

# The Jewish background of the oneness language in John's Gospel

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Interest in the oneness language of John's Gospel started in the 1970s. Many scholarly contributions have been offered ever since. Recent studies show that the oneness language in the Gospel closely related to how the Jews had utilised it. This study attempted to sketch the Jewish background of the oneness language useful to understand the similar language usage in John's Gospel. It employs the narrative approach associated with N.T. Wright. The focus is on the common Judaism of the Second Temple Period, as presented by E.P. Sanders. The structure of the article follows the framework offered by N.T. Wright, namely monotheism (the oneness of God), covenant (the oneness of God's people) and eschatology (the one future of God's people). It also explores the impact of the destruction of the Temple on the oneness language of the time. The article concludes by confirming that the oneness language usages in common Judaism illuminate a reading of the similar language found in the John's Gospel.

**Contribution:** This study further applies N.T. Wright's narrative approach to reading the oneness language in John's Gospel. It also provides readers with a framework to read the oneness language in the Gospel based on the Jewish monotheism as the language's narrative substructure.

**Keywords:** Common Judaism; the *Shema*; John's oneness language; Jewish background of the oneness language; the destruction of the Temple; N. T. Wright's narrative approach.

## Introduction

Interest in the oneness language of John's Gospel had already started in the 1970s. In his *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel*, Mark L. Appold (1976) argued that the oneness language played a significant role in understanding the theology of the Gospel. The second edition was published by Wipf and Stock in 2011. Furthermore, he argued that the oneness language in the Gospel had something to do with the Gnostic sources that the fourth evangelist used (Appold 1976:155). He made his case by examining the three most extensive oneness language usage passages: John 17, John 11:47–53 and John 10. Regarding John 17, he saw a connection between the oneness community of the disciples and the concept of *laufa* in Mandaeen Gnosis (Appold 1976:189). Similarly, he believed that the gathering into one in John 11:47–53 was comparable to Gnosticism's *laufa* and *kusta* traditions (Appold 1976:243–244). As for John 10, he argued that the oneness expression in John 10 was peculiar to distinctly Gnostic traditions (Appold 1976:260).

Several decades after the publication of Appold's *Oneness Motif*, a growing number of scholars have been proposing that the oneness language in the Gospel is closely related to Judaism's most important creed, the *Shema*. For example, in his 2004 article, Richard Bauckham argued that the word 'one' (ἓν) in John 10:30 referred to the *Shema* (Bauckham 2004:227; cf. Bauckham 2005:163). Similarly, in her 2015 dissertation, Lori Baron suggested that the oneness language of John's Gospel should be read in light of its Jewish background, referring to the *Shema* theme (Baron 2015). Whilst focusing on the ecclesiology of the Gospel, Andrew Byers made a similar point that the oneness language of the Gospel is closely related to the *Shema* (Byers 2017). In addition, Brury Eko Saputra has proposed a *Shema* framework for understanding the oneness language in John 10 (Saputra 2019). Those studies open up the possibility of asking further about the influence of the Jewish worldview on the oneness language usage in the Gospel.

This article sketches the Jewish background for the oneness language in John's Gospel in light of the advancements mentioned above. In doing so, it employs literature research as its working methodology with the narrative approach associated with N.T. Wright as the framework.<sup>1</sup> Wright's approach was influenced by the work of Richard Hays, especially Hay's *The Faith of Jesus*

1. For some critical appraisals on the approach, see Boer (2014), Longenecker (2002), Seifrid (2008) and White (2017).

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*Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Hays 2002:82–117; Wright 2013:110). The approach considers that there was a narrative substructure underlying the worldview of the New Testament writings. Here, this article argues that the narrative substructure underlying the Gospel's oneness language is the Jewish understanding of the oneness of God (monotheism). To prove that, the article will examine how the oneness language was utilised in the Second Temple period. The evidence for the examination is from the work of E.P. Sanders, namely, the common Judaism of the 1st-century era. The worldview employed to do so is based on the work of N.T. Wright, stressing the importance of monotheism, in which he understands Jewish monotheism connected with covenant and eschatology. Finally, this article also pays attention to the Temple destruction and its impact on the oneness language usage of the period.

