THE COHERENCE OF THE FLOOD NARRATIVE 1)

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For more than a century the account of the flood in Genesis vi-ix has been regarded as one of the prime examples of composite narrative in the Pentateuch 2). Occasional dissenting voices 3) have failed to disturb the general consensus of scholarship that these chapters are composed of two sources J and P. When Genesis vi-ix is dissected into its constituent sources, two new versions of the flood story are produced, which differ both from each other and from the version we now find in Genesis 4). It is a tribute to the skill of the final redactor of Genesis that he has been able to knit together his sources in such a way that the ordinary reader is often unaware of the composite nature of the present story.

In a recent study of Hebrew syntax 5) F. I. Andersen has questioned the value of the documentary analysis of Genesis at certain points. He argues that in the flood story the division of material into J and P leads to one part of a grammatical construction being assigned to one source and the rest of the construction being ascribed to a different source. For example, Gen. vii 6-17, describing the onset of the flood and the entry into the ark, is a single grammatical unit (pp. 124-6), making elaborate use of chiasmus (pp. 119 ff.) and epic repetition (pp. 39 ff.). Yet verses 7-10, 12, 16b are traditionally assigned to J, and the rest to P.

Andersen comments: "The significance of this kind of construction has generally escaped literary critics. Either they assign parallel passages to different ‘sources’ as ‘doublets’, thus destroying the fabric of the composition; or else they speak disparagingly of its

1) Revised version of a paper read to the Society for OT Study in Oxford, July 1975.
2) H. Gunkel, Genesis 7 (Göttingen, 1966), p. 137.
tedious redundancy. But if the text is left as it is, and its grammatical structure is taken seriously as serving artistic purposes, more positive conclusions about the integrity of a passage and the solemnity of its style are possible. Sentences from the Flood Epic ... cut across passages generally assigned to the 'J' and 'P' documents... This means that if the documentary hypothesis is valid, some editor has put together scraps of parallel versions of the same story with scissors and paste, and yet has achieved a result which, from the point of view of discourse grammar, looks as if it has been made out of whole cloth” (p. 40).

These observations do not rule out the possibility that a redactor of Genesis could have used two independent sources to create the present form of the flood narrative, but they underline the fact that, if he did work this way, he has knit the sources together very thoroughly. The purpose of this study is to present three fresh arguments for supposing that Genesis vi-ix is a carefully composed piece of literature, which is more coherent than usually admitted.

The Structure of the Flood Narrative

One mark of the coherence of the flood narrative is to be found in its literary structure. The tale is cast in the form of an extended palistrophe, that is a structure that turns back on itself. In a palistrophe the first item matches the final item, the second item matches the penultimate item, and so on. The second half of the story is thus a mirror image of the first. This kind of literary structure has been discovered in other parts of Genesis 6), but nowhere else is it developed on such a large scale. This may be partly due to the fact that a flood narrative is peculiarly suited to this literary form.

Gen. vi 10 to ix 19 appears to be a palistrophe containing 31 items. It begins and ends with a reference to Noah. Then Noah’s sons are named and so on. Particularly striking are the references to days (lines H, I, L, O) 7. The periods of time form a symmetrical pattern, 7, 7, 40, 150, 150, 40, 7, 7. The turning point of the narrative is found in viii: 1 “God remembered Noah”.

This is a palistrophe on a grand scale. Up to a point it is not sur-


7) Only the references to days form part of the palistrophe; the 40 days and nights (vii 4, 12) and the dates do not.