeheartedly, with your whole self, with all your capacity. The oneness and all-inclusiveness of the Lord your God is matched by the oneness and totality of your devotion.

That last remark leads me to my conclusion, which is triggered by a question that Krister Stendahl is reported to have asked a doctoral student in an oral exam. He was fond of asking unexpected questions, and in this case, his single question to an Old Testament student was, "What's so hot about monotheism?" It seems to me to be a legitimate question and one toward which I have been moving in these remarks about the great commandment, the primary word of Deuteronomy. For whether or not Israel's religion in the formative period was precisely a monotheistic religion, it is clear that the First and Second Commandments and the *Shema* are the roots from which that theological position has grown. It is surely one of the most characteristic and fundamental features of the Judeo-Christian religion.

In thinking about what is at stake in the monotheistic claim, I would suggest that there is both a theological implication and an anthropological implication. The theological implication has to do with the freedom and power of God. That is, the monotheism which arises out of this Deuteronomic center claims that there is only one ultimate or absolute — the power that undergirds all reality is one and not multiple, a whole and not divided, and therefore capable of purpose and power because it is not controlled and limited by other forces. God is not divided, nor is God limited or controlled by other forces. The only limitation on the freedom and power of God is the self-limiting step that is taken by God in the creation of the human creature. Without this freedom and power in God unaffected by outside forces, then we would have to raise serious questions about the possibility of the accomplishment of the divine purpose or even the clarity of speaking of a divine purpose. For I think it is difficult to assume an order and purpose to the universe if there is not a center or ground of being, value, and meaning that is one and comprehensive. While Christian theology has often tended toward at least a dualism, if not a polytheism, it has never finally moved back in that direction. To do so

[14]S. Dean McBride, "The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-5," *Interpretation*, (1973), p. 303.

[15]Ibid., p. 304.

would not only change the biblical story but would undercut the very ground of the sovereignty and purpose of God.

Alongside this theological implication there is an anthropological one, i.e., the impossibility of human sharing of a loyalty that is meant to be ultimate. Penultimate loyalties to those beings and things that do not ground human existence, do not call human life into being, or shape its destiny are quite possible and indeed necessary and desirable, but the loyalty to Creator, the Lord and Giver of life, Savior and Judge canot be satisfactorily divided. This anthropological claim that belongs to the monotheistic conviction is not merely an abstrct and theoretical one. It is indeed very personal and human and ultimately pastoral. For the oneness of the reality that grounds our existence, i.e., God, is that which keeps our lives from being chaotic and divided beyond the limits of human management. We constantly encounter multiple pulls and dimensions in human life and human experience that would claim ultimate control or ultimate loyalty from us. That which holds these together, relativizes all other claims, and gives unity to our life is that one and absolute object of our allegiance and loyalty. We do not find conflicting claims on our ultimate allegiance, only on secondary interests and loyalties. It is possible to deal with these secondary claims if we have a sense that our ultimate and full allegiance is directed toward one alone.

This seems to me to be precisely the point of the *Shema*, which in its first part, "the Lord your God is *Yahweh, Yahweh* alone,"makes the theological statement that there is but one God and the power behind everything is not limited or divided. The second half of the *Shema*, "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might," spells out the human personal implication of this, that the one God demands a sole and total allegiance.[16] But that finally is not just a demand. That is also what makes human life possible. All claims on our lives are relativized and subsumed within the one total claim of God, so that even the demand finally is the gift of grace.

[16]Cf. ibid., pp. 305-306, n. 70.