The Character and Purpose of the Succession Narrative

We are therefore forced to conclude that the Succession Narrative, although its theme is an historical one and it makes use of historical facts, is not a work of history either in intention or in fact. The author's interests lay elsewhere.

2. The Succession Narrative as a novel

It has already been suggested in the foregoing discussion that the author has some of the qualities of the novelist. This suggestion must now be examined more closely. The claim that the work is a novel implies that it is the earliest work of its kind in Israelite literature: neither the earlier sagas, which belong rather to the category of popular narrative, nor the contemporary Yahwistic history, which is a composite work largely dependent on earlier sources, can be so called. As a narrative work of considerable length and complexity which is a free composition rather than dependent on older sources, the Succession Narrative stands by itself. This means that the claim that it is basically a novel can only be assessed by the standards which are applied by modern literary criticism to the novel of our own day.23

Among the most important features which we expect to find in a novel are the following: an essential unity of theme and action, leading—however diversified may be the subordinate themes—step by step to a logical and satisfactory conclusion; a structural unity, in which each chapter constitutes a distinct, vivid and realistic scene, yet plays an essential part in the whole; convincing and lively dialogue; credible characters, corresponding in their complexity to the experienced realities of human nature; and a lively and flexible style capable of conveying to the reader mood, feelings, atmosphere, irony and humour.

(a) Unity of theme. Without anticipating later discussion of the purpose of the book, we may define the central theme as that of the succession to the throne of David. As Rost24 correctly pointed

23 By 'novel' here is meant the classical novel as the word has been understood in the west since the eighteenth century; that is, the novel with a plot which is brought to a definite conclusion. It may be noted that the idea of comparing the Succession Narrative with the modern novel is not new: it is the basis of the literary criticism in the three major studies of B. Luther, Rost and von Rad—presumably because it is really the only method available to us.

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out, the clue to the whole work is to be found in I Kings 1 and 2, where it is made clear by constant reiteration of a kind of refrain:

'I will be king.' (Adonijah, 1.5)

'Have you not heard that Adonijah ... has become king and David our lord does not know it?' (Nathan to Bathsheba, 1.11)

'Go in at once to King David, and say to him, “Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your maidservant, saying, “Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne”? Why then is Adonijah king?”' (Nathan to Bathsheba, 1.13)

'My lord, you swore to your maidservant by Yahweh your God, saying, “Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne.” And now, behold, Adonijah is king, although you, my lord the king, do not know it.' (Bathsheba to David, 1.17f)

'And now, my lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are upon you, to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him.' (Bathsheba to David, 1.20)

'My lord the king, have you said, “Adonijah shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne”? (Nathan to David, 1.24)

'Has this thing been brought about by my lord the king and you have not told your servants who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?' (Nathan to David, 1.27)

'As I swore to you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, saying, “Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne in my stead”; even so will I do this day.' (David to Bathsheba, 1.30)

'He shall come and sit upon my throne, for he shall be king in my stead.' (David, 1.31)

'Solomon sits upon the royal throne.' (Jonathan to Adonijah, 1.46)

'Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, who has granted one of my offspring to sit upon my throne this day.' (David, 1.49)

So Solomon sat upon the throne of David his father. (2.12)

So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon. (2.46b)

Working back from these last chapters, Rost had no difficulty in demonstrating that this theme which is expressed so insistently at the end of the book is in fact its central theme. Every incident in the story without exception is a necessary link in a chain of narrative which shows how, by the steady elimination of the alternative possibilities, it came about that it was Solomon who succeeded his father on the throne of Israel.

The book begins with a narrative (II Sam. 9) which reminds the reader of the still existing threat to the new dynasty of a restoration of the house of Saul.23 The purpose of bringing Meribbaal on the scene at this point is to prepare for the narratives (16.1-4; 19.24-30) where the reader is deliberately left in doubt over the loyalty of Meribbaal at the time of Absalom’s rebellion; and the incidents involving Shimel, ‘a man of the family of the house of Saul’ (16.5-14; 19.16-23; I Kings 2.8f, 36-46), together with the revolt of Sheba, who was a member of Saul’s tribe of Benjamin (II Sam. 20), remind the reader of the latent possibility which continued to exist throughout David’s reign, that David would not have any successor to sit on his throne; and they show how this danger was fought against and eventually eliminated.

