

6. Numerical Features of Exodus 23

This chapter is a typical example of what seems to be a conglomerate of diverse laws, commandments and guidelines. They range from the spreading of rumours, giving malicious evidence, perverting justice, showing favouritism, how to deal with stray animals of your enemy, lying in court, taking bribes, oppressing aliens, letting the land lie fallow every seventh year, abstaining from work every seventh day, invoking other gods, celebrating the feast of Unleavened Bread, prescriptions regarding blood, fat, the first fruits, the boiling of a kid in its mother's milk (vs. 1-19). All this is followed by YHWH's promise to send an angel before the Israelites to guard them and bring them to the promised land, provided that they heed him and listen to his voice. He shall drive their enemies away to prevent them from getting ensnared into worship of other gods (vs. 20-33).

The question arises whether we have to do with a conglomeration of miscellaneous material, or whether we can detect rules governing the compositional structure of this composite text. The logotechnical analysis of the chapter has revealed how the material was grouped and structured by the use of the divine name numbers as a literary organizing principle.

23:2-3	Integrity and truthfulness in giving evidence in a lawsuit	17 words
23:4-5	The right attitude towards your enemy and his possessions	23 words
23:1-5	The material in this section is sealed by the number 26	52 (2 x 26) words
23:6-8	Promote the course of justice: do not lie; refuse bribes	26 words
23:9	Do not oppress the alien	13 words
23:6-9	The material in this section is organized by the formula	39 = 26 + 13 ¹

In light of the strong emphasis on the prohibition of idolatry (vs. 13, 24, and 32-33), it may be intentional that the **91 (7 x 13)** words of vs. 1-9, divide precisely into **39 + 13 + 39**, with the remarkable **13**-word instruction about the ass in v. 5 at the centre. Compare vs. 31-33 below!

23:10-13	Measures to provide food for the poor and rest for labourers This section is concluded by a plea not to invoke other gods	51 (3 x 17) words v. 13
23:14-17	Instructions for keeping the three feasts: vs. 14-15 and 16-17 The key-words 'three times' (vs. 14 and 17) function as a device for inclusion The command to come into YHWH's presence three times concludes this section	52 (26 + 26) words
23:18-19	Four cultic prescriptions serve as transition to the next section	24 words
23:20-21	YHWH promises to send a guarding angel: obey him!	26 words
23:22-23	The angel will bring the Israelites to the indigenous nations	28 words ²
23:24-25	YHWH urges the people not to worship other gods	26 words
23:26-27	They should worship YHWH: he will bless and keep them	26 words
23:28-30	YHWH promises to drive their enemies away	23 words
23:31-33	He will establish their borders, but they should drive the nations away to prevent them from ensnaring the Israelites into worshipping other gods	39 words.

¹ For the YHWH-*echad* formula: YHWH is One, see the [General Introduction](#), under "Special patterns". The use of this formula anticipates the warning in the following passage not to invoke other gods (v. 13).

² For the idea that an angel goes before Moses, see Exod. 32:34 and 33:1-3. It is intriguing to note what is said of YHWH's 'angel' in 23:21, "*my name abides in him*". This may be understood as referring to Moses, whom the Israelites had to heed and obey; compare Deut. 18:15-20! If this mysterious phrase refers to Moses, it can be explained in terms of the numerical value of his name (**39** = 13+21 (= **34**) + 5). For particulars, see [Exodus 33](#) at 33:17, where it is said that YHWH *knows Moses by name*.