WORD-PLAY IN GEN 6:8-9

Gen 6:8-9 reads as follows:

> w^enōaḥ māṣā' ḥēn b^{e}'ênê YHWH. 'ēlleh tôl^{e}dōt nōaḥ
> nōaḥ 'îš ṣaddîq tāmîm hāyâ b^edōrōtāyw 'et-hā'ĕlōhîm
> hithallek-nōaḥ

Verses 8 and 9 contain testimony to Noah's worthiness. In vs. 8, ascribed to J, the sentence w^enōaḥ māṣā' ḥēn b^{e}'ênê YHWH is complete within itself and contains an obvious play on the consonants ḤN, "grace," and NḤ, "Noah." Such "puns"—for lack of a better term— depend on visual rather than aural gratification. The legends surrounding Noah, to be sure, are replete with examples of the latter style. U. Cassuto, in his *Commentary on Genesis, I,* 288-289, has collected a number of examples which must have pleased an audience listening to the Flood story. The purpose of this short note is to reveal other, more sophisticated, occurrences of the "visual" word-play in vs. 9, a verse which is usually assigned to P.

This verse repeats the name of Noah thrice. It begins with "These are the generations of Noah," yet does not proceed with genealogical detailing until vs. 10. In itself, this is not unusual. But when this phrase which is complete in itself is placed apart, we are left with a sequence which is made up of three segments, each of which amplifies on the qualities of Noah. Noah is "righteous"; he is "faultless among his contemporaries"; "with (the) God(s) was Noah on intimate terms." The construction of *'et-hā'ĕlōhîm hithallek-nōaḥ* is syntactically noteworthy,·since such inverted constructions are more usual in either poetic passages or ones where figurative usage is sought. It is rather obvious that this inversion was purposely made in order to take advantage of a sentence which thus began and ended in the name of Noah. Additionally this sequence of ten words no doubt underscored the fact that Noah formed the tenth generation since creation. There might, however, be more to it than that.

The *hithpa'ēl* of *hālak* is fairly frequently used in the OT. Except for a few examples, it is construed with a preposition: b^e, l^e, 'al and *min*. There ·are four examples, additionally, in which the preposition *'et*, "together with," is employed. In 1 Sam 25:15, the steward of Nabal speaks of his master's servants peacefully mingling with David's followers. The other three occur-

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rences are to be found in Gen 5:22, 24, and our 6:9. Since they share a similar vocabulary in which the indirect object to the verb is *'ĕlōhîm*, prefixed by the definite article *ha(n)*, one could imagine an interdependence to have existed among these P passages. The first two cases refer to Enoch, seventh generation since creation, who, after living 365 years, "was no more." Undoubtedly, much was told about this antediluvian patriarch that has not been preserved for us in the OT. For our purposes, Skinner's comments on Gen 6:9 concerning the relationship between Enoch and Noah could still be quoted with profit (*Genesis*, 159): "The expression ['*et-hā'ĕlōhîm hithallek-nōaḥ*] receives full significance from the Babylonian legend, where Ut-napištim, like the Biblical Enoch, is translated to the society of the gods."

Skinner's statement offers an explanation for the meaning but not for the syntax of the phrase under discussion. It is here suggested that the writer, in addition to deriving pleasure from sandwiching his praises within the names "Noah," could not miss the opportunity to drive home his comparison between his illustrious ancestors *ḥănôk* and *nōaḥ*. He structured his wording such, that the last three letters of his sentence were, *read backwards*, Ḥ-N-K.

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