

Exodus 21-24: Specimen of a Numerical Composition A Fresh Approach to Resolve Two Literary Problems

An earlier version of this article was submitted in September 2012 for publication in *Vetus Testamentum*, but since it was summarily rejected as being 'speculative' and showing 'a selective and manipulative use of the data', I submitted a slightly revised version in April 2013 for publication in *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Having been notified that the article is 'inappropriate for JBL' and that it fails 'to be a useful contribution to the academic study of the Hebrew Bible', I have now decided to publish it here. Let the unprejudiced readers judge for themselves.

Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to shed new light on Exodus 21-24, the passage dealing with the Book of the Covenant and the ratification of the covenant; more specifically to address two crucial questions: its precise delimitation, and its compositional architecture. On neither of these issues has any accord of opinion been reached. The great variety of scholarly opinion can be explained as based on subjective considerations by which the objective criteria provided by the text itself are disregarded. I shall argue that the key to finding objective criteria lies in a fresh approach to the literary analysis of a biblical text, based on the Masoretic layout markers and the crucial insight that these writings are numerical compositions constructed with the help of specific numbers which function as structural devices. This insight, which has been substantiated by the numerical analysis of a large number of texts, stems primarily from the fact that the transmitters of the Hebrew text diligently counted verses, words, and even letters, and that they located and marked the centre of books and groups of books in terms of verses, words, and even letters. I shall demonstrate that Exodus 21-24 is positioned at the centre of the book of Exodus and that it is a meticulously designed numerical composition with clear-cut edges not only at its outer boundaries but also at the seams between its subsections.

A numerical analysis of a large number of biblical texts has brought to light that the authors /editors used specific numbers and their multiples to give structure to their writings and to imbue them with symbolic significance. It concerns the number **7**, which signifies 'fullness', and **17** and **26**, the so-called 'divine name numbers' signifying YHWH's presence. They represent the two numerical values of the letters YHWH: **26** = 10 + 5 + 6 + 5 (sum of the numerals) and **17** = 1(0) + 5 + 6 + 5 (sum of the digits: the number 10 is counted as 1, because the zero has no quantity). The discovery of the high density of occurrences of the divine name numbers and their multiples has incontrovertibly substantiated the Jewish tradition that the name of God has been woven into the fabric of the Torah as in a piece of textile, the so-called *arigah* tradition.¹

To introduce the reader to the wonderful world of the biblical numerical compositions, let me present three simple but telling specimens: Deut 1:34-40, Psalm 23, and Psalm 92.

In **Deuteronomy 1**, the passage dealing with YHWH's decision regarding admission to the land (1:34-40) is made up of **7** verses, with v 37, 'Entrance refused to Moses' at the centre:

Verse 34	YHWH's reaction to the Israelites' words	8	
Verse 35	Entrance refused to the <u>old generation</u>	15	} 34 (2 x 17)
Verse 36	Entrance granted to <i>Caleb</i>	19	
Verse 37	Entrance refused to Moses	11	
Verse 38	Entrance granted to <i>Joshua</i>	15	} 34 (2 x 17)
Verse 39	Entrance granted to the <u>new generation</u>	19	
Verse 40	YHWH's command to the Israelites	8	

¹ For the *arigah* tradition, see C.J. Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, BIBAL Press, North Richland Hills, 2000, 92-93.

In this case the 11-word verse 37 constitutes the *mathematical* centre both in terms of verses and words: $3 + 1 + 3 = 7$ verses, and $(8 + 34) = 42 + 11 + 42 = (34 + 8) = 95$ words.

The centre is flanked on either side directly by **34** words: verses 35-36 and 38-39 respectively. The passage is delimited by **8** words at the beginning and **8** words at the end, functioning as an inclusion. The most important divine decision is positioned in pride of place at the centre: God's refusal to grant Moses admission, a matter returned to in 3,26-28.

Psalm 23 is phrased in such a way that there is a sudden shift from *speaking about* God to *addressing* him directly, in verse 4, beginning with כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי, 'for you are with me'. Such sudden shifts are typical literary devices used in the Psalms to draw special attention to what follows. A closer examination shows that these **3** words, which constitute the gist of the poem, are positioned in the mathematical centre, flanked by **26** words: $26 + 3 + 26 = 55$. Since the divine name number **26** signifies YHWH's presence through his name, the symbolism is that God surrounds the psalmist with his presence – see Ps 139:5 'You keep close guard behind me and before me'.

