CHAPTER FIVE

RESTORATION

Ultimately the story of the flood tells of God's commitment to his creation. Both J and P testify to the mercy of God, who promises never again to send a universal deluge, even though man has achieved no moral improvement. The J account puts this in sharp focus in 8:21, where the reason for God's mercy seems to be that man's heart is evil from his youth. The P account gives no hint of any improvement in the human condition, yet God still pledges never to send another flood and guarantees this assurance by the covenant. The present chapter will explore how the two sources present the theme of God's commitment to the world in the post-flood era.

1. God's Maintenance of the World

In order to understand both the J and the P accounts of restoration it is important to grasp the Old Testament's belief in God's personal maintenance of the world. In Chapter 3 we discussed the personal involvement of God in the events of the world; the created order is not detached from its creator. Eichrodt writes,

On the one hand, by the concept of the creature, which is inseparable from the idea of creation, it presupposes the permanent dependence of the world on God, with no room for a detachment of the created thing from him who created it; and on the other it shows that a necessary consequence of the act of creation is an historical process which finds its forward motive power in the permanent life-relationship of the creature with the Creator.¹

Given this involvement of God in the world, there was an inherent regularity in the events of nature with God's law being manifested in the natural process. The forces of nature do not have lives of their own but are subject to God's rule and command. Through his omnipotence God controls both nature and history.

God's personal care can be seen in the provision of food, rain and fertility (e.g. Pss. 65:9–13, 107:35ff and 147:15ff). The events of nature are the outcome of God's action; he fashions and forms each

individual (e.g. Ps. 139:13ff, Job 10:8–12). The gifts of the seasons, day and night, seedtime and harvest all come from God’s care. In everything God’s wonders can be seen. The verb שָׁבַע can be used for both creation and preservation, which shows that creation is not just a single act but is part of the continuing sustaining process.2

In P nature receives attention for its own sake as a work of God’s creating and sustaining power. Gen. 1 regards creation as a suitable object for man’s joy and wonder. Both Gen. 8:20–22 (J) and 9:8–17 (P) fit in with this belief in God’s care for the world by witnessing to the stability of creation. The Priestly story of creation makes a distinction between creation and preservation by concluding the account of the making of the world with the day of rest (2:1–3), which affirms the continuity and constancy of the divine creative will. Creation is not a matter of caprice, but it is given a mandate to exist by God. The creative act is seen as God’s purposeful will; his maintenance of creation is a demonstration of his רטָע (Ps. 136: 4-9).

2. Genesis 8:20–22

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (RSV).

i. Gen. 8: 21

In the story of the flood the promise to meet sin with mercy is set in Gen. 8:21, where God promises not to curse the ground further for the same reason as he introduced the universal judgement in 6:5. The verse is difficult to interpret and has caused some discussion over its precise meaning. Rendtorff has made a significant contribution to the debate and translates 8:21, “I will never again declare the earth to be cursed (as I have done hitherto) on account of humanity because the imagination of the heart is evil from one’s youth”.3 He adds, “Von jetzt an regiert nicht mehr der Fluch die Welt, sondern

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