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5. The Decalogue

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5. The Decalogue: Numerical Features of the Two Versions

The purpose of the present survey is to detect and define the formal differences and correspondences between the two versions of the Decalogue with regard to their numerical features. This may shed new light on their individual characteristics.

The Exodus Version

20:1	Introduction to the Decalogue	7 words
20:1-17	The entire text of the Decalogue pericope	17 verses
20:2-17	The Decalogue as such	172 words
20:7	The Third Commandment: the holy Name	17 words
20:7	The 17 words have altogether 51 (3 x 17) letters	
20:11	Motivation for the Fourth Commandment	26 words
20:12-16	The Fifth has 15 words, the Sixth-Ninth have 11	26 words ¹
20:17	The Tenth Commandment	15 words
20:13-17	The Sixth-Tenth Commandments (11 + 15)	26 words
	These 26 words divide into 15a and 11b	
20:18-21	Epilogue to the Decalogue	60 words
20:22-23	YHWH tells Moses to convey a message	26 words
20:22b-23	YHWH's prohibition of graven images	17 words
20:24-26	YHWH ordains the building of an altar	47 words
20:22-26	Two commandments regarding the cult	73 words
20:1-26	The Decalogue passage as a whole	26 verses

Contrary to what one would expect, the First and Second Commandments are not specifically given prominence by means of one of the divine name numbers. However, this is largely compensated by the extra commandment in 20:22b-23, which is highlighted by the number **17**. See further below.

The Third Commandment is given prominence by the use of **17** words, which are further highlighted by the fact that they have **51** (3 x **17**) letters. This technique is reminiscent of Exod. 3:14, the revelation of YHWH's name: **7** words in 14a, with **26** letters, and 8 words in 14b, with **34** (2 x **17**) letters. See my analysis of [Exodus 1-4](#).

The Fourth Commandment is also given prominence, in this case, by the fact that **26** words are used in the motivation for the Sabbath Commandment, v. 11.

A conspicuous feature of this Commandment is the use of **7** categories to which the prohibition applies:

- You
- Your Son
- Your Daughter
- Your Slave**
- Your Slave-Girl
- Your Cattle
- Your Alien within your gates.²

¹ The numbers **15** and **11** represent the numerical values of **YH** and **WH** respectively.

² For the series of **7** possessive pronouns, compare [Psalm 8](#).

The category most likely to be set to work on the Sabbath, *the slave*, is positioned at the centre. See the discussion of the Deuteronomy version below.

The Tenth Commandment exhibits the same feature: **7** 'objects' belonging to the neighbour. Here, the category most prone to be coveted, *the slave-girl*, is positioned at the centre:

The House of *your neighbour*
 The Wife of *your neighbour*
 His Slave
His Slave-Girl
 His Ox
 His Ass
 Anything that belongs to *your neighbour*.

Note the inclusion function of '*your neighbour*' at the beginning and end.

The Sixth-Tenth Commandments are highlighted by the use of **26** words (vs. 13-17).

Finally, the message regarding YHWH's prohibition of graven images, which Moses had to convey to the people (vs. 22b-23) is given prominence by the fact that it comprises **17** words. But there is more: the number **47**, the words in 20:24-26 about YHWH ordaining the building of an altar, is highly significant. It occurs not only here, but also in Exodus 14:2-4, 33:1-3, and 33:12-13, and has everything to do with the fact that Moses is YHWH's messenger. In fact, the number **47** represents the numerical value of מִלְאָכִי, 'my angel' (13+12+1+11+10), occurring explicitly in Exod. 23:23 (compare also 32:34). See my analysis of [Exodus 33](#).³

The Deuteronomy Version

5:6-21	Total number of words in the Decalogue: 189, i.e., 17 more than in Exodus	
5:1-5	Prologue to the Decalogue	72 words
5:1-4	Introduction and Moses' reference to the covenant	52 (2 x 26) words
5:6-10	First and Second Commandments (16 + 27)	43 words
5:7-8	No other gods and no graven images!	23 words
5:11	Third Commandment: the holy Name	17 words
5:11	The 17 words have altogether 51 (3 x 17) letters, as in Exodus	
5:12-15	The Sabbath Commandment as a whole	64 (2 x 32) words
5:13-14	Commandment: work six days and observe the Sabbath	32 (6 + 26) words
5:15	Motivation for observing the Sabbath: YHWH freed you	23 words
5:13-15	Commandment and Motivation	55 (32 + 23) ⁴
5:16	Fifth Commandment (7 words more than Exodus)	22 words
5:17-21	Sixth-Tenth Commandments	27 words
5:17-22	Sixth-Tenth Commandments and the Epilogue	51 (3 x 17) words
5:24	First part of the people's speech: God's <i>glory</i> and <i>voice</i>	23 words
5:25-26	Second part: the people's fear that they might die	32 words
5:24-26	Words dealing with YHWH's awesome <i>glory</i> and <i>voice</i>	55 words ⁵
5:28	Moses tells the people that YHWH understands their fear	23 words

³ The angel in Num. 20:16 has a different role: he brings the Israelites out of Egypt. It is interesting to note that in Isa. 63:9 the angel is denied the role of saviour attributed to him in Num. 20:16. The angel in Mal. 3:1 ('my angel') is to prepare the way for God.

