CHAPTER THREE
REFLECTIVE NUMERICAL SAYINGS

In all periods of history the human mind has observed the world and has tried to understand it. Understanding, in turn, is the attempt to discover an order thought to be inherent in the phenomena observed. Once such an inherent order has been found and fixed in one way or another, new knowledge has been gained. On its basis further reflection and observation can yield new insights. It does not matter much whether the observed phenomena pertain to every-day life or to philosophical meditation, whether they are concerned with seemingly insignificant matters or with the basic questions of human existence. What matters is the fact that the question ‘WHY?’ is asked and an answer for it sought. Wherever and whenever this question rises and is not shunned, the human mind exercises its inborn desire to ‘master’ world and life and the different ways in which they manifest themselves.

One of the first steps in this process of understanding is the recognition of analogous features. Phenomena which exhibit similar or analogous characteristics are set side by side. In this way the human mind strives to discover the order underlying these phenomena and to group them together according to aspects common to all of them. Hence adding and numbering such phenomena is one of the first results of reflection of this kind. In the words of Curtius, “counting, enumerating, and numbering are means which thinking reflection employs to orient itself”. 1) In turn, inability to count or enumerate phenomena of a given nature is considered identical with not understanding their inner order. One of the questions put to Job in order to demonstrate to him his ignorance uses this very argument (Job xxxviii 37 a):

Who can number the clouds by wisdom?

The expected answer is that nobody can do this because it is beyond human power to do so. Hence it can be said in another context that that which man cannot number is ‘unsearchable’ and cannot be understood (Job v 9; cf. Ps. lxxi 15 c):

... who (scil. God) does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number.

Passages of this nature do of course not imply that the Old Testament does not contain texts which owe their existence to the attempt to understand, through counting and grouping together, the order and structure of various phenomena of life and world. On the contrary, with regard to almost all fields of human knowledge the people of the Old Testament have searched for an order inherent in the phenomena encountered. The genre of the numerical saying is one of the foremost oral and literary patterns employed in order to fix the results of such reflection. With reference to the collection of such reflective numerical sayings in Prov. xxx 15-31, von Rad has this to say: "... these are first attempts to order together enigmatic nature phenomena. ... when like is put side by side with like, much is already gained, because then these phenomena lose their absolutely enigmatic character which they had when they were considered in isolation. Yet precisely this is wisdom: the desire for a penetrating rational enlightenment and ordering of the world in which man finds himself, the will to discover and to fix orders of the phenomena of human life as well as of nature". 1)

It is rewarding to search the Old Testament in the light of this argument for texts which illustrate the desire of the human mind to understand its world. Many relevant texts occur in the form of numerical sayings, because this pattern offers itself as a convenient form to express and to fix for the future the newly discovered order. The list can accommodate any number of analogous items, while the title-line not only describes the characteristic feature but also indicates, through the numerical value, the extent to which the order is considered valid.

A survey of Old Testament numerical sayings which were framed as the result of human reflection indicates that such reflection was neither limited to one field of human knowledge nor to one period of the history of Israel. It is also clear that one cannot hope for advance of human knowledge in intellectually stagnant periods or surroundings. In some cases the time of origin of particular numerical sayings can be ascertained, in other cases this is not possible. The main concern in the following discussion, at any rate, is to show the readiness and effectiveness with which the genre of the numerical saying was em-