

OPEN YOUR BIBLE

Study Companion

Shema — שמע

Hear, Listen, Obey—and What the Hebrew Verb Can Actually Tell Us

A printable companion for tracing shama' through ordinary hearing, understanding, covenant listening, obedience, prayer, wisdom, prophecy, the Shema, and the Greek akouō bridge.

Use this packet with your Bible open. Write what the passage actually does with the word before choosing a definition.

WORD-STUDY RULE A word can include more than one sense without carrying every sense into every occurrence. Context tells us whether shama' means hear, listen, understand, heed, or obey.

Don't take my word for it—Open your Bible.

Before You Study

Record your starting position before you edit it.

What do you currently think “Shema” means?

Have you heard the claim “Shema means hear and obey”? What do you think it means?

Do you think shama' means “obey” every time it appears? Why or why not?

What do you expect the word itself to prove about discipleship?

Keep These Questions Beside You

For every occurrence ask:

What is being heard?

Who is hearing?

Is the object a sound, report, person, command, voice, prayer, language, or legal case?

Does the context require a response?

Does the passage show that the hearer actually responded?

Lexical Snapshot

שמע — shama'

Possible contextual senses include:

- hear
- listen
- attend / give heed
- understand
- perceive
- obey
- hear a case or report
- in causative forms, make heard / announce / proclaim

שמה — shema

In Deuteronomy 6:4, shema is the Qal masculine singular imperative of shama'.

A natural starting gloss is:

"Hear!" / "Listen!"

Why is it important that the famous word is an imperative rather than a noun meaning "obedience"?

My First Working Definition

Based only on the lexical snapshot, write a careful one-sentence definition.

Ordinary Hearing

Genesis 3:8

READ: Genesis 3:1–10

What do Adam and the woman hear?

Does the occurrence itself contain obedience?

What do they do after hearing?

EVIDENCE CHECK If shama' always meant "hear and obey," this passage would be difficult to explain. Here the verb describes auditory perception.

Yehovah Hears

READ: Genesis 16:7–13; Genesis 21:14–19; Exodus 2:23–25; Psalm 6:8–10

What does Yehovah hear in each passage?

Does His hearing imply indifference or attentive response?

Why can "obey" not be imported into these occurrences?

Evidence Boundary

Divine hearing may include response, but Yehovah is not "obeying" the people who cry to Him. The same root can carry different contextual senses.

Understanding Speech

Genesis 42:23

READ: Genesis 42:18–24

Why do Joseph's brothers speak freely in front of him?

What does shama' communicate about Joseph in this scene?

Genesis 11:7

READ: Genesis 11:1–9

What happens when people can no longer shama' one another's speech?

SEMANTIC MOVEMENT Hearing can extend into understanding when the issue is whether speech is comprehended.

A Hearing Heart

1 Kings 3:5–12

Hebrew phrase:

לֵב שָׁמַע — lev shomea'

What does Solomon ask Yehovah to give him?

What tasks does Solomon need this “hearing heart” to perform?

Which English words best communicate the sense here: hearing, listening, understanding, discerning, obeying? Explain.

Hearing a Case

Deuteronomy 1:16–17

READ: Deuteronomy 1:9–18

What are the judges commanded to hear?

What must happen after they hear?

What does this judicial use teach you about semantic range?

From Hear to Listen

READ: Deuteronomy 4:1–8; Deuteronomy 5:1–5

What follows the command for Israel to hear/listen?

Which verbs appear alongside hearing?

Does the passage collapse hearing and doing into one verb, or connect them as a sequence?

Hearing the Voice

COMPARE:

- Genesis 22:18
- Genesis 26:5
- Exodus 15:26
- Exodus 19:5
- Jeremiah 7:23–24

Who is speaking in each passage?

What does “listening to the voice” require?

Where would the English word “obey” communicate the force better than bare “hear”?

CONSTRUCTION RULE Shama’ + an authoritative “voice” frequently carries the sense of heeding or obeying that voice.

Double Hearing

Exodus 19:5

Hebrew:

אִם־שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ

im shamoā’ tishme‘u

Deuteronomy 11:13

Hebrew:

אִם־שָׁמַעְתִּי תִשְׁמָעוּ

im shamoā’ tishme‘u

What repeated root do you see?

What effect does the infinitive-absolute construction have?

How do English translations communicate the intensity?

The Shema in Context

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

READ the entire paragraph before answering.

What does verse 4 command Israel to do?

What truth about Yehovah follows?

What response appears in verse 5?

Where are the words to be kept?

What are parents to do with them?

In what ordinary settings are the words to be spoken?

What physical reminders are named?

Evidence Map

Complete the flow:

SHEMA → _____

LOVE → _____

WORDS ON HEART → _____

TEACH → _____

SPEAK → _____

REMEMBER / MARK → _____

PARAGRAPH RULE Do not force every action in verses 5–9 into the lexical definition of shema. Let the paragraph show what faithful hearing produces.

