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## The Shema‘ Yisrael

### Monotheistic Jewish Amulet Discovered Near Carnuntum

[Noah Wiener](#) • 04/12/2013



According to a recent article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the *Shema' Yisrael* on this Jewish amulet discovered near Carnuntum is one of the earliest monotheistic readings of Deuteronomy.

The *Shema' Yisrael* from Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”) is Judaism’s holiest confession. Today, we understand the passage as a monotheistic declaration. However, in the Second Temple period, the *Shema' Yisrael* text in Deuteronomy would have been read “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord *alone*.” The *Shema' Yisrael* was originally a monaltritic statement; it stated that Israel had an exclusive relationship with its God, but it did not deny the existence of other national deities for other peoples.

When did Deuteronomy’s *Shema' Yisrael* become a monotheistic statement? When did Jews begin to recognize their deity as *the only* deity existing in the universe? In the May/June 2013 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Armin Lange and Esther Eshel discuss the discovery of a Jewish amulet near the city of Carnuntum that “marks an early pinnacle of this monotheistic interpretation of the *Shema' Yisrael* in Deuteronomy 6:4.”

The Jewish amulet was discovered in a third-century C.E. child’s grave near the Roman frontier city Carnuntum (close to modern Halbturn, Austria). The amulet is formed out of a silver capsule and small gold leaf, inscribed with a Hebrew *Shema' Yisrael* written in Greek letters. Lange and Eshel state that “the Jewish amulet reads the last clause of the *Shema' Yisrael* as ΑΔΩΝ Α ‘the Lord is 1.’ That is, it replaces the Hebrew word  $\eta\eta\alpha$ , which meant originally ‘alone,’ with ‘one’ (a Greek Α). The letter in ancient Greek represents the numeral 1.”

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In the groundbreaking book [\*The Birth of Monotheism: The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism\*](#), André Lemaire, a world-renowned expert on the ancient world, explores the development of perhaps the most important idea in the history of mankind: the concept of a single, universal God.

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What is an early monotheistic *Shema 'Yisrael* doing near Carnuntum? Lange and Eshel illustrate that Carnuntum had a well-integrated Jewish population that stated their religion openly. The Jewish population would have known how to recite the *Shema 'Yisrael*, but most likely did not know how to write in Hebrew.

Lange and Eshel conclude that

To our knowledge the Halbturn amulet is the first text that renders the Hebrew word *ehad* (אחד) with the number “1.” This numerical representation of the final word of the *Shema* leaves no doubt about how the Jewish craftsman who made the Halbturn amulet understood the *Shema 'Yisrael* —as a monotheistic statement! Only the Lord is God; there is no other God. Though the Jews of Carnuntum were open to the multi-religious culture of their city, this openness clearly had defined limits. For them, no other god existed but the Lord.

Armin Lange and Esther Eshel’s full article [“The Lord Is One”: How Its Meaning Changed](#) explores the Jewish amulet and its *Shema 'Yisrael* inscription in light of ancient Jewish magic, the evolution of monotheism and the local Jewish population.

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