Chapters 10-12 then take up a different aspect of the succession theme: the origins of the man who did in fact succeed David, i.e. Solomon. This necessitated the introduction of an account of the war against the Ammonites which formed the background to the story of the birth of Solomon; and here the author decided, contrary to his usual custom, to incorporate more or less unchangeable into his book narratives which he took from a contemporary annalistic source: 10.1-11.18; 12.26-31. The series of events which is inserted between these two annalistic excerpts is of vital importance for the development of the main theme. Bathsheba, here introduced for the first time, not only became the mother of David’s eventual successor, but was later to play a decisive role in securing the throne for her son through her influence over David in his senility (I Kings 1.11-31). Through the account of the birth and premature death of her first son by David, who, if he had lived, would have been a candidate for the throne (11.27; 12.15f), followed by the notice of the birth of her second son Solomon, of whom it is said that ‘Yahweh loved him’ (12.24), the reader’s attention is drawn to the problem of

23 If Rost is right in believing II Sam. 6.16, 20-21; 7.11b, 16 to be part of a lost beginning of the book, this theme emerges all the more clearly: if Michal had not been barren, the two houses might have been united in the person of a son, who would have been the son of David and the grandson of Saul; but this was made impossible by Michal’s barrenness.
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the succession, whose solution is already suggested in a veiled way. Meanwhile the story of David’s adultery, revealing his emotional instability, has prepared the way for the account of his later ineptitude in personal matters, which was also to prove to be a vital element in the elimination of Absalom from the succession.

After this introduction, Bathsheba and her son retire into the background, and the remainder of the work, with the exception of II Sam. 20, is devoted to the rival candidates for the throne, Solomon’s half-brothers Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah, and their elimination, leaving the field clear for the triumph of Solomon at the very end. The story of Amnon’s rape of his half-sister Tamar (13.1-19) leads to his elimination from the succession through his murder by Absalom, and the latter action in turn introduces the series of events which led to Absalom’s rebellion (13.20-38). With the death of Amnon and the banishment of Absalom it appears that two of the rival candidates have now been eliminated; but then begins (ch. 14) the account of Absalom’s return from banishment and partial reconciliation with his father, a story which gives yet another twist to the succession theme, while explaining the circumstances which led to his rebellion. The story of the rebellion itself and its defeat (chs. 15-19) shows not only how precarious was David’s own position, but also how the succession question came near to being solved in an entirely unexpected way.

In the course of this story the incidents involving Shimei and Meribbaal, who is credited by Ziba with having tried to take advantage of the confusion of the times to assert his own claim to the throne (16.3), once more remind the reader of the continued threat from the house of Saul. At the end of ch. 19, with the rebellion quelled and Absalom dead, the succession question is still unsolved; and before the final solution which comes as the result of Adonijah’s unsuccessful coup, the story of Sheba’s rebellion (ch. 20) raises pertinently the question—which is related to that of the claims of the house of Saul—of the extent of the kingdom which is to be inherited. The question is now not of an usurpation of the whole kingdom but whether the kingdom will be redivided into two parts, with the north reverting to Benjamite rule, leaving to David’s successor a greatly impoverished kingdom. With this question settled by the collapse of Sheba’s rebellion and the death of the pretender, the stage is now set for the final act.

We are now introduced to the remaining rival candidate, Adonijah, who attempts to take advantage of his aged father’s apparent incapacity either to control events or to settle the new urgent question of the succession, by proclaiming himself king. This had the effect of stirring the supporters of Solomon into action, and gave them the weapon which they needed to force David into a decision. The story now rapidly reaches its conclusion with the anointing and enthronement of Solomon, the flight of Adonijah, the death of David, and finally the statement that ‘Solomon sat upon the throne of his father; and his kingdom was firmly established’ (1 Kings 2.12). The remainder of the work is, as Rost noted, a kind of appendix, though not an irrelevant one, describing the measures taken by Solomon to make his position completely secure.

The work is, then, a unity in which each scene is essential to the whole and to the development of the central theme of the succession. But it is not only the central theme which gives the story its unity. A number of subordinate themes running through it make their contribution. Of these the most important is the psychological study of the family history of David, with its interpretation of the personal disasters which befall him and his sons as the consequence of his own weakness of character. This theme is most clearly expressed in two of Nathan’s words spoken when he condemned David’s seduction of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah: ‘Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house’ (II Sam. 12.10), and: ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun’ (12.11). The fact that these words may not be an original part of the narrative is of no consequence: even if this is so, they are additions made by a reader who has correctly—though with more overt piety and less subtlety than the author normally shows—discerned the theme in question and expressed it in plain words for the benefit

