CHAPTER TWO

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF NOAH

The account of the deluge presents Noah as an exemplary model of piety. In the entire Old Testament he is the only man who is described as ∇א. In 6:8 (J) Noah found favour with God, and in 7:1 (J) his righteousness is seen in faithful obedience to God’s command. P describes Noah as righteous, blameless and as walking with God in 6:9ff. There does however appear to be a paradox: 6:8-10 seem to exclude Noah from the general depiction of humanity, whilst 8:21 includes him in the statement that man’s heart is evil from his youth upward because only Noah and his family are then alive. The problem is how do these statements relate? The present chapter will explore Noah’s relationship with God, and will relate the question to the value of human life in the story of the flood.

1. Righteousness in the Old Testament

In order to understand our text, a study of the root ∇א is necessary. A person was either righteous or not, there could be no intermediary stages.¹ There is no precise English equivalent to terms such as ∇א and ∇א, and the reader of the Bible needs to be careful not to understand ∇א according to the western tradition of Roman law, where an individual’s proper conduct was judged over and against an ethical norm.² Von Rad writes,

The mistake lay in seeking and presupposing an absolute ideal ethical norm, since ancient Israel did not in fact measure a line of conduct or an act by an ideal norm, but by the specific relationship in which the partner had at the time to prove himself true.³

Perhaps von Rad’s distinction between absolute ethical norms and relationships is not really justified since, as we shall see, moral stand-

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ards are central to the concept of righteousness, but von Rad is right to note that at the heart of the Old Testament concept of Ἰντίς is the idea of a relationship. A righteous person was someone who measured up to the claims which the relationship laid upon him. Each relationship, whether between individuals or God’s covenant with Israel brings demands upon the conduct of the participants. The fulfilling of these claims of the relationship results in Ἰντίς. Ἰντίς refers to a relationship between persons rather than to the relationship of an object to an idea. The most pertinent of these relationships was that between God and Israel. Ἰντίς denotes the duties of each party arising out of the relationship.

Any discussion of righteousness in the Old Testament must be wary of modern, in particular Lutheran, presuppositions colouring our view of the text. Luther taught that law and gospel were two concepts which were in antithesis to one another: the gospel is viewed positively, the law negatively. In addition there is a noticeable anti-Semitism in Luther’s writing, particularly in his later works. It can come as no surprise that scholars from Germany may have been particularly influenced by Luther in their treatment of righteousness, and we need to be aware of this in our discussion.

Consequently Jewish writers have reacted against some aspects of the understanding of Ἰντίς as expounded by such scholars as von Rad and Eichrodt, who not only came from Protestant backgrounds, but were also influenced by events in Germany in the 1930’s. Levenson points out that there is a tendency for both of them to adopt a negative attitude to law and an unnecessary eagerness to see a dichotomy between faith and works in the Old Testament. For example von Rad says that the law became an absolute quantity which ceased to be understood as the saving ordinance, but became “a dictate which imperiously called into being its own community”. Of course there can be legalism in religion, but this does not neces-

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