The third specimen is **Psalm 92**, a 'Song for the Sabbath day'. It is a jewel of compositional craftsmanship. Reading the psalm, it immediately meets the eye that **v 9** is conspicuously short, having only **4** words. A count of the verses and words shows that the psalm (without the heading, which is not part of the poetical body) is made up of **15** verses and 108 words, with the **4** words of v 9 at the mathematical centre, flanked by **7** verses and **52** words:

vs 2-8 **52** (2 x **26**) words and **7** verses

v 9 **4** words and 1 verse: וְאַתָּה מְרוֹם לְעַלְמֵי יְהוָה, 'You, YHWH, reigns for ever!'

vs 10-16 **52** (2 x **26**) words and **7** verses.

The central positioning of verse 9 is reinforced by the **7** occurrences of the name YHWH, arranged in such a way that the central (4th) instance falls exactly in v 9: $3 + 1 + 3 = 7$.

Let us now return to Exodus 21-24. Before examining its positioning in the context, I first want to give the reader an idea of the numerical aspects of the Book of Exodus as a whole and divulge a few of its features, of which I must say that they are only the tip of the iceberg:

- The first seven verses of the book have altogether **51** (3 x **17**) words, and the last five verses are made up of **60** words: **26** in 40:34-35 and **34** (2 x **17**) in 40:36-38.²
- Ex 1:1-4:31, The Prelude to the Exodus-story, are made up of **1428** (84 x **17**) words.
- Ex 2:1-25, The Birth of Moses and his First Years has **340** (20 x **17**) words.
- Ex 4:1-17, Moses called by YHWH and prepared for his task, has **255** (15 x **17**) words.
- The story in Exodus 2-40, from Moses birth (2:1ff) to YHWH's occupation of the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle (40:34-38) is made up of **16473** words (57 x **17** x **17**).

The overall framework of the book has a heptad (sevenfold) structure based on the image of the six-branched menorah, a very popular structuring model frequently used by the biblical writers, not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament. The larger component parts of the book can be delimited with a great measure of certainty with the help of specific numerical aspects of the text determining its architecture as I shall explain below:

² The book of Genesis opens with **52** (2 x **26**) words in 1:1-5, and ends with **85** (5 x **17**) in 50:21-26, and the Prologue to Deuteronomy (1:1-5) is made up of **78** (3 x **26**) words and the book ends with Moses' eulogistic necrology of 60 words, divided into **34** (2 x **17**) in 34:9-10 and **26** in 34:11-12.

Part I	1:1-15:21	The Exodus from Egypt and the Crossing of the Reed Sea
Part II	15:22-18:27	The First Stages of the Wilderness Wanderings
Part III	19:1-20:26	The Theophany at Mount Sinai and the Decalogue
Part IV	21:1-24:18	The Book of the Covenant and the Ratification of the Covenant
Part V	25:1-31:18	Directions for the Fabrication of the Tabernacle and its Equipment
Part VI	32:1-34:35	The Golden Calf Drama at Mount Sinai
Part VII	35:1-40:38	The Fulfilment of YHWH's Instructions Concerning the Tabernacle.

Part IV (21:1-24:18) is positioned in pride of place at the centre, which means that it has a special status as the most important part of the book. Its status is numerically underlined by the fact that it is made up of a significant number of words: **1462** which is a multiple of **17** (86 x **17**). Within the sevenfold framework, it is only matched by Part II (15:22-18:27) which has **1309** (**77** x **17**) words. By furnishing a text with a number of words that are a multiple of **17** or **26** our author/editor finalized and symbolically sealed it as a distinct literary entity with the help of the two numerical values of the Tetragrammaton. Here follows some examples of specific sections of the text composed in this way, all taken from Part I (1:1-15:21):

- Ex 5:1-6:13 has **510** (30 x **17**) words and **1972** (116 x **17**) letters,
- Ex 6:14-28 has **182** (7 x **26**) words and **731** (43 x **17**) letters,
- Ex 7:14-9:7 has **765** (45 x **17**) words,
- Ex 9:8-12 has **78** (3 x **26**) words and 9:13-21 has **136** (8 x **17**) words,
- Ex 12:1-28, the Institution of the Passover, has **442** (17 x **26**) words,
- Ex 13:1-14:31, the Exodus and the crossing of the Reed Sea, has **799** (47 x **17**) words.