The Three Shema Passages

Traditional Keriat Shema commonly includes:

1. Deuteronomy 6:4–9
2. Deuteronomy 11:13–21
3. Numbers 15:37–41

READ all three.

What themes repeat?

How do hearing, love, commandments, memory, teaching, and embodied practice relate?

What belongs to the biblical text itself, and what belongs to later liturgical tradition?

Deuteronomy 28: Hearing and Doing

READ: Deuteronomy 28:1–2, 15

In the blessing section, what two actions are connected?

In the curse section, what two failures are connected?

Does hearing replace doing, or lead toward doing?

Samuel: Better Than Sacrifice

1 Samuel 15:22-23

READ: 1 Samuel 15:1-23

What command had Saul already received?

What did Saul actually do?

What religious explanation does Saul offer?

What does Samuel say is better than sacrifice?

Why is “obey” a strong English rendering of shama‘ here?

APPLICATION CHECK Religious activity cannot substitute for hearing the command Yehovah actually gave.

Samuel: “Your Servant Is Listening”

READ: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

What kind of hearing happens at first?

What changes once Samuel knows Who is speaking?

What does servant posture add to hearing?

Prophetic Deafness

Jeremiah 7:21-28

What did Yehovah command?

What did the people do instead?

Is their problem inability to hear sound or refusal to yield?

Ezekiel 3:4–11

Why will Israel refuse to hear Ezekiel?

Zechariah 7:8–14

What did the people do with their hearts?

What reversal occurs when they later cry out?

Psalm 81

READ: Psalm 81:8–14

What does Yehovah wish His people would do?

What action is placed beside listening?

What is the opposite of listening in the psalm?

Psalm 95 and Hebrews

READ: Psalm 95:6–11; Hebrews 3:7–19; Hebrews 4:1–11

What warning follows “Today, if you hear His voice”?

Did the wilderness generation encounter Yehovah’s word?

What did they do with what they heard?

How does Hebrews describe the failure?

IMPORTANT BOUNDARY Scripture can describe people who hear and still rebel.
Hearing does not mechanically equal obedience.

Greek Bridge: Akouō

Greek:

ἀκούω — akouō

The Septuagint often uses *akouō* to translate *shamaʿ*.

Deuteronomy 6:4 begins:

Ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ — Akoue, Israel

What is gained by noticing the Greek bridge?

Why should Hebrew *shamaʿ* and Greek *akouō* still be studied on their own terms?

Yeshua Quotes the Shema

READ: Mark 12:28–34

What question is Yeshua answering?

What words does He quote first?

What command follows “Hear, Israel”?

What second command does He join to it?

What does this teach about hearing, love, and allegiance?

Different Kinds of Hearing

READ: Mark 4:1–25

For each soil, record what happens after the word is heard.

Path

Rocky Ground

Thorns

Good Soil

What does this parable teach about the difference between receiving sound and fruitful hearing?

Test the Popular Claims

Claim 1

“Shema literally means hear and obey.”

Evidence for:

Evidence against an absolute definition:

My conclusion:

Claim 2

“Shema only means hear. Obedience is added by translators.”

Evidence for / against:

My conclusion:

Claim 3

“Biblical Hebrew has no word for obey.”

Compare shama' with:

שָׁמַר — shamar: keep / guard / observe

עָשָׂה — asah: do / make

What is more accurate than the slogan?

Claim 4

“If someone heard Yehovah’s word, they obeyed.”

Test with Psalm 95, Jeremiah 7, Ezekiel 3, and Mark 4.

My conclusion:

Claim 5

“The Shema is only a declaration that God is one.”

Test Deuteronomy 6:4–9.

My conclusion:

Evidence Map

Fill in the best contextual sense for shama' in each passage.

Genesis 3:8 → _____

Genesis 16:11 → _____

Genesis 42:23 → _____

Deuteronomy 1:16 → _____

Exodus 19:5 → _____

Deuteronomy 6:4 → _____

1 Samuel 15:22 → _____

1 Kings 3:9 → _____

Jeremiah 7:24 → _____

Psalms 95:7 → _____

Build Your Definition

What is the broadest shared idea?

When does shama' mean ordinary hearing?

When does it move toward understanding?

When does it move toward heed or obey?

What determines the sense?

My Working Definition

What the Word Can and Cannot Prove

The word CAN show:

The word CANNOT by itself settle:

Personal Response

Where am I most tempted to hear Scripture without letting it correct me?

Which command or teaching have I been treating as information rather than instruction from the King?

What would “Speak, Yehovah. Your servant is listening” look like in one concrete area this week?

Final Definition

After completing the study, write your final one-sentence definition of shama’.

Then answer:

Does “Shema means hear and obey” need to be rejected, corrected, or carefully qualified?

Notes

Use this space for cross-references, Hebrew observations, questions, or anything you want to revisit.

