

# Who Is My Neighbor? Parallelism and Identification of Neighbors in Deuteronomy's Decalogue

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The Pentateuch distinguishes the Ten Commandments as an especially succinct and important summary of God's character and of the divine will for his people in a number of ways. For example, these ten sayings alone in all of Scripture have the distinction of being spoken directly by YHWH to Israel (Exod 20:18–19).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, they alone were written by God's own finger (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10). This was the only portion of the Torah stored in the ark of the covenant within the inner sanctum (Deut 10:2–5; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chron 5:10).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the Ten Commandments have a prominent structural role in the Pentateuch in that they bracket Israel's wilderness journey from

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<sup>1</sup> This point is clarified and amplified in Jewish tradition where it is noted that only the first two of the commandments are in the form of direct address from YHWH to Israel. Beginning with the third commandment (the prohibition against misuse of the divine name) YHWH is referred to in the third person. This led early Jewish interpreters to suggest that YHWH directly revealed only the first two commandments and the rest were mediated by Moses. Thus, the events narrated in Exod 20:18–21 were understood to have actually transpired between the second and third commandment but were postponed in the text so as not to interrupt the commandments. See James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 279.

<sup>2</sup> This fact has long been a point of contention since Heb 9:4 suggests that the ark contained Aaron's budding rod and the jar of manna as well. The author of Hebrews is probably including accrued tradition familiar to his Jewish audience. For a full discussion see H. W. Attridge and H. Koester, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 236.

Sinai to the plains of Moab and thus are related in full at least twice (Exod 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21).<sup>3</sup>

It is this last distinction that is most relevant for this essay. The duplication of the commandments in Deuteronomy 5 invites comparison with Exodus 20. While the basic commands in Deuteronomy 5 are the same as those in Exodus 20, a number of the details of their wording and rationale are different. For example, the Sabbath commandment begins with the charge to preserve or protect (שמור, *šāmôr*) the Sabbath Day in Deuteronomy 5:12 as opposed to the charge to remember it (זכור, *zāḵôr*) in Exodus 20:8. Furthermore, Deuteronomy offers an entirely different rationale for observing the Sabbath Day than does Exodus. In Exodus, the Sabbath observance is in imitation of YHWH's cessation of his creative activity on the seventh day of creation (Gen 2:1–3). In Deuteronomy, however, the Sabbath commemorates Israel's emancipation from Egyptian slavery, serving as a reminder to Israel to avoid Egypt's oppressive practices (Deut 5:15).

Another often overlooked difference is in the slight rewording of the prohibition against slandering one's neighbor in court in Deuteronomy 5:20. Whereas the command in Exod 20:16 says, "Never testify against your neighbor as a dishonest (שקר, *šeqer*) witness," the same command in Deuteronomy 5:20 says, "Never testify against your neighbor as a worthless (שוני, *šāw'*) witness." While these two Hebrew words may certainly be used synonymously,<sup>4</sup> the change in Deuteronomy appears not to be accidental nor motivated merely by an arbitrary preference or stylistic tendency. Rather, Deuteronomy, by means of this slight rewording, creates a significant verbal parallel between the prohibition against testifying falsely against one's neighbor and the prohibition against bearing YHWH's name "in an untrustworthy manner" (לשוא, *laššāw'*, Deut 5:11). In fact, one could argue that Deuteronomy is setting up the prohibition against false testimony against a neighbor as a parallel command to the

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<sup>3</sup> Many have argued for another iteration of the Ten Commandments in Exod 34:11–26. The commands here, however, are considerably different from those found in either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5. Mark Smith has argued that Exodus 34 is an amalgam of the Ten Commandments and the cultic calendar of Exod 23:12–19. See Mark S. Smith, *Exodus*, NCBC (Collegeville: Liturgical Press: 2010), 124.

<sup>4</sup> D. J. A. Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 8 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2011), 271, 557.

prohibition against untrustworthy use of the divine name—a parallelism with significant theological implications.

