A STRUCTURAL TRANSITION IN EXODUS*

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H. W. WOLFF demonstrated the value for isolating structural transitions in his work on the kerygma of the Yahwist 1). Transitions are signs of a framework used to bring earlier traditions together into a meaningful whole. They suggest groupings of significant narratives and point to a basic understanding of relationships among them. Moreover, transitions within the Yahwist’s material provide insight into the theological stamp peculiar to the source. Since the Yahwist did little editing in the tradition transmitted to him from the past, according to WOLFF, his own peculiar perspective stands out most clearly in the transitions.

Gen. xii 1-3, the key transition in the Yahwist’s work, emphasizes blessing by developing the old tradition about Yahweh’s promise for a great nation from Abraham’s seed. The thrust of the Yahwist’s kerygma, however, does not advance Israel’s blessing so much as her responsibility for bringing blessing to the nations of the world. The transition ties into the preceding primeval history by contrasting Abraham’s blessing to the nations with the curse the nations have brought against themselves (cf. Gen. iii 14-17; iv 11; v 29; ix 25). At the same time, it anticipates the following patriarchal cycles.

WOLFF notes that although a land promise occupies a central position in the patriarchal traditions the Yahwist receives, the promise for blessing through a great posterity dominates the structure of the Yahwist’s material. Indeed, the kerygmatic stamp in Gen. xii 1-3 controls the structure, not only for the patriarchal traditions, but for the entire scope of the Yahwist’s narration. WOLFF concludes from this observation that the Yahwist had no section for the conquest in his narration because he had no theological interest in the promise for land.

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Wolff's work with transitions outside the patriarchal cycles is minimal. Thus, I propose to analyze a similar transition in Exodus in order to determine its contribution to organizational patterns in the Tetrateuch. Just as a structural device in Gen. xii 1-3 signals movement from the primeval history to the patriarchal traditions, so a similar device in Exod. i 1-14 bridges the patriarchal traditions and traditions associated with Israel's exodus from Egypt. Moreover, the transition has implications about structure that reach beyond the confines of its few verses. I shall argue that it offers evidence for establishing, not only the introduction, but also the conclusion for the entire exodus narration, a major structural element in the Tetrateuch. Since my interest lies primarily in defining structure rather than in the discussion of kerygma in the Yahwist, I shall not limit attention to texts commonly assigned to J. It will be just as important to ask whether E or P mark major transitions at the same juncture, at other points, or perhaps not at all. The transition in Exodus should, nevertheless, expand the basis for a discussion of the Yahwist's kerygma.

I

Exod. i 1-14 bridges the patriarchal cycles and the exodus traditions in much the same fashion as Gen. xii 1-3 links primeval history and patriarchal cycles. Two principal elements of structure serve this linking function: 1) a summary conclusion for preceding traditions, and 2) an introduction to following traditions.

The first element, in vss. 1-6, comprises a name list (1-5) and a death notice (6). The list begins with a typical we'ëlleh šemôt (cf. Gen. xxv 13; Num. i 5; et al.) and a definition of the names: “These are the names of the ones who came to Egypt with Jacob...” (cf. Gen. xlvi 8). It ends appropriately in vs. 5a with a specification of the number of people described by the list (thus, cf. Gen. xlvi 26-27). The MT has Joseph outside the list, in vs. 5b. But the number in vs. 5a clearly includes Joseph and his children. Thus, an expanded form of the same tradition in Gen. xlvi 8-27 concludes with the same number preserved in Exod. i 5a but explicitly includes Joseph at his traditional place in the list (vss. 19-20). Significantly, the LXX in Exod. i 5 places the note about Joseph before the concluding number. The difficulty arises from the apparent contradiction between the introductory qualification that the people named in the list came to Egypt with Jacob and the firm tradition that Joseph preceded his