Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: VaEthannan

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VaEthannan:

Two Tellings of Revelation:

Why the Decalogue Changes in Deuteronomy

One of the most striking phenomena in the Torah is the appearance of the Decalogue in two different versions. The first appears at Sinai in Exodus 20, while the second is presented by Moses to the new generation on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy 5. Although the two versions are substantially similar, they contain several noteworthy differences.

Among the most significant variations are the reasons given for Shabbat observance, the addition of the phrase *ka-asher tzivvekha Hashem Elokekha* (“as the Lord your God commanded you”) regarding Shabbat and honoring parents, the use of *shav* instead of *sheker* in the prohibition against false testimony, and the substitution of *titavveh* for *tahmod* in the prohibition against coveting.

How are we to understand these variations? Are both texts verbatim divine speech, or does Deuteronomy represent Moses’ own presentation and

interpretation of revelation?

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon maintained that the version in Exodus was engraved on the first tablets, while the version in Deuteronomy appeared on the second tablets. According to this view, both formulations constitute direct divine speech. However, this position encounters a formidable difficulty. Exodus 34:1 states: “And I shall write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets.”

Similarly, Deuteronomy 10:1–4 emphasizes that the second tablets contained the same words as the first. If so, how can one maintain that the first tablets contained the Exodus version whereas the second tablets contained the Deuteronomy version?

Furthermore, why would God alter the formulation of the Decalogue between the first and second tablets?

Several Midrashim, followed by Rashi and Rambam, adopt a different approach. They assume that both versions are equally divine and that each wording conveys additional religious teachings. The differences are therefore not contradictions but complementary dimensions of revelation.

Rashi, citing Sanhedrin 56b, explains that the phrase *ka-asher tzivvekha Hashem Elokekha* (as the Lord your God commanded you) regarding Shabbat and honoring parents in the Deuteronomy version must refer to a command given before Sinai, at Marah. There, Scripture states: “There He established for them statute and ordinance” (Exodus 15:25).

Since Rashi regards the Deuteronomic Decalogue as preserving God’s own speech, the phrase cannot be understood as Moses’ addition. Rather, God must be referring back to an earlier divine command. The Midrashic approach therefore treats the variations as deliberate expressions of multiple dimensions of the divine message. Each formulation reveals an additional aspect of the

commandment and enriches our understanding of its meaning.

Yet one may still wonder why God did not simply incorporate both formulations into a single version. Why not say, for example, "*zakhor ve-shamor et yom ha-Shabbat*" (remember and observe the Shabbat day) and include all dimensions simultaneously?

A fundamentally different approach emerges from Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Rashbam. They suggest that Moses is not reproducing the Decalogue verbatim in Deuteronomy but rather presenting it anew to a new generation.

Radak, commenting on Genesis 24:39, observes that biblical speakers frequently paraphrase earlier statements, preserving their substance while varying their wording. Ibn Ezra similarly argues that the Exodus account of the Decalogue records God's exact words at Sinai, whereas Deuteronomy presents Moses' retelling and explanation of revelation.

Accordingly, *zakhor* already implies remembrance expressed through observance, and therefore Moses may legitimately formulate the command as *shamor*. This approach assumes that several of the linguistic differences are stylistic or synonymous rather than independently significant. Thus, *shav* and *sheker* convey essentially the same prohibition, as do *tahmod* and *titavveh*. Not every variation is intended to communicate a distinct teaching.

This perspective suggests something profound about the nature of Deuteronomy. Moses' own voice enters the presentation, even within the Decalogue itself. Deuteronomy is not merely a transcript of Sinai but a covenantal reinterpretation addressed to a new generation preparing to enter the Land.

The differing versions of the Decalogue thus illuminate one of Deuteronomy's central themes. Revelation remains authoritative, yet each generation requires renewed explanation and application. Whether one follows Rabbi Saadiah Gaon,

Rashi, Rambam, and the Midrashim, who understand both formulations as equally divine speech, or the approaches of Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Rashbam, who see Deuteronomy as Moses' inspired retelling, the message remains profound.

The covenant at Sinai is not merely preserved; it is continually interpreted, taught, and transmitted. Deuteronomy demonstrates that fidelity to revelation does not preclude explanation. Rather, the enduring vitality of Torah depends upon the ability to restate eternal truths in ways that speak meaningfully to new generations.