

A unifying command

Singular or plural pronouns in Deuteronomy 6

Sometimes a basic observation can help elucidate a complex phenomenon.

The alternating use of singular or plural forms for God's people in the passages where Moses deals with Israel casts light on God Himself and many aspects of God's dealings with them. These include: The Divine Unity, the unity in diversity of Divine Law, polytheism and other forms of disobedience, repentance, self examination, national coherence and unity.

There is striking parallel between Divine Unity and national unity in Deuteronomy 6.

The chapter, which succeeds the ten commandments, starts with a general exhortation, like those at the end of the preceding chapter to all the people of Israel, v.1. All the pronouns and the verb pertaining to Israel are plural (two pronominal suffixes, one pronoun and one verbal participle, in Hebrew).

In v.2, there is a complete shift to the singular (one verb, six pronominal suffixes and one pronoun). Why? Perhaps it suggests a particular focus on the individual responsibility of each hearer?

In v.3, there is a shift from singular (three times, two verbs and one pronominal suffix) to plural (one verb, to multiply greatly), and then back to the singular again (two pronominal suffixes). The context suggests a national identification as one person, which is emphasised by the use of the plural form for multiplying.

By v.4, this impression is strongly confirmed by that most famous confession, the Shema'. The imperative, 'hear', to the whole nation as one man, is singular, the description of our God, involves a plural pronominal suffix. Our God makes us one people.

The greatest of all commands, the heart of all the Law, is all in the singular, v.5 (four pronominal suffixes, including this time the one attached to God's title and one verb). A unifying affection is manifest.

For the next eight verses, 34 singular expressions are used consecutively. Is this coincidence?

In v.14, suddenly the harmony and unity is shattered by the introduction of polytheism. Two plural forms occur abruptly (a noun and a pronominal suffix). A multiplicity of gods splinters Israel into factions and parties.

v.15, a reminder of God's true nature and Name, restores the singular forms (all of which are pronominal suffixes on the receiving end of God's fury), including the mistranslated 'you', which should strictly be 'thee'.

In v.16, the reminder of Massah and the active tempting of God, fractures Israel into individuals or parties again (three plurals: two active verbs and one pronominal suffix).

In v.17, the remembrance of and return to God's law, sees a transition from plural back to singular (a plural verb and pronominal suffix, to a singular pronominal suffix).

The from v.18 to v.20, the next 9 consecutive forms are singular (6 pronominal suffixes and 3 active verbs). The chapter concludes with a description to an enquiring son, with a lesson in God's dealings with 'us', after his enquiry about 'you' (pl.) and 'our' God. The instructor is singular, v.21, the nation is now treated as plural 14 times, but only in the first, now not the second person.

There is also an interesting parallel with the singular and plural for the word command (mizvah), which is uncharacteristically unclear in the AV translation. In 5.29 (v.26 in Hebrew text) the word is plural, but in 5.31 (v.28 in Hebrew), 6.1, and again later in 6.25, despite the words for statutes and judgements always being plural, the word for command is singular each time. In 6.2, after the transition from plural to singular for Israel, the word command reverts to the plural (as it always is in the AV). It hints at an emphasis on the uniqueness of the great command in 6.4, as the great undergirding singular command, and perhaps hints too at a relationship between the unity of the heart in the unity of grasp of the law, something also hinted at in Ps.19.9 (v.10 in Hebrew) and Ps.86.11. In Hebrew, as in Arabic, the word for unite is a cognate of the first numeral, leading to interesting paradoxes like Gen.11.1, where the Hebrew for 'one' is a plural adjective. When Israel falls to polytheism, like picking up the shards of a broken vessel, the word for commands is again plural in v.17, along with the pronominal suffix for God. As restoration of the relationship is envisaged and obedience is restored, the singular for command is once more used in v.25 as the passage concludes.

There is a still more intriguing parallel with the Unity of Deity. We are familiar with the Council of Deity passages, in which God calls upon His Counsel, indicating relational plurality within the Godhead, Gen.1.26; 3.22; 11.7; Ps.89.1-5; 110.1; Isa.6.8; Tit.1.2; Rev.13.8. During the transition of the description of the people from plural to singular, at the threshold of receiving the greatest command, is the Shema', v.4. The Divine title Elohim is a plural form. The Divine Name YHVH is the singular 3rd person, in causative form, for to be.

So the Shema' is: Hear (s) O Israel, YHVH (s) our (pl) God (pl) is One (s) YHVH (s).

By the next verse, the greatest commandment, the heart of all commands, there are 5 singulars for Israel.

And thou (s) shalt love the LORD thy (s) God with all thine (s) heart, and with all thy (s)soul, and with all thy (s) might.

Loving Divine Unity unifies Israel. It is impossible to love one aspect or character of God truly, without loving Him all, as we worship Him in His fullness, by His Word, and His Holy Spirit, He unites us within and amongst ourselves. There is an echo here of the High Priestly prayer, especially Jn.17.23.

[More on Number in Deuteronomy](#)