Though parallelism is typically associated with Hebrew poetry, its presence in narrative, procedural, and didactic types of discourse has more recently been established.<sup>5</sup> This is largely due to the adoption of the insights of linguist Roman Jakobson for biblical studies. Jakobson demonstrated that parallelisms are linguistic equivalences that transcend genre distinctions and are thus found in nearly all genres.<sup>6</sup> It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that parallelism may be at work in the legal-didactic discourse of the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy appears to intensify the parallelisms already latent in the traditional Decalogue by means of its revisions. Deuteronomy 5:20 is an example of this and may point to other examples as well. The two commands are compared in the table below to highlight their connection.

Deut 5:11	Deut 5:20
You shall not carry the name of YHWH your god <b>in an untrustworthy manner</b> (אִשָּׁוֹן). Indeed, YHWH will not exonerate one who carries his name <b>in an untrustworthy manner</b> (אִשָּׁוֹן). <sup>7</sup>	You shall not testify against your neighbor as an <b>untrustworthy</b> (אִשָּׁוֹן) witness.

By bringing these two commands into closer alignment with the replacement of “deceitful” (שָׁקֵר) with “untrustworthy” (אִשָּׁוֹן) in Deuteronomy 5:20, Deuteronomy suggests that a close relationship exists between honoring the divine name and honoring the reputation of one’s neighbor. The prohibition against abuse of the divine name has been variously interpreted. Many have understood it to apply to carelessly swearing oaths in YHWH’s name.<sup>8</sup> Others

<sup>5</sup> Adele Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Roman Jakobson, “Grammatical Parallelism and its Russian Facet,” *Language* 42 (1966): 399–429.

<sup>7</sup> All translations are those of the author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 282.

take it to prohibit invoking YHWH's name magically in divinatory rites.<sup>9</sup> The language of the command, however, suggests that its application is broader than the inappropriate invocation of the divine name in the context of oaths or divination. Block convincingly argues that the imagery of carrying or bearing (אִשָּׁתָּה from אִשָּׁה, *tissā'* from *n-s-*) the divine name derives from the ancient practice of branding slaves with the name of their owner, thus obliging slaves to properly and honorably represent the person whose name they bore.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of the prohibition against abuse of the divine name is confirmed by the parallelism with the prohibition against slandering one's neighbor. Just as one must not misrepresent YHWH by behaving in ways contrary to his name and reputation, so also one must not misrepresent a neighbor either with unsubstantiated suppositions or false accusations. Furthermore, the association of the prohibition of the abuse of the divine name with the prohibition against slandering one's neighbor broadens the latter's application beyond the legal arena. Whereas most commentators see "bearing false witness" as primarily, if not exclusively, in reference to formal testimony in court,<sup>11</sup> the parallelism in Deuteronomy suggests a much broader application. The principle applies to informal conversations, gossip, innuendo, and social media posts as well. For that matter, the term אִשָּׁה, which I've translated here "untrustworthy," is not necessarily limited to lying. The term may refer to any empty, unhelpful, vapid, careless, or mean-spirited utterances that may harm one's neighbor or damage her reputation, even if technically true.<sup>12</sup> Just as any careless or thoughtless use of YHWH's name is culpable, so any careless or thoughtless use of one's neighbor's name is culpable.

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Walton, "Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document," in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* ed. Daniel I. Block (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 313–18.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel I. Block, "Bearing the Name of the LORD with Honor," in *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 61–72.

<sup>11</sup> Lundbom typifies the restriction of this prohibition to legal settings imposed by most commentators when he says, "What we have then is not a general prohibition against lying, as bad as lying might be, but against lying testimony regarding another person..., something far more serious. In the ancient world great significance was attached to the testimony of a witness..." See Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 294.

<sup>12</sup> Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 8:271. See also Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 166–67.