⁴ For the double *kabod* formula (**55** = **32** + **23**), which represents the two numerical values of *kabod*, 'glory', see the General Introduction, under [Special Patterns](#). This compositional formula is also used in 5:24-26.

⁵ There can be no doubt that the use of the double *kabod* formula is intentional, because *kabod*, 'glory', occurs in the text (v. 24a).

5:28-29	YHWH appreciates Israel's mind to fear him	32 words
5:30-31	YHWH promises to reveal the statutes and Moses exhorts the people to conform to all YHWH commands them	26 words
5:28-31	The settlement of the problem of hearing God's voice	68 (4 x 17) words
5:33	Moses urges the people: if you obey, you'll prosper	17 words
5:23-33	Moses' address to the people after the Epilogue	187 (11 x 17) words

The key-word 'fire' occurs **7** times: vs. 4, 5, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26.

The key-word 'voice' likewise occurs **7** times: vs. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28a, 28b.

YHWH occurs **10** times in the Decalogue: vs. 6, 9, 11a, 11b, 12, 14, 15a, 15b, 16a, 16b.

The divine name occurs in total **14** (2 x 7) times: **5x** in the Prologue (vs. 2, 3, 4, 5a (2x)), **10x** in the Decalogue, and **9x** in 5:22-33 (vs. 22, 24, 25, 27a, 27b, 28a, 28b, 32, 33).

In the Leningrad Codex the text of the Decalogue (5:6-21) is divided in **10** sections by means of the *parashah setumah* (S): after vs. 5, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21a, 21b. See *BHS*. Note the remarkable S within v. 21, between 21a and 21b. See further below.

The specification of the prohibition of labour on the sabbath in Deuteronomy is significantly different from the Exodus version. Instead of the 7 categories of Exodus, Deuteronomy has no less than 9: you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your slave-girl, your ox, your ass, any of your cattle, the alien residing among you.

In order to create a compositional centre containing the most vulnerable category, the author has devised a clever numerical arrangement of the **26** words, in a perfect symmetric pattern. Now *the slave and the slave-girl* are positioned at the focal point.

I present this beautiful text in translation. The 9 categories are underlined:

The seventh day is a sabbath to YHWH your God;	5w.--	}	
on it you shall not do any work,	4w.-	}	
<u>you</u> , or your <u>son</u> , or your <u>daughter</u> ,	3w.-	}	7
or your <u>slave</u>, or your <u>slave-girl</u>	2w.	}	26
or your <u>ox</u> , or your <u>ass</u> , or any of your <u>cattle</u>	4w.-	}	
or the <u>alien</u> within your gates	3w.-	}	7
so that your slave and slave-girl may rest as you do.	5w.-	}	

The text is structured throughout by the number **7**. There are no less than six pairs having **7** words together: the 1st branch of the menorah, like its counterpart the 7th, together with the mathematical centre have 5+2=7 words; the 2nd branch and its counterpart the 6th, like the 2nd and 3rd, and the 5th and the 6th have 4+3=7 words; the 3rd branch and its counterpart the 5th have 3+4=7 words. The **2** words at the centre are flanked by **12** words on either side. The mentioning of the *slave* and *slave-girl* at the centre of the menorah is of special importance for the interpretation of the text. As the focal point, this category receives specific emphasis, which should not surprise us, since the slave and slave-girl were the most vulnerable members of the household and subject to being called upon first to carry out chores or run errands on the Sabbath. No wonder that they are explicitly mentioned once again in the last line!

The Tenth Commandment is also significantly different. First, instead of one (which is used a second time in v. 21b), two verbs are used: 'covet' in 21a and 'crave for' in 21b. Second, as indicated by the S after 21a, this commandment is split in two: the coveting of the neighbour's *wife*, and the craving after his *possessions*.⁶

⁶ Regarded as two different commandments in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran tradition.

Moreover, whereas in Exodus the *house* is mentioned first, here it is the *wife*. In this way the Deuteronomic author clearly differentiates between *the wife* and the *material possessions*. At the same time, he maintains (with Exodus) a series of **7** possessions, but differently, because he adds the *land*:

The House of *your neighbour*
 His Land
 His Slave
His Slave-Girl
 His Ox
 His Ass
 Anything that belongs to *your neighbour*.

The Decalogue pericope, 5:1-22, can be outlined in a perfectly symmetric menorah pattern:

5:1-5	Prologue
5:6-11	Prohibitions
5:12-14	Commandments
5:15	Motivation for observing the Sabbath
5:16	Commandment
5:17-21	Prohibitions
2:22	Epilogue

This symmetric menorah pattern resembles the overall structure of the book as a whole, in which the **Lawcode** has pride of place at the centre of the menorah:

Deut. 1-3	Opening narrative: Moses looks back
Deut. 4 :1-40	Opening prophetic sermon
Deut. 4 :44-11:32	The Horeb covenant
Deut. 12-26	The Lawcode: statutes and stipulations
Deut. 27-29	The Moab covenant
Deut. 30	Concluding prophetic sermon
Deut. 31-34	Concluding narrative: Moses looks forward

For more examples of menorahs in the Book of Deuteronomy, especially in chapters 31-34, see my article “The Setting of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy”, in: *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomical Literature: Festschrift C.H.W. Brekelmans*, edited by M. Vervenne and J. Lust, Leuven, 1997, pp. 111-129.

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