## The oneness language of the common Judaism

Scholars have already noted that Judaism in the 1st century was not uniform, let alone singular. According to Josephus, there were at least four kinds of Judaism at the time (see *War* 2:119–166; *Ant.* 13:171–173; 18:11–23). However, this does not mean that the Jews held no unifying principle. On the contrary, as shown by E.P. Sanders in his *Judaism: Practice and Belief* (Sanders 1992), we can find commonalities amongst the groups. The primary commonality was the oneness of God, monotheism; Sanders called Judaism united by this view as the common Judaism. Therefore, this article will focus on the common Judaism of the Second Temple period. In doing so, it employs N.T. Wright's proposal for approaching the monotheism of the period: the oneness of God, the oneness of God's people and the one future of God's people (Wright 1992:244–279, 2009).

### Monotheism: The oneness of God

The oneness language usage in common Judaism of the Second Temple period had a dominant reference to monotheism, the oneness of God (Sanders 1992:242). Sanders argued that monotheism was the most important Jewish belief at the time (Sanders 1992:242; cf. Moore 1958:360–361). Ephraim E. Urbach noted that monotheism was 'the belief common to all Jews at the beginning of the first century', and its oneness language affirmed that 'their God was the only God and their religion was the only true religion' (cf. *Ant.* 5. 1, 27, 112; *Sib. Or.* 3.629) (Urbach 1981:273). Interestingly, such a belief in monotheism was not merely a theoretical system but a practical aspect of life (Wright 2013:619–623). Its practicality can be seen in the recitation of the *Shema* (twice a day; *m. Berakhot* 1.1–4) (Gerhardsson 1996:10; Huat 2008:181–182, 2011:2680; Jacobs 2007:453–456) by the Jews at the time (*m. Tamid* 5.1) (Dunn 2006:26–27; Hayward 2004:138; Sanders 1992:242, 247–249; Wright 1992:248, 2013:624). By confessing the *Shema*, the Jews stressed the one God's identity as superior to other beings (cf. 3 Macc 7.9; 1QS 10.12; 11QBer 3; 1QM 18.7; *Spec.* 1.30; *Decal.* 61; *Mut.* 29) (Moore 1958:361; Wright 1992:248–249). It also clarified the distinction between

the creator and the creatures (Hurtado 2005:120–122; Moore 2011:137–138; cf. Thompson 2000:48–53). The Jews were to worship only the creator God and were forbidden to do so to any other beings (McGrath 2012:36–37; cf. Dunn 2006:27–28, 2010:62; Köstenberger 2009:356–357; Sanders 1992:247; Thompson 2001:54), including all intermediary figures respected by the people (Bauckham 1998:118–149, 2007a: 39–53; Hurtado 1998:14–22, 2003:29–48, 2005:117–129). Therefore, the oneness language utilised in monotheism in this period should not be understood numerically (Hurtado 2003:42–44). On the contrary, it was meant to communicate the singular creator God's identity to the world (Bauckham 1998:7, 2005:164).

The use of oneness language referring to monotheism is also dominant in John's Gospel (Bauckham 2005:148; Thompson 2001:17–55; cf. Thompson 2000:53). Some scholars even argued that monotheism occurs from the beginning of the Gospel (Bauckham 2005:149–150; McGrath 2012:56–58; North 2004:155). The references of the oneness language to monotheism were not merely a coincidence but evidence that the Jewish usage of such a language was embedded in the Gospel's narrative substructure. An apparent example is the oneness language in Jesus' claims and actions relating to God (see Jn 5:18; 8:59; 10:31–33; cf. 11:8) that were perceived as blasphemy because of their association with Jewish monotheism (Baron 2015:333; Byers 2017:137; Köstenberger 2009:149; McGrath 2001:78, 80–102). Interestingly, despite being accused as a blasphemer on the ground of Jewish belief in the oneness of God, the Gospel never presented Jesus as a competing god (Bauckham 2008:147; Davies 1992:129–132; Michaels 2010:601). Instead, Jesus' relationship with God was incorporated with the oneness language confessed in the *Shema*. For example, Jesus was portrayed as equal (Jn 10:30, 38) and yet subordinate to the Father (Jn 10:18, 27, 36–37). As stated earlier, the oneness language usage in Jewish monotheism was not supposed to be understood numerically but as the revelation of God's identity. Some scholars use the terms 'relational oneness' and 'revelational oneness' for this understanding (cf. Appold 1976:12–13). Others use 'Christology of divine identity' (Bauckham 2005:148). As present subconsciously in the Jewish worldview, John's Gospel also uses the oneness language referring to Jesus' oneness with God. Such a relationship is the source of Jesus' authority (Jn 5:17, 19; 8:26, 38). Consequently, Jesus does not have authority on his own, but it comes from God, whom Jesus calls his Father (McGrath 2012:60–61). In fact, Jesus' coming to the world is commissioned by God himself (see Jn 5:36; 7:29; 17:4) (Appold 1976:19; Davies 1992:163–167; McGrath 2001:103–116). In addition, in doing his works, Jesus is revealing the identity of the only God of Israel (see Jn 7:28; 8:26) (Appold 1976:20–34; Bauckham 2005:152–153; McGrath 2001:71–79).