The point is that the two commandments mutually inform each other in their parallel relationship much like the parallel halves of a line of Hebrew poetry. While parallelism has been widely recognized in and applied to the interpretation of poetry to great effect, its presence in and utility for interpreting these commandments has largely gone unnoticed. Far from being a mere literary trope that enhances the aesthetic symmetry of the text, though it does do that as well, the parallelism suggests associations and invites comparisons that enhance *the meaning* of the two commands. Indeed, when reading the commands in parallel, one comes to realize that YHWH is the neighbor par excellence or the archetypal neighbor whose presence in Israel's community sets the tone for all relationships. Relating rightly to YHWH, the divine neighbor, is prerequisite to and prototypical of relating rightly to one's human neighbors.

This understanding of YHWH as archetypal neighbor also reminds readers of the Decalogue's place in the larger story of both Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus, the revelation of the Decalogue launches the narrative regarding the construction of the tabernacle which culminates in YHWH's descent down Mt. Sinai to take up residence within Israel's camp inside the sanctuary (Exod 40:34–38). YHWH, thus, becomes a neighbor to the Israelites encamped at the foot of Sinai after having established the norms for a community centered around his holy presence. Similarly, Moses introduces his exposition of the law in Deuteronomy with the following words: “For what other great nation has a god *so near* to it as YHWH is to us whenever we invoke him?” (Deut 4:7, emphasis added). YHWH's determination to draw near to Israel and to live in her midst has had the effect of ordering the tribes into a neighborhood, a community characterized by YHWH's nature. The norms of life within YHWH's neighborhood are then spelled out in the Decalogue.

The parallelism evident between the prohibition against the abuse of YHWH's name and the prohibition against slandering a neighbor extends to other commands in Deuteronomy as well, illuminating some of the other modifications in Deuteronomy's Decalogue. For example, the rationale for observing the Sabbath in Deuteronomy has been altered to create a parallel with what Jews consider to be the first commandment, YHWH's self-identification as the deity who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage (Deut 5:6; cf. Exod

20:2).<sup>13</sup> By grounding the Sabbath command in Israel’s experience as slaves in Egypt, Deuteronomy underscores the social dimension of this commandment, thus clarifying that life under YHWH’s lordship is quite different than it was under Pharaoh’s. Israel is to make this difference obvious in all of her dealings, from family members and household slaves down to beasts of burden (Deut 5:14). The differences between Deuteronomy’s and Exodus’ versions of this commandment are contrasted below.

Exod 20:8-11	Deut 5:12-15
<p>Remember the Sabbath Day to sanctify it. Six days you shall work and perform all of your labor but the seventh day is the Sabbath of YHWH your god. On it you must not perform any labor, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your male-slave, nor your female slave, nor your beasts, nor the immigrant who is within your borders. For in six days God made the sky, the land, and the sea along with all that is in them, but on the seventh day he rested. Therefore, God blessed the Sabbath Day and sanctified it.</p>	<p>Observe the Sabbath Day to sanctify it <b>just as YHWH your god commanded you</b>. Six days you shall work and perform all of your labor but the seventh day is the Sabbath of YHWH your god. On it you must not perform any labor, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male-slave, nor your female-slave, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of <b>your beasts</b>, nor the immigrant who is within your borders <b>so that your male and female slaves may rest just as you do. You will remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt but YHWH your god brought you out from there with strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, YHWH your god has commanded you to practice the Sabbath Day.</b></p>

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<sup>13</sup> Three different traditions exist as to the numeration of the “Ten Words.” Jews typically count YHWH’s self-identification at the beginning of the Decalogue as one of the Ten Commandments. Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics, however, all consider this to be a prologue and begin counting commandments with the prohibition against worshipping any gods besides YHWH. Catholics/Lutherans and most Protestant/Orthodox Christians then differ as to how to divide the remaining material into Ten Commandments. These differences arose because, while the Bible makes clear that Ten Commandments stand at the heart of the law (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4), it offers little help as to how the sacred text arrived at this number. For an excellent discussion and helpful chart comparing these three different approaches, see Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106.