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28 P. 194.
29 This point was recognized by writers earlier than Rost, e.g. by S. R. Driver, Introduction, p. 183.
30 Cf. the comment by H. A. Leimbach, quoted by Hertzberg, op. cit., p. 378: ‘Chapters 11-12 might be called “David’s sin and its consequences”.’
of readers who might not be sufficiently subtle to discover it for themselves. The theme is undoubtedly present in the original narrative: although the death of the first child born to the murderer and his victim's wife is the direct punishment for the murder (12.13-15), that death is only the prelude to a horrifying series of calamities which befall David and his other children and household: the rape of Tamar, the public humiliation of David’s concubines by his own son, the rebellion of two of his sons and the violent deaths of two of them—Amnon and Absalom—within their father’s lifetime and of a third—Adonijah—soon afterwards. The pathos and tragedy of these events and their crippling effect on David’s character are clearly brought out in the scene in which David mourns for Absalom (II Sam. 18.33-19.8). This theme of a man forced throughout his remaining years to witness in his own family the effect of that same violence and lust of which he himself has been guilty is one which greatly contributes to the book’s literary unity.

Other thematic threads run through the book: the Meribbaal story is in three parts (II Sam. 9; 16.1-4; 19.24-36), each part standing naturally in its own context, while the whole forms a distinct sub-plot. The tragic story of Joab forms another. The unity of the book is also reinforced by numerous subtle details which, to the discerning reader, evoke memories of earlier scenes or foreshadow later ones. Thus when Absalom cohabits with David’s concubines (II Sam. 16.22) he does it ‘on the roof’, presumably that same ‘roof’ of the king’s house’ from which his father had his first fateful glimpse of Bathsheba (11.2). The words of the wise woman of Tekoa, when she speaks of the threat to her ‘name and remnant’ if both her sons are taken from her (14.7) are, in spite of David’s promise that her second son will be spared, already looking forward to the death of Absalom, and epitomize the question of the dynastic succession. Again, the whole tragedy of Joab, the man who in the end pays with his life for having put loyalty to the interests of the State before other loyalties (19.1-8; I Kings 2.28ff.), is presaged in the scene in which his efforts to serve the State by reconciling Absalom and David receive as their only reward the destruction of his property by the man whose cause he has championed (II Sam. 14.29-33). Again, the series of tragedies in David’s family is made more poignant by the constant references to the physical beauty of its members: Bathsheba, 11.2; Tamar, 13.1; Absalom, 14.23 and his daughter Tamar, 14.27; Adonijah, I Kings 1.6. These are also clearly intended to recall David’s own physical beauty (I Sam. 16.12), which, although it is not mentioned in the Succession Narrative, was evidently well known to the reader.

Another unifying bond is the consistent treatment of the characters. From the moment when he first appears, each one (with the exception of the really minor ones) is kept in the author’s mind, and his story is brought to a definite conclusion within the compass of the book. In some cases (Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah, Joab, Amasa, Shimei, Abishaphel) a man’s career is followed through to a death which is directly related to his actions; in others there is some other definite conclusion: in the case of Abiathar, banishment and supersession by Zadok (I Kings 2.6); with Bathsheba and Nathan, who are regularly linked together in the narrative, it is the happy fulfilment, through the accession of Solomon, of a lifetime’s ambition. With another pair, Ziba and Meribbaal, three scenes scattered through the book end with a compromise decision which nevertheless brings their tragedy to a conclusion. Even with such minor characters as Barzillai, the author is unwilling to leave an incident once begun (II Sam. 17.27-29; 19.31-40) without a definite conclusion (I Kings 2.7). As von Rad rightly saw, these multiple threads which run intertwined through the book are a strong argument in favour of its unity.

(b) Structure. The division of the book into distinct scenes or chapters is to be understood in purely artistic terms. This is unusual in the Old Testament: in most of the narratives of comparable length the breaks in the story mark the points where an editor has joined two originally separate incidents together. But the author of the Succession Narrative was entirely master of his own material, and had to solve for himself the problem of dividing it into vivid and artistically satisfactory scenes while maintaining continuity. This he did with remarkable success, as

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30 This is true, for example, of the stories of David’s early career in the Books of Samuel. The main exceptions are the Joseph Narrative and the books of Ruth, Jonah and Esther.
31 This independence of source material is widely accepted, e.g. by von Rad, ‘Beginnings’, p. 191, though Eisfeldt (Introduction, p. 139) questions it.
may be seen from an analysis of the account of the events which led to Absalom’s rebellion, II Sam. 13.1-15.12.