### Covenant: The oneness of God's people

The second usage of the oneness language by the Jews of this period referred to the oneness of God's people. Although

divided into many groups with different theological presuppositions, the Jews of the period were united as one people because they had only one God (cf. Philo, *Spec.* 1:52; 4:159; *Virt.* 35; Josephus, *Ant.* 5:111). The oneness of Israel as God's people was initiated by God when he elected and made a covenant with Abraham (Gn 12, 15, 17) (Dunn 2006:29–32; Flusser 2009:8; Moore 2011:138–139; Wright 1992:259). The covenant made Abraham's offspring to be included in the relationship with God (cf. Gn 12; Dt 27–30; Jub 12:19–20) (Dunn 2006:29; Neusner 2002:91–93; Wright 1992:261). Moreover, as the one people of God, Israel would inherit God's promise given to Abraham (cf. Dt 1:8, 11; 6:10–12; 29:12–13) (Wright 1992:261). In addition, they had the assurance that God would intervene in history for their sake (Wright 1992:250–251).

As God's people, Israel was called to live God's vision through their obedience to the Torah (Jub 22.16; Bar 3.36–4.4) (Dunn 2006:32–42). Such a life would show that they reflected their only God to the world. Their oneness itself was an image of the oneness of their God (Bauckham 2005:164). As a reflection of God, the people of Israel were entrusted with a mission to restore the fallen world. They were required to live a holy life amongst the nations (Sanders 1992:286; Wright 1992:260). Like the Qumran community, the Essenes and the Zealots, some groups separated themselves from society to live in holiness before their God (Wright 1992:261–262). Other groups initiated and were involved in some revolts of the period for the same purpose (e.g. the Hasmonean Revolt [BC 167–160] and the AD 66–70 Revolt) (Sanders 1992:280–289; Wright 1992:261–262).

The oneness language in John's Gospel has also developed the idea of the unity of God's people from the story of Israel. The election of the disciples was based on the covenant God made with his people in the Old Testament (Chennattu 2006:59–61, 68–80, 180–193). Just like the people of Israel, the disciples were chosen to restore God's world (see Jn 1:40–41, 49–51; 13:31–35; 15). The Gospel used several images to visualise this worldview. In John 10, the Gospel alluded to the shepherd image from Ezekiel 34. Regarding the oneness of God's people, John 10:16 stressed the unity of the people under God through his messiah, the true shepherd. The nature of the unity was inclusive, because John 10:16 invited 'other sheep' to be one people of God. As John 10 alluded to Ezekiel 34, it is possible to interpret 'the other sheep' as the Samaritans (Keener 2003:818). The basis for this relationship was the covenant binding God and his people (Van der Watt 2000:159–160). In John 15, the Gospel used the vine and its branch image to show the unity of God and his people. Whoever stayed in the covenant with God, he or she would live (Jn 15.7–17) (Stevick 2011:184–216). Such language prepared the readers for a theological explanation of the oneness language in John 17 (Bauckham 2007:265–266; Dodd 1958:418–419). Jesus' prayer in John 17 made it clear that the basis for the unity of the disciples is the oneness of Jesus and his father (Jn 17:22).

## Eschatology: The one future of God's people

Another reference to the oneness language in common Judaism is Jewish eschatology. As God's people, the Jews faced a difficult question regarding their condition. Their oppression and sufferings brought doubt about the protection of their God (Flusser 2009:29). Trying to make sense of their struggle, the Jews saw their condition as a punishment for their sins (Thettayil 2007:243; Wright 1992:272–273). In this context, sins against God could refer to a violation of their commitment to the one God confessed in the *Shema* (Moore 1958:465). Therefore, the people had to repent from their sins (cf. Is 40:1–2; Jr 31:31, 34, 38, 40; Ezk 36:24–25) (Wright 1992:273). Some sects interpreted the act of repenting as fighting against the pagan who oppressed them (Wright 1992:302), whilst others believed that Torah observance was the best expression of their repentance (cf. *Ant.* 18.12) (Wright 1992:194–195). Despite the difference in expression, their hope was the same: that their God would one day deliver and bring them back to Zion (see Is 32:22, 44–46; 52:7–8; Ezk 43.1–5) (Horbury 1998:64–68; Talmon 1992:107–108; Huat 1997:23–51; Wright 1992:269, 278, 300–301, 2013:1049–1050). The hope was supplemented by reading the exodus event in their worship (Bauckham 2006:44–46). In the end, it underlined the importance of God's messiah as the one sent to deliver his people (see 1QS a 2:11–12, 14; 1QS 9:11; CD. 12:23–13.1; Bar 39.7) (Bauckham 2006:39; Flusser 2009:29–35; Sanders 1992:295–297; Wright 1992:299–301, 307–320) – in short, the one God had prepared for his one people, one bright future.