Clearly, this is Deuteronomy's most substantial revision to the Decalogue as preserved in Exodus 20. What motivated such a radical shift in rationale for the Sabbath? Perhaps it was a desire to connect the Sabbath commandment with the opening of the Decalogue which similarly grounds YHWH's identity as well as the entirety of the Decalogue in YHWH's gracious act of liberating Israel from Egyptian oppression. The two commands are compared side by side below to highlight their connection.

Deut 5:6	Deut 5:12 – 15
I am <b>YHWH your god</b> who <b>brought you out</b> of the <b>land of Egypt</b> , from the house of <b>slavery</b> .	Observe the Sabbath Day to sanctify it just as <b>YHWH your god</b> commanded you. Six days you shall work and perform all of your labor but the seventh day is the Sabbath of <b>YHWH your god</b> . On it you must not perform any labor, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your <b>male-slave</b> , nor your female-slave, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your beasts, nor the immigrant who is within your borders so that your male and female <b>slaves</b> may rest just as you do. You will remember that you were <b>slaves</b> in the land of <b>Egypt</b> but <b>YHWH your god brought you out</b> from there with strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, <b>YHWH your god</b> has commanded you to practice the Sabbath Day.

The numerous echoes of Deuteronomy 5:6 in Deuteronomy 5:12–15 suggest that YHWH's emancipation of Israel sets a precedent for Israel's own social structure. YHWH redefined the concept of neighbor in his deliverance and adoption of Israel. Israel's memory of her experience in Egypt and of YHWH's liberating action provides a reference point and framework for Sabbath that establishes it as that distinguishing characteristic of Israel that prevents her degeneration into a nation like Egypt. As a result, immigrants become neighbors deserving of the same dignity as any native Israelite. Slaves are transformed into neighbors deserving of the same opportunities for rest and renewal as their masters. Even one's beasts of burden are included in the

neighborhood YHWH constructs around his sanctuary. YHWH is the prototype and paradigm of neighborliness. His presence in Israel transforms the nation into the kind of neighborhood where people of all backgrounds and statuses flourish.

Even commands that Deuteronomy left unchanged exhibit parallelism and may have served as the inspiration and basis for those alterations that extended and reinforced these latent parallelisms already present in the Decalogue. For example, the prohibition against adultery can be understood to parallel the prohibition against Israel's worshipping any god other than YHWH. The mutually exclusive covenant bond between YHWH and Israel provides a clear precedent for that between a husband and wife. In fact, several prophets made this connection in their condemnation of Israel's and Judah's rampant syncretism, never hesitating to label Israel and Judah as adulterers or prostitutes due to their idolatry (for example, Isa 57:1–9; Hos 2:2, 5; 3:1; Jer 3:8–9; 13:27; Ezek 16:30–36).

The prohibition against having any gods other than YHWH may also parallel the command to honor one's father and mother. Already in the Pentateuch YHWH identified himself as Israel's father (Exod 4:22). This relationship is further assumed in all of the inheritance language YHWH uses in reference to the land to which he is leading Israel. Israel, therefore, understood herself to be inheriting the land from YHWH because YHWH had adopted her. This may be the reason why Deuteronomy expands the motive clause for this command by underscoring YHWH's role in gifting the land to Israel (Deut 5:16). The implication is that YHWH is Israel's father from whom she inherits the land. Her enjoyment of the land, however, is predicated on her honoring her human parents as an extension of the honor she gives to YHWH.

The prohibition against honoring any god other than YHWH, therefore, has a double parallel, one with the fifth commandment and one with the seventh.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Ezekiel employs both the adoption and marriage metaphors in reference to YHWH's exclusive relationship to Israel within the same context in Ezekiel 16:6–14, thus making the same connection as that suggested by the parallelism between the first, fifth, and seventh commandments. One wonders if Ezekiel may have recognized these connections in the Decalogue

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<sup>14</sup> I am assuming here the traditional Protestant numeration of the commandments as opposed to the Catholic/Lutheran or Jewish numerations.



and was referencing them in his parable. Perhaps this double parallel indicates the special importance of this prohibition against polytheism as foundational to the Decalogue.