Absalom is introduced for the first time in 13.1; by 13.12 his rebellion has been launched, and David’s throne and life are in danger. From a quiet and apparently unpromising statement that ‘Absalom, David’s son, had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar’, the author leads the reader through a series of scenes in which the tension steadily increases, to the climax of 15.10-12. Notes on the passage of time amounting to eleven years (13.23, 38; 14.28; 15.7) remind us that we are witnessing a slow and inexorable process which has been compressed into a small compass. The choice of incidents, clearly revealing the change in Absalom’s character and the growth of his inordinate ambition out of a sense of frustration and righteous indignation, is adroitly made. The scene changes frequently; but there are five main ‘chapters’: the rape of Tamar, 13.1-22; the murder of Amnon and Absalom’s consequent banishment, 13.23-39; the attempts to secure his return, 14.1-53; the preparations for the rebellion, 15.1-6; and the climax, the act of rebellion itself, 15.7-12. Of these the third consists of two distinct but closely related scenes (14.1-24, 28-33) joined by an interlude (14.25-27). Each chapter is complete in itself and is brought to an appropriate conclusion; yet in each case the concluding words themselves unmistakably hint that this cannot be a final solution, but only marks a pause in the action which satisfies none of the participants. This sense of unease creates in the reader a new feeling of suspense, and so preserves the momentum of the story as a whole. There is a sense of inevitable movement towards some final crisis. Relief is given, however, to the monotony of a movement in one direction only by the device of departure and return, which is strikingly emphasized by the choice of words. In the second scene the word ‘go’ recurs insistently (13.24, 25 (twice), 26 (twice), 27), to be followed by the equally insistently repetition of words meaning ‘flee’ (vv. 29, 34, 37, 38). In the third these keywords are replaced first by ‘bring back’ (14.13, 21, 23), then by ‘dwell’ (vv. 24, 28) and finally ‘see the face (of the king)’ (vv. 24, 28, 32). At each step there is suspense; and the gradual approach of the once banished Absalom back towards the centre of events hints at the final step, when he will for a time succeed in placing himself in the very centre itself.

Ostensibly the central character in these chapters is Absalom; yet in a deeper sense the reader is made to feel that it is David whom the author seeks to portray: David who is in a true sense the architect of Absalom’s destiny—the one who gave him life, who gave him his inherited qualities of impetuosity and cunning, ambition and ruthlessness; who was ultimately responsible, through the ineptitude of his treatment of him, weak and sentimental, yet hesitant, for his final fatal venture. Throughout these chapters the figure of David looms like an evil genius over the protagonists.

In each chapter the central action is described with dramatic terseness: 13.14; 13.29; 14.13; 14.30; 15.10. The author’s real interest lies not in the actions themselves but in their causes, circumstances and consequences. It is especially in the concluding sections that one may observe how his chapters are rounded off as distinct units, while at the same time pointing forward to further developments. In 13.1-22, the personal tragedy of Tamar is complete in v. 20b; but verses 21f., which describe the new state of affairs (David angry, Absalom nursing hatred for Amnon, Amnon thus in danger) create a new tension. Action is suspended; but the future is uncertain.

Similarly in 13.23-39, the action is completed, it would seem, in v. 38: Tamar is avenged, and all three participants in the drama have been removed from the scene, Amnon by death, Tamar by disgrace and Absalom by flight. Yet the final words make it clear that things cannot remain in this state: David longs for reconciliation with his son (v. 39); and so the reader is prepared for the next chapter.

Again in 14.1-24 the return of Absalom to Jerusalem (vv. 23, 24a) seems to have brought the story to a close; but the final words (v. 24b) that ‘he did not see the king’s face’ again show that the solution can only be a temporary one.

At this point (14.25-27) the author uses the pause to introduce a passage describing Absalom’s handsome appearance which can hardly be presented in narrative form but is necessary as a prelude to a later scene (15.1-6) in which Absalom is to ‘steal the hearts of the men of Israel’ (15.6). The reference to Absalom’s daughter Tamar, who was beautiful like her unfortunate namesake, seems to be intended to point forwards as well as backwards: for Absalom, the incident of his sister’s humiliation is not over, and
will never be over: he bears a grudge against his father which will drive him on to even more desperate action. The insertion of this descriptive passage into a narrative packed with incident also serves to create suspense, and to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that from now on it is Absalom who will be at the centre of events.