The oneness language in John's Gospel is also utilised eschatologically. It is evident primarily when the language refers to Jesus' functions as the eschatological prophet and messiah sent by the one God (Bauckham 2006:63). Acting as the eschatological prophet, Jesus was the only one to be expected to bring a new exodus to the oppressed and suffering people of God (see also Jn 6–7) (Bauckham 2006:53; Brunson 2003:153–156). Similarly, as the eschatological messiah, Jesus was the one to be sent to rule and reign over the people on behalf of the one God (Jn 1:43–51; 12:34; 4 Ezr 7:2; 2 Bar 30:1). Regarding Jesus' role as the messiah, John Ashton's comment is worth noting here. He said that 'there is nothing inherently blasphemous in a claim to be the messiah' (Ashton 1991:241). Ashton's comment is supported by the data provided by Richard A. Horsley that there were many, like Judas, son of Ezekias (4 BC) and Manahem (AD 66), regarded as messiahs without being accused as blasphemers (Horsley 1992:276–295; cf. Beasley-Murray 2002:75). In addition, the oneness language referring to Jesus' eschatological roles corresponds with the Christological titles that appeared in the Gospel. In John's Gospel, the Son of God referred to, on the one hand, Jesus' role as a representation of the one God's people and, on the other hand, his role as the only saviour of the people (Ashton 1991:260–262; Bauckham 2006:68; Hurtado 2003:360–361). As a title, the king of Israel (identical to the king of the Jews) was referred to as the Davidic messiah (see Ps Sol. 17:24), who would come to reign over his people (Ashton 1991:262; Bauckham 2006:59–60).

Similarly, the Son of Man draws upon Daniel 7:13–14, also referring to the Davidic messiah in the Second Temple Judaism (Bauckham 2006:67; Burkett 1991:16–37; Vanderkam 1992:187). Furthermore, by alluding to Ezekiel 34 in John 10, the Gospel envisioned the deliverance from God, through his messiah, as the gathering into one of God's people under the one true shepherd (Jn 10:16) (Saputra 2019:76).

## The oneness language and the Temple destruction

In addition to the common Judaism, the destruction of the Temple played a significant role in the oneness language usage in the Jewish context and John's Gospel. Neusner listed four responses, including the Christian response, to the destruction of the Temple (Neusner 2004). Here, the focus would be on the responses relating to the Temple's function as the symbol of the oneness of God and his people. It is important to note what Josephus said about the Temple: 'one Temple for the one God' (*Ap.* 2.193) (Dunn 2006:46; Sanders 1992:50). In other words, the Temple was a symbol of God's oneness and the place for the people to gather as one people. That was why the Jews had only one Temple in Jerusalem (Hayward 2004:139). Köstenberger rightly commented that 'the erection of the temples at Elephantine (Upper Egypt), Leontopolis (Lower Egypt), and in Samaria ... none rivaled the prestige of the Jerusalem sanctuary' (cf. Josephus, *Wars.* 7.2–4, 10) (Köstenberger 2006:83). The centrality and holiness of the Temple were also crucial to the Qumran community. Accordingly, they left the Temple because of the defilement of the Temple's purity (Dunn 2006:46; Kerr 2002:55–57). Moreover, the Jews considered the Temple the centre of all things (Dunn 2006:42–47; Goldenberg 2006:192–194). It represented Zion, the place God chose to dwell and be worshipped by his people (Davies 1994:50–54; Dunn 2006:44–47). Furthermore, it also reminded the people of their covenant with God (Goldenberg 2006:196; Wright 1992:226). That was why, to the Jews, 'Judaism without the Temple seems to have been unthinkable' (*Ap.* 2.193–198). Nevertheless, ironically, 13 years later, Josephus realised that his previous opinion had been mistaken and that Judaism could continue even without the Temple (Köstenberger 2006:81–84).