Another intriguing parallel exists between the prohibition against making images of YHWH and the prohibition against murder. Just as one is forbidden to make images of God, so is one forbidden to destroy the image of God by taking human life. Israel was called not to make images of God but to *be* the image of God. It follows, therefore, that murder is sacrilege in that it destroys the divine image as is suggested by the terms of the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9:6.<sup>15</sup>

The final parallel one might see in the Decalogue is that between the prohibition against theft and the prohibition against coveting a neighbor's belongings. True to the nature of most parallelisms, this one exhibits a significant intensification.<sup>16</sup> While theft is a visible, physical action—one capable of being witnessed by human eyes—covetousness is entirely subjective and internal to the perpetrator and, therefore, known only to the perpetrator and God. The coupling of these two prohibitions, therefore, in a parallel relationship emphasizes that it is not enough to avoid stealing. YHWH is not merely interested in external conformity to commandments but desires a transformation of heart and mind as well. Since a person's stray thoughts and misplaced affections are the true source of all of one's misdeeds, the ultimate solution to sin resides in attacking its root buried deep in one's interior life. The final commandment plumbs these depths by moving beyond mere actions.

This final pairing is significant for at least two reasons. First, it shatters a misconception that many have regarding the Old Testament in general and the Torah in particular. Too often the Torah is misrepresented as being concerned with only external obedience, as if it were itself the source of the hypocrisy of certain Pharisees that Jesus exposed and condemned (Matt 23:27). By recognizing the connection between theft and covetousness, however, one sees

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<sup>15</sup> Block, *Deuteronomy*, 166. Interestingly, Block notes the connection of the prohibition against murder with Gen 9:6 but does not make the connection between this prohibition and that against making images of God.

<sup>16</sup> That some kind of intensification is typical, perhaps even essential, to the trope of parallelism has been famously and convincingly argued by James Kugel. See James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 51.

YHWH's concern for heart issues from the very beginning of his dealings with humanity. For example, many assume that when Jesus moves from the prohibition against adultery to an even deeper, more probing warning against entertaining lustful thoughts, he is expanding on the commandment, intensifying it in a new way (Matt 5:27–28). In fact, however, Jesus is merely pairing the prohibition against adultery with the prohibition against coveting a neighbor's wife. The intensification was already there in the Decalogue. Jesus simply points it out by emphasizing the parallelism present in the text.

The second reason this final pairing is important is that it points to the heart issues underlying all the preceding commandments. As already noted above, it suggests a connection not only between theft and coveting but also between adultery and coveting. The apostle Paul even goes so far as to associate coveting with idolatry, thus identifying it as the heart issue at the root of the first two commandments as well (Col 3:5). The parallel relationships between the various commandments in the Decalogue, therefore, culminate in an intensification that points beyond outward acts to their internal sources in the heart and mind. The chart below aligns and summarizes the suggested parallelisms discussed above.

Parallel Commandments in Deuteronomy 5	
I am YHWH your god who brought you out of the land of Egypt	Sabbath command grounded in YHWH's emancipation of Israel from Egyptian slavery
You shall have no other gods before me	Honor parents; You shall not commit adultery
You shall not make for yourselves carved images	You shall not murder (i.e., destroy the divine image)
You shall not bear YHWH's name in an untrustworthy manner	You shall not testify against your neighbor as an untrustworthy witness
You shall not steal	You shall not covet

The recognition of parallel relationships between the various commandments potentially enriches one's understanding of and appreciation for their power and relevance. Especially noteworthy is the way this parallel structure encourages redefinition of neighbor to include YHWH, slave, and immigrant—a point underscored by Jesus on at least two memorable occasions (Matt 25:40; Luke 10:29–37). These parallels and their theological point appear to be underscored by the alterations made to these commands in Deuteronomy's version of the Decalogue. Most expositions of the Decalogue, however, overlook this key feature of its structure and thus miss key connections that clarify and intensify their meaning. Perhaps the thoughts offered here will spark the conversation needed to encourage recognition of this parallel structure and take full advantage of the interpretive riches it yields.

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