14.28-33, which begins with a reminder of the unsatisfactory situation of Absalom on his return to Jerusalem, seems at first sight to end happily: the king signifies publicly his reconciliation with his son (v. 33). Yet this is in fact the ‘calm before the storm’: Absalom’s preparations for rebellion, unhurried though they are (15.7), begin from this point. If we look more closely at the final verse it will be seen that here also the author has introduced an ominous note, the most subtle of all: the scene is enacted in total silence. Elsewhere we are told without restraint about David’s emotions at times of crisis: he was angry (13.21); he rent his garments (13.31); he wept bitterly (13.36); he longed for Absalom (13.39); he mourned bitterly over Absalom’s death (18.33; 19.4). Yet at this moment we are told nothing. Absalom had forced his father’s hand, the interests of the State required a formal reconciliation, and David bowed to those interests; but the reconciliation was no more than formal. The author has told us plainly by his silence how cold and formal was that kiss. There were now, he implies, two rivals for the throne. This was the moment when Absalom realized that there was now nothing more to be expected from his father. So 14.33 leads the perceptive reader to expect a dénouement of the whole story; and it comes in 15.1-12.

So chs. 13-15 provide clear proof that the ‘scenes’ in this work are not, as elsewhere in Old Testament narrative, the result of the joining of sources by an editor but literary units within an original work, created for purely literary and artistic reasons. The other parts of the book confirm this.

The first chapters (II Sam. 9-12) are somewhat less perfect from the literary point of view, partly because the author has here used an older source and partly because the beginning of the work is lost. Nevertheless the same techniques can be seen. The story of Meribbaal (9.1-13) is broken off at a point which offers a conclusion of a kind; yet that very conclusion—a lame Meribbaal dependent on a servant whose trustworthiness has not been men-
tioned; a descendant of Saul installed at court—suggests the possibility, if not the certainty, of further development, which is in fact found later in the story (16.1-4). Similarly the story of David and Bathsheba (11.2-12.25) is a preparatory chapter which finds its sequel at the very end of the work in 1 Kings 1.1ff., when the same four persons, David, Bathsheba, Nathan and Solomon, gather all the themes together with the accession of Solomon to the throne, a sequel hinted at in the final verses of the first story (12.24f.), where Solomon is named Jedidiah, ‘Yahweh’s beloved’. These two stories provide a framework for the stories concerning the fate of David’s other children.

In the account of Absalom’s rebellion (15.13-19.40), the literary problems were quite different, and the methods correspondingly so. The problem in 13.1-15.12 was to trace the fate of Absalom over a long period of time in such a way as to show not only the relationship between the events but also the gradual change in Absalom’s character, its causes and its consequences. This task required the selection of a number of scenes, each of which should be complete in itself yet organically related to the whole. The events of 15.13-19.40 cover only, at most, a few weeks, and describe a single event: Absalom’s rebellion. The subject provided the author both with opportunities and with technical problems. The main character was now once again David, at one of the greatest crises of his life; and thus the opportunity was provided of depicting aspects of his character not previously brought out. This the author did principally by creating a number of short scenes (15.13-16.14; 19.16-40) which depict David’s relations with a host of people: David’s servants and his personal bodyguard, Itai and his Gittites, the priests, Ahithophel, Hushai, Meribbaal, Ziba, Shimei, Abishai. Each scene reveals some aspect of David’s character.

The technical problem, however, lay elsewhere, in the ordering of the narrative. It was necessary that each side of the conflict should receive equal attention, and this involved a dovetailing of two sets of scenes, those concerning Absalom and those concerning David. This had to be done without confusing or losing the attention of the reader, and it had never been done satisfactorily before in Hebrew narrative. The author chose to do it by inserting a single block of narrative about Absalom and his followers (16.15-17.14) into a main narrative which is told from
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David’s point of view. He inserted it into a natural pause in the story, when David and his men had reached the Jordan, safe from immediate pursuit, and were resting (16.14). At this point the reader would naturally wonder how safe David was there, and would wish to know what Absalom was doing. The change of scene is therefore entirely appropriate. Similarly, at the end of the block of narrative about Absalom, the reader is led back to David’s camp quite naturally through the story of David’s spies in Jerusalem—already prepared for in 15.32-37—as they themselves return to David with news (17.15-22). From this point, after a short description of the disposition of the forces on both sides (17.24-26) it was possible to tell the rest of the story from the point of view of David, including in it the battle and the death of Absalom.

The story of the revolt of Sheba (ch. 20), an event which followed closely upon that of Absalom, presented no difficulties to the author.