Knowing that the Temple was central to the Jews, its destruction meant a significant challenge to their faith and theology. It forced the Jews to rethink their theological formulation regarding the Temple. Some scholars noted that the Jews were not ready to accept the destruction of the Temple. Hence, they planned to rebuild it (Goodman 2007). Others, represented by the Jamnian sages, responded to the event by temporarily redirecting the Temple's symbolic function as the gathering place of the people to the synagogue (Davies 1996:51; Köstenberger 2005:222). As such, the synagogue was a place both to study the Torah and to unify the people of God (Köstenberger 2006:85–87). By living the Torah and staying united as the one people, they believed God would rescue and deliver them from their plague (Goldenberg 2006:201–202; Köstenberger 2006; Thettayil

2007:243). Practically, such a belief drove them to arrange the liturgy according to the *Shema* recitation (cf. *m.* Ber. 1.14) (Huat 2011:2684; Sanders 1992:195–198). By resting the *Shema*, they were reminded of their exodus from Egypt, which led to God's command in Deuteronomy 6:4–9, later known as the *Shema* (Segal 2002:138–139).

Like the Jamnian Sages, the author of John's Gospel was also forced to respond to and rethink the event. The most pressing issue was understanding the presence of God and the unity of his people. Some Christians interpreted the event as a punishment from God for rejecting Jesus (Davies 1996:49). For the Gospel, the event confirmed that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Temple (see Jn 2:18–22; 1:14; 1:51; 4:20–24) (Kerr 2002). Some scholars argued that the idea of Jesus replacing and fulfilling the Temple's function was anticipated, even in the Old Testament, just like the Temple replaced Bethel and the Tabernacle (Bauckham 2007:263–264; Davies 1994:289; Dunn 2006:124; Hoskins 2006:104–146; Köstenberger 2009:422–430, 433; Matson 2001:147–148). That said, Jesus represented God by dwelling amongst the people (Jn 1:14, 51) (Coloe 2001:23–27; Davies 1994:295–296; Hoskins 2006:135; Köstenberger 2006:92–93). More importantly, it is even more evident in the oneness language usage in the Gospel. For example, it is apparent in Jesus' oneness language usage during the Temple festival in John 10. By stating that he is one with God (Jn 10:30), Jesus is saying that he is now replacing the Temple as the place signalling the presence of God (cf. Kerr 2002:254–255). Similarly, the oneness language in John 17 has also strongly echoed the Temple as the place for the people to pray. By praying for his disciples, Jesus acts as the high priest and bears the name of YHWH (cf. Kerr 2002:332–335).

As previously stated, the Gospel's response to the destruction is to replace it with the figure of Jesus. One consequence of that is the renewal of the criterion for defining the oneness of God's people. An apparent passage depicting this new criterion is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Because Jesus was the fulfilment of the Temple, both the Jews and Samaritans did not need to worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem (destroyed in AD 70) or Mount Gerizim (destroyed in 120 BC) (Hayward 2004:142; MacDonald 1964:330–331). Instead, both were able to worship God in truth and spirit (for schism and conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans: Bowman 1975; Hjelm 2000). According to Kerr, worship in truth and spirit is equivalent to worship in Jesus (Kerr 2002:195). In addition, when read together with John 10:16, which was an allusion to Ezekiel 34, the Samaritans fit the 'other sheep' description brought together with the Jews as one people under the one shepherd (Saputra 2019:69–71; cf. Keener 2003:818). In other words, Jesus' role as the fulfilment of the Temple encompassed the latter's function to gather all people to be one people of God – in this case, both the Jews and the Samaritans (cf. Ezk 34:22–24).

## Conclusion

The presence of the oneness language is dominant in John's Gospel. One way of understanding its functions is by reading it in light of the Jewish context of the Second

Temple period. Such a reading is justifiable because the Gospel's oneness language reverberates the Jewish narrative and worldview. Using N.T. Wright's narrative approach, this article affirms that it is indeed the case. The findings of the article show that the primary reference to the Jewish usage of the oneness language was to refer to monotheism, the oneness of God. Other usages were still ramifications of that primary usage, namely, speaking of the oneness of God's people and the one future of God's people. Similarly, John's Gospel used the oneness language as such. It spoke of the oneness of God in relationship with Jesus, the covenant God made with his people and the deliverance of God. An event worth mentioning regarding the oneness language usage was the destruction of the Temple. The Jews, represented by the Jamnian sages, responded by relocating the Temple to the synagogue. Hence, the symbol of God's oneness with his people was redirected to the synagogue. Meanwhile, John's Gospel interpreted the event alongside the figure of Jesus. The Gospel pointed to Jesus as the fulfilment of the Temple. Consequently, the function of the Temple as a symbol of oneness was replaced by Jesus.

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