

4. The Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6— Logotechnical Analysis (Rev.)

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) and the Introduction to the [Embedded Hymns](#).

The Priestly Blessing in its Literary Context

In the book of Numbers the Priestly Blessing is clearly demarcated by an open space, a *Parashah* (P), at the beginning and at the end. More importantly, it is positioned at the beginning of the third group of 7 divine speeches, introduced by the stereotyped formula וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר 'And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying'.

For particulars, see my study “The Pattern of the Divine Speech Formulas in the Pentateuch: The Key to its Literary Structure”, *VT* 32/3 (1982), pp. 268-296, especially pp. 291-292.

1:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 1
1:48	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 2
2:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 3
3:5	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 4
3:11	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 5
3:14	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 6
3:44	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 7
4:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 1
4:17	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 2
4:21	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 3
5:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 4
5:5	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 5
5:11	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 6
6:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 7
6:22	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 1
8:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 2
8:5	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 3
8:23	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 4
9:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 5
9:9	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 6
10:1	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying 7

The positioning of the Priestly Blessing within this evidently regular pattern rules out any possibility that it may here be out of place, as has been suggested by many scholars. There is no shred of evidence for this supposition.

The blessing of the Israelites, which functions here as the *dedication* of the people to YHWH by means of the pronouncing of his name over them, is the logical follow-up to the *dedication* of the Nazarites (6:1-21). At the same time it opens the series of *dedications* and instructions in connection with the altar and the tabernacle (7:1-10:10).

The whole section, Num. 6:22 – 10:10, is structured by the coherent series of 7 divine speeches (Note that the story of the departure from Sinai begins in 10:11.):

6:22-7:89	Dedication of Israel, and their offerings for the dedication of the altar	1
8:1-4	Positioning of the Seven Lamps and the Lampstand	2
8:5-22	The cleansing and dedication of the Levites	3
8:23-26	Instructions regarding the services of the Levites	4
9:1-8	Instructions for celebrating Pesach	5
9:9-23	Additional instructions and the story of the cloud over the tent	6
10:1-10	Instructions regarding the silver trumpets	7

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the **framework**; **d**: words in the blessing.

		Total	a	b	c	d
22	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:	5	5		5	
23	דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבַרְכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ^ אָמֹר לָהֶם: ׀	6 5 2	6 5		6 5 2	
24	יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיְשַׁמְרֶךָ: ׀	3	3			3
25	יְאֹר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנְּךָ: ׀	5	5			5
26	יֵשָׁא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לָךְ שָׁלוֹם: ׀	7	7			7
	Total, v. 24-26	15	= 15	+ 0	= 0	+ 15
	Total, v. 23c-26	17	= 15	+ 2	= 2	+ 15
	Total, v. 22-26	33	= 31	+ 2	= 18	+ 15
27	וַשְׁמוּ אֶת־שְׁמֵי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ^ וְאָנֹכִי אֲבָרְכֶם: ׀	8	6	2	8	
	Total, v. 24-27	23	= 21	+ 2	= 8	+ 15
	Total, v. 22-27	41	= 37	+ 4	= 26	+ 15

Observations

1. From a numerical point of view, the 5-word introductory formula is an integral part of the body of the text. This means that the entire text was composed as a single literary unit: the introduction (v. 22), YHWH's command to Moses to instruct Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel (v. 23); the blessing, which is cited (vs. 24-26), and YHWH's instruction to dedicate the people by pronouncing his name over them (v. 27).

2. The 15-word blessing is enveloped by 26 words (18 before and 8 after). This is not surprising, since the use of the divine name numbers and their multiples to encompass the kernel of a text is a well-attested scribal device, which I have encountered in a considerable number of psalms. Compare also, e.g., Deuteronomy 33, where the 52-word kernel of the text, 33:13-17, the blessing of Joseph, is preceded by 156 (6 x 26) words and followed by 136 (8 x 17). See my analysis of [Deuteronomy 33](#), pp. 2 and 10. Compare also my analysis of [Genesis 47-49](#), where the story about Jacob's Blessing of the sons of Joseph and his Farewell Address, Genesis 48 and 49:1-27, is surrounded by 153 (9 x 17) words.