After this there occurs one of the major breaks in the narrative (cf. 10.1; 13.1). The author apparently was uninterested in any events which may have occurred between the revolt of Sheba and Adonijah’s abortive attempt on the throne. The story of the ministry of Abishag to David in his old age (I Kings 1.1-4) is a transitional passage (cf. 14.25-27) which, although it in no sense fills the chronological gap, serves the literary purpose by returning the reader gently to the atmosphere of the court after the military scenes of the previous chapters, while at the same time providing the psychological atmosphere of a kingdom in perilous waters, with the strong hand of the king no longer firmly on the helm, and the king himself a prey to ambitious advisers. The link with previous events is made in 1.5-8: everything related here about Adonijah reminds the reader of the earlier tragedy of Absalom: the statement about his chariots and fifty runners (cf. II Sam. 15.1), his personal beauty (cf. 14.25), and the ominous statement that his father had spoiled him and never exercised parental control over him (1.6). The parallel is then made explicit by the mention of the name of Absalom in v. 6b. History, it

would seem, was about to repeat itself. Then in vv. 7f. the past is further recalled with a list of names which remind the reader of many previous episodes: Joab, Abishar, Zadok, Nathan. The fact that these are now divided into two opposing camps leads the reader to expect the arrival of the final crisis of the story.

This concluding section of the work has a unity of theme, since it is the attempt of Adonijah which provokes the proclamation of Solomon; but like the Absalom story it is divided into chapters. There is a pause in 2.10-12 with the death of David and the accession of Solomon, and this might seem to be the end of the story, but for 1.53: the fact that Adonijah, after the failure of his attempt, should have been allowed to go on living as if nothing had happened, yet without a reconciliation with Solomon—another reminiscence of the Absalom story—has already persuaded the reader that there must be more to come. There are many loose strands left over; and it is not until the conclusion of ch. 2 that the end comes, with Solomon at last firmly settled on the throne (2.46b).

The technical craftsmanship which the author shows in the structure of his story and its division into chapters is seen also in the detailed handling of each chapter regarded as a unit. The art of constructing a story with an artistically satisfying form was not new: even the authors of the sagas of the patriarchs succeeded admirably in doing this. Most of these stories, however, are relatively short and simple. Even in the case of longer and more complex stories, such as that of the mission of Abraham’s servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24), where changes of scene were necessary, the narrator did not set himself any very taxing problems: all the events in that story, from the despatch of the messenger in vv. 2-9 to his return in vv. 62ff., are given in simple chronological order, and told from a single standpoint. In the Succession Narrative the author set himself problems of considerable complexity, and solved them with such dexterity that only the careful reader is aware of their existence. The scene often changes rapidly: for example, in II Sam. 13.1-22 the main events are set in Amnon’s house; but there is considerable movement among the other characters: the king visits Amnon in his house, then sends a message to Tamar (v. 7); Tamar goes to Amnon’s

32 II Sam. 20.22 was followed immediately in the original Succession Narrative by I Kings 1.1; nothing has been omitted. See Noth, König, p. 8.

33 The fact that the whole paragraph is circumstantial in character is suggested by the choice of an initial nominal clause in 1.1.

house; after Amnon’s assault she is put out into the street, meets Absalom there and is conducted by him to his house. Finally we return to David, whose reaction is noted. In the second half of the chapter, there is again rapid change of scene: the invitation to the feast (v. 23), the interview with David (vv. 24–27), the instructions to the servants (v. 28), the deed itself (v. 29a) and the flight of the guests (29b). At this point a further complication is introduced in order to create a situation of dramatic irony: while the king’s sons are actually on their way back to Jerusalem with a true account of what has taken place (v. 30), a false rumour that all the king’s sons have been murdered reaches David.

Again, in II Sam. 18.19–33 the scene-changing is very rapid. After the battle in which Absalom is defeated and killed, the question how the king is to be told arises. The author’s desire to create suspense and, once again, dramatic irony, involves a complicated narrative: the scene on the battlefield, with the despatch in succession of the two runners (vv. 19–23), the double scene between David, sitting in the gate, and the watchman on the roof (vv. 24–27), and the arrival of the runners in the reverse order of their setting out (already prepared for in vv. 23f.).