The Masoretic layout markers and the delimitation of the passage

Ex 6:14-28, the Levitical descent of Moses and Aaron, can be used as a textbook example. The passage is delimited by a **Setumah** after 6:13 and a **Petuchah** after 6:28. Moreover, it is finalized and sealed by its conspicuous number of **182** (7 x **26**) words and **731** (43 x **17**) letters. It gives me the opportunity to illustrate the importance of the Masoretic layout markers *Petuchah* and *Setumah* as effective tools to determine the boundaries of a given text and its subsections. They are generally not taken seriously by scholars, much to the detriment of the correct delimitation of a text and its compositional structure.³

Despite the fact that the passage is clearly delimited by a **Petuchah** after 6:28, some commentators ignore the demarcation marker and regard v 27 instead of v 28 as the outer boundary.⁴ These layout markers have excellent credentials going back to the time of the formation of Scripture and should never be ignored. In my opinion, they have two different functions: first, to demarcate specific sections of the text, and second, to draw special attention to a certain verse or verses.⁵

³ For two notorious instances of disregarding the layout markers, the **P** after Gen 2:3 and Job 3:1, see "The Layout Markers in the Hebrew Text of Genesis" in Chapter 6 of my *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, 107-111.

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, e.g., argues that the section "ends with a note which recounts the ages of Moses and Aaron" and that the author "recapitulates a bit of his story (28ff.) before continuing his narrative" (*The Book of Exodus*, OTL, 1975, 117-118). Werner Schmidt sees a break in the text after v. 27, because vv. 28-30 "bilden den Übergang von der Genealogie ... zu der erst bevorstehenden Einsetzung Aarons" (*Exodus*, BK II/1, 1988, 311).

⁵ For this distinction, see my commentary *Deuteronomium* (De Prediking van het Oude Testament), Nijkerk-Zoetermeer 1987-1997, Part 1A, 22-23 and 153. See also J.M. Oesch, *Petucha und Setuma* [OBO 27], Fribourg, 1977, and "Textgliederung im Alten Testament und in den Qumranhandschriften," *Henoch* 5 [1983], 289-321.

For M. Korpel's work in this regard, see: <http://www.brill.com/publications/books/delimitation-criticism>.

The fact that Exodus 21-24 is made up of **1462** (86 x **17**) words, and therefore finalized and sealed as a literary unit, is the first indication corroborating the proposed delimitation. However, there are other considerations in support of this delimitation. The outer boundary at 24:18 is evident, being determined by Part V, 25:1-31:18, of which the delimitation is undisputed. In much the same way, the initial boundary of Part IV at 21:1 is determined by Part III, The Theophany at Mount Sinai, which should be delimited, in my opinion, as 19:1-20:26 primarily on numerical grounds but also in terms of content. In any case its initial boundary (at 19:1) is determined by the preceding Part II, 15:22-18:27, which is finalized and sealed as a distinct literary entity by having **1309** (77 x **17**) words.

The proposed delimitation of Part III is the result of having weighed different options in answering the question as to where the passage ends: at the **Petuchah** after 20:17, that is to say, at the end of the Decalogue, or at the **Petuchah** after 20:21, just before the Law of the Altar, or at 20:26 at the **Petuchah** just before the Statutes and Ordinances in 21:1? The first significant feature that meets the eye in the present delimitation of the Theophany passage as 19:1-20:26 is the fact that the text is made up of **51** (3 x **17**) verses, with the introduction to YHWH's promulgation of the Decalogue (20:1) at the mathematical centre (**51=25+1+25**). This means that Chapter 20 has **26** verses by which it is finalized and sealed as a distinct subsection in addition to the fact that the chapter is made up of **312** words (12 x **26**).

The decisive factor that tipped the scales in favour of the present delimitation of Part III, 19:1-20:26, is the insight that something completely new starts in 21:1, the promulgation of the Book of the Covenant, which naturally leads to the ratification of the covenant. The Book of the Covenant and the ratification of the covenant are inextricably linked together. This definitely settles, in my view, the question of the delimitation of Part III and Part IV.

The storyline in Parts II-IV, Ex 19:1-24:18

The storyline evolves as follows. After the theophany (19:1-25) YHWH promulgates the Decalogue in a speech directed to the *Israelites* (20:1-17). The narrative in 20:18-21 describes the reaction of the Israelites to the theophany. Then, in 20:22ff, YHWH speaks specifically to *Moses*. This speech is in two sections: in the first (20:22-26), YHWH orders Moses to set the Law of the Altar before the people. The second part of the speech is introduced with the words "*These are the ordinances you shall set before them*" (21:1ff) indicating what the speech is about. Subsequently, YHWH promulgates the Book of the Covenant (21:1-23:33).