In this case the device is used to express the idea that the words of the blessing is literally enveloped by YHWH's name, which signifies his presence. This interpretation gains credibility since the *name* of YHWH is explicitly mentioned as having a crucial function in the act of blessing (v. 27): it is to be laid upon the Israelites, i.e., pronounced over them. The act does not relate to some obscure ritual, but simply refers to the solemn thrice-repeated pronunciation of the name in the blessing. This is

in fact an act of dedication and consecration: Israel belongs to YHWH and bears his name. Compare 2 Sam 12:28; Deut. 28:10; Isa. 63:19; Jer. 25:19, and 32:34.

- The 15-word blessing itself is a terse, meticulously composed little text modelled in the form of a rectangular stepped tower, as observed by many scholars. This particular form is buttressed by some significant numerical features brought to light by my former student Rev. Gerrit Ruiterkamp, in his Undergraduate Thesis.¹

v. 24	יְבָרְכֶה יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶה:	3 words	15 letters
v. 25	יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּה:	5 words	20 letters
v. 26	יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:	7 words	25 letters.

The structure of the blessing itself (24-26) displays an unmistakable progressive extension with 2 words in each case: 3+5+7, and with 5 letters: 15+20+25.

Additionally, in MT the *paseq slash* has been used to divide the **15** words into 5+5+5, probably to direct attention to the progressive extension of the text with **5+5** letters.

The **5+5** extensions represent the **10** fingers of the hands laying the Name upon the Israelites. The number **15** happens to constitute the numerical value of YH (10+5).

Including the divine command (v. 23c), אָמַר לָהֶם, 'You shall say to them', in my view, the tower can be provided with a **2-word** top, perfectly in accordance with the progressive extension: 2+3+5+7, bringing the total number of words to **17**. This has been done in order to weave the divine name number **17** into the blessing. The remarkable term אָמַר לָהֶם, can satisfactorily be explained as consciously designed in order to achieve **2** words, for we would expect here the currently used לְאָמַר.

	אָמַר לָהֶם	2 words	7 letters
v. 24	יְבָרְכֶה יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶה:	3 words	15 letters
v. 25	יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּה:	5 words	20 letters
v. 26	יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:	7 words	25 letters.

- The introduction (v. 22) together with YHWH's command and the blessing (vs. 22-26), have **33** words, the numerical value of *brk*, בָּרַךְ, 'to bless' (2+20+11=33), which was also deliberately designed. Note that שְׁלוֹם, 'peace', is the 33rd word! Moreover, as we have seen above, the divine name number **26** features in the words surrounding the blessing where it signifies YHWH's presence among his people.
- The 15 words of the blessing, together with the 8 words in YHWH's command (v. 27), constitute the *kabod* number **23**, which has deliberately been contrived to denote YHWH's presence through his glory.
- The ritual of the laying of YHWH's name on the Israelites may have been the origin of the *'ariga* tradition about the weaving of YHWH's name into the fabric of the text. See pp. 4-5 in the [General Introduction](#).
- The name יהוה occurs 4 times, 1x in the introduction and 3x in the blessing.

© 2008 revised 2015
 Dr. C.J. Labuschagne Senior Lecturer in Semitic Languages (retired),
 Brinkhorst 44 University of Pretoria, South Africa
 9751 AT Haren (Gron) and
 The Netherlands Professor of Old Testament (retired),
labuschagne.cj@gmail.com University of Groningen, The Netherlands

¹ *Gezegend ben je! Een studie van achtergrond, vorm en functie van de Aäronitische zegen (Numeri 6:22-27)*, Doctoraalscriptie Oude Testament, Universiteit Groningen, 1988.