Perhaps the most complex passage in the whole work is I Kings 1.1–53. The revolt of Adonijah, which led to the anointing and proclamation of Solomon, is the climax of the whole book, and the author was determined not only to show the chain of cause and effect which brings the story to its conclusion, but also to record its effects on several groups of people. The actual dénouement occurs in ch. 2, but the events of that chapter are a foregone conclusion. The climax is reached in ch. 1. The telling of the story involved a number of different groups of people, and a number of events or situations occurring more or less simultaneously in different places: Adonijah and his followers at En-rogel, the old king isolated and impotent in his bedroom, Nathan and Bathsheba plotting in the latter’s palace, and the anointing and proclamation of Solomon at Gihon, followed by his enthronement in the throne-room in the palace. All these had to be worked into a single, smooth narrative. This involved a particularly complicated piece of dovetailing: from David’s bedroom (vv. 1–4) the reader is transported to Adonijah’s circle at court (vv. 5–8) and then on to En-rogel, the scene of the rebellion itself; the introduction of the next theme, Nathan’s intrigue with Bathsheba, takes us first to Bathsheba’s palace (vv. 11–14) and then back to David’s bedroom (vv. 15–37), out in procession to Gihon for Solomon’s anointing (vv. 38–40) and then back to Adonijah at En-rogel, where the feast is still going on (vv. 41–48). Here the themes are drawn together by the arrival of a messenger who reports two more scenes: Solomon’s enthronement in the throne-room (v. 46) and the congratulatory visit of David’s servants to him, once again in his bedroom (v. 47), an important turning-point in the story which marks the disappearance of David as an effective force and his replacement by ‘King Solomon’.

The strands are finally pulled together with Adonijah’s flight to the altar (v. 50) and the throne-room scene (v. 53) in which the confrontation of the two rivals takes place and Adonijah is dismissed to his house.

This story is technically perhaps the most complex story describing a single event in the Old Testament; yet the scenes have been so well dovetailed that the whole narrative reads smoothly and naturally, and the reader is at no time in any confusion or doubt about the sequence or coincidence of the events. Occasionally the devices used to achieve this effect are visible, e.g. in v. 15, where a circumstantial clause reminds the reader of David’s condition, already described in vv. 1–4. But in most cases the effect is obtained simply by a mastery of the art of narration which knows exactly when and where to make a change of scene. As a result we have as it were a panoramic view of the whole city of Jerusalem at that moment, in which can be seen the deeds, reactions and fates of a host of characters, including even the people (v. 40).

If we compare these narratives with even the most sophisticated of the narratives in the other historical books of the Old Testament, their superiority is evident. For example, in the story of David’s farewell to Jonathan (I Sam. 20), where the author had a fairly complicated story to tell, though less complicated than I Kings 1, the narration is technically so inept that the reader is often in confusion. Both the plan to let David know what happens at the feast (vv. 5–23) and its execution (vv. 35–40) are described in a confused way; moreover the author’s desire, in addition, to include a touching and significant farewell scene (vv. 41f.) makes nonsense of the arrangement that Jonathan should communicate

\[35\] For an appreciation, see Montgomery and Gehman, op. cit., pp. 91f.
with David by a prepared sign to avoid the risk of their being seen together. The account is so confused that it has been thought to be a conflation of two sources, but this hypothesis, for which there is no real evidence, is insufficient to explain what are clearly blemishes on the part of an author whose mastery of his art was insufficient for the task which he had set himself: an imperfect control over complicated dialogue, inefficient scene-changing, and an inability to portray emotions without the creation of a special set piece as their vehicle.

Again, the story of Joseph's dealings with his brothers in Egypt (Gen. 42.6-45.15), although it does not lack psychological insight, is wooden, forced and unnatural at many points: the author is heavily dependent on the traditional devices of epic narrative or folk-tale, with their frequent repetition of incident and dialogue with only slight variations. Unlike I Sam. 20, its plot is relatively free from confusion, but the effort to create a logical and symmetrical plot has been achieved at the expense of credibility and resemblance to real life.

(c) Use of dialogue. This is one of the most striking features of the book. Elsewhere in the Old Testament dialogue is often used to reveal the characters and emotions of the speakers, often with considerable subtlety. But in no other Old Testament narrative does the effectiveness of the stories depend so completely on dialogue as here. The dialogue in the Succession Narrative not only reveals character: it often bears the whole weight of the action, dispensing the author from the necessity of making his own comments about the motives of the speakers, a clumsy device to which he resorts only very rarely. Thus in the story of David and Uriah the Hittite (II Sam. 11.6-25) the narrator nowhere says that David first determined to cover up his adultery by bringing Uriah home on leave; that when this stratagem failed, he determined to kill him; that Joab was faced with a difficult assignment; that having carried it out, at the possible cost of his military reputation, he felt the need to defend himself by a kind of blackmail; that the message which he sent had to be carefully worded in order not to arouse the suspicion of the messenger. All this is subtly conveyed to the reader through the conversations in vvv. 8-12 (with the repeated 'Go down to your house'; 'Why did you not go down to your house?') and by David's letter (v. 15) and the conversations between Joab and the messenger and the messenger and David. No explanation by the narrator could so well have conveyed these complex motives, or indeed so well revealed the characters of Joab and David in such an entertaining way.