This speech is followed by a short address directed to Moses in which he, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu are invited to come up to YHWH (24:1-2). Moses repeats YHWH's words to the people and the covenant is ratified (3-11). Then Moses and Joshua set off up the mountain to receive the stone tablets which YHWH had renewed in the meantime (12-13). Moses goes up the mountain. Then YHWH's Glory settles on Mount Sinai (14-18), which anticipates the occupation of the Tabernacle by YHWH's Glory in 40:34-38. The stage is now set for YHWH's instructions for the fabrication of the Tabernacle: Exodus 25-31.

It is important to note that the concluding section (24:14-18) has **68** (4 x **17**) words by which it is strongly focussed on, in this case as the apogee of the Sinai-story. This brings us to a most intriguing literary technique which our author/editor frequently uses throughout the book to round off and seal a text, namely to let it end with a verse or verses having **17** or **26** words (or multiples of them). Let me give a few examples, once again only from Part I:

Ex 1:1-4:31	The Prelude to the Exodus-story	52 (2 x 26) words in 4:28-31,
Ex 6:29-7:13	YHWH's Resolve to Use Force	51 (3 x 17) words in 7:10-13,
Ex 10:1-12:51	7 Divine Speeches and 3 Plagues	26 words in 12:50-51,
Ex 14:1-31	The Crossing of the Reed Sea	17 words in 14:31,
Ex 15:1-21	The Song Sung at the Reed Sea	26 words in 15:20-21.

The Compositional Structure of Exodus 21-24

Keeping in mind that, in addition to their delimiting function, the layout markers have also the function of drawing attention to and highlighting a specific verse or verses, I came to the following insight on the basis of a word-count. Twenty-one instances of **Setumah** and two of **Petuchah** function as highlighting devices: after 21:6.13.14.16.17.19.21.25.26.32.34.36; 22:4.5.8.12(**P**).16.18.23(**P**).30, and 23:3.4.5. The remaining layout markers have a demarcating function dividing our text into **12** paragraphs (one for each tribe?):

§ 1	Ex 21:1-11	Laws regulating slavery	S ends with 68 (4 x 17) words.
§ 2	Ex 21:12-27	About capital offences	P ends with 26 words.
§ 3	Ex 21:28-22:3	About bodily injuries	S ends with 26 words.
§ 4	Ex 22:4-14	Protection of property	S ends with 52 (2 x 26) words.
§ 5	Ex 22:15-17	Seduction and witchcraft	S ends with 26 words.
§ 6	Ex 22:18-26	Miscellaneous laws	S ends with 17 words.
§ 7	Ex 22:27-23:1	About reviling God or the ruler	S consisting of 52 (2 x 26) words.
§ 8	Ex 23:2-8*	About conduct in legal cases	? ends with 26 words.
§ 9	Ex 23:9-19	Obligations ensuing from the exodus	S ends with 34 (2 x 17) words.
§ 10	Ex 23:20-33**	Paranetic Epilogue	P ends with 39 (26 + 13) words.
§ 11	Ex 24:1-11	The ratification of the covenant	S ends with 51 (3 x 17) words.
§ 12	Ex 24:12-18	YHWH invites Moses to meet him	P ends with 68 (4 x 17) words.

* After 23:8 we miss a layout marker, but §8 is undoubtedly delimited correctly.

** The use of **39** words at the end of §10 is exceptional but understandable and easy to explain as a means to highlight vs 31-33 dealing with YHWH's promise to establish Israel's frontiers (31) and the stern warning not to make a covenant with the inhabitants (32) lest they ensnare the Israelites into the worship of their gods (33). This clearly involves the sin against YHWH as the only God, being יהוה אחד, of which the letter value is **26** + **13** = **39**.

The proposed delimitation and compositional structure of Exodus 21-24 are firmly based on the use of objective criteria. Therefore, we may conclude with unreserved confidence that this resolves the two literary problems of our passage in a decisive way. I hope the reader will understand that at this stage it is not appropriate for me to enter into a discussion with scholars who have other views on the delimitation and the structure of this passage. What I intend here is solely to present the results of the numerical analysis of the present passage in order to illustrate a supplementary approach to its literary problems. Moreover, it is to elicit a discussion on the insight - substantiated by massive evidence presented in a large number of publications -, that the study of the numerical features of biblical texts is of paramount importance for understanding their compositional architecture.⁶

⁶ For an overview of my publications in this regard, please go to my website <http://www.labuschagne.nl/>. There you will find a general introduction to logotechnical (numerical) analysis as well as a pdf-version of my book *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*. Especially recommended is the Torah Project, a numerical analysis of the five books of the Pentateuch: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/torah.htm>. See also my article "Significant Compositional Techniques in the Psalms: Evidence for the Use of Number as an Organizing Principle", VT 59 [2009]: 583-605.