Again, the story of David's grief over the death of Absalom and of Joab's intervention at the risk of his own safety to save the situation by an apparently callous rebuke (18.33-19.8), which is one of the most revealing and moving episodes in the book, would be flat and uninteresting if it were told, as it could have been told, in the form of a direct narrative. As it is, it consists almost entirely of dialogue, which moves the reader by its realism and holds him in suspense concerning the outcome of such a bold and unexpected outburst, while it illuminates the whole book by revealing important aspects of the characters of David and Joab which are essential for an understanding of the whole inner history of these years.

Other examples of the use of dialogue could be given. Much of it is, of course, ordinary conversation necessary to any narrative work and comparable with dialogue in other Old Testament books; but it is in the intimate scenes, in which the spoken word predominates, and through which the clash of personalities can be seen, that the real superiority of the work lies. The formal speeches of Nathan (II Sam. 12.1-7), Ahithophel (17.1-5) and Hushai (17.8-13) are also masterpieces of their own kind.

(d) Portrayal of character. As was pointed out by Rost and reiterated by many later writers, artistically the most subtle and mature feature of the book is the author's treatment of character and his profound psychological insight. This is seen most clearly in the fully drawn major characters, although even the minor ones possess a life of their own.

David as portrayed in the Succession Narrative is the most fully delineated of all the characters in the Old Testament. The real greatness of this psychological study is measured by the fact that even so, he remains for the reader an essentially elusive...
personality. This is not due to any vagueness or inconsistency on the part of the author. On the contrary, it is the very richness and variety of his literary creation which raises the figure of David to a stature comparable with the great tragic heroes of literature. The character is drawn so close to life that we find it impossible to understand him fully, because he has the complexity of a real person. It is this enigmatic manner of his portrayal which has occasioned the expression of so many different views concerning the meaning and purpose of the Succession Narrative. In incident after incident we see more than one possible explanation of David's conduct. Was he really magnanimous to Meribbaal (II Sam 9.1-13), or was he merely being prudent in arranging to have him under his eye? And what of his piety? When he accepted the death of his child with the words 'But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me' (12.23); when he sent the Ark back to Jerusalem with the words, 'Behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him' (15.26); when he prevented Abishai from killing Shimei, saying, 'If he is cursing because Yahweh has said to him, ‘Curse David’, who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?’' (16.10)—was this genuine piety, or was it a calculated attempt to impress his followers? Are these further examples of David's well known cunning, such as he revealed when he sent Hushai back to Jerusalem to 'defeat the counsel of Ahithophel'? Here surely the author has deliberately left his readers in doubt.

Not only David's clemency and piety but even his greatness is similarly left an open question. David was, in the end, successful—though he had more than once come close to total failure—in the achievement of his political and military aims. He left behind him a strong kingdom and an assured succession. We are allowed to see some of the factors which contributed to this success: David's personal charm and his ability to command complete loyalty (especially in Joab, Ittai, Hushai); his craftiness, especially when hard pressed; his personal courage, as when he wanted to take the field in person against Absalom; his tactical skill and ability to come to a swift decision, as when he temporarily abandoned Jerusalem to Absalom. Yet over and over again, as king and statesman, he shows the most absurd ineptitude: though accustomed to the role of judge, he is unable to distinguish between a true and a fictitious story whether it is Nathan

(II Sam. 12.1-6) or the wise woman of Tekoa (14.1-11) who tells it; he is totally blind to the fact that Absalom is steadily undermining his position; he is incapable of seeing, until it is rudely pointed out to him by Joab (19.1-8) that his uncontrolled grief over the death of Absalom will have such a demoralizing effect on the troops who have just risked their lives to defend him against Absalom that he is throwing away everything which he has just regained. And it can hardly be accidental that it is only when he is old and feeble and a mere puppet in the hands of others that the succession to the throne can be settled by others who see, as he had never been able to do, the dangers into which the State has been thrown by his refusal to name a successor. So the author leaves us with yet another enigma: was it real greatness, or was it luck, together with the possession of loyal subordinates, which preserved David's kingdom and secured the all-important succession to the throne? It is significant that Joab, in the plainest speech in the book, emphasizes that David owes his life to his subordinates, and even comes close to suggesting that he owed his kingdom to them from the start (19.7).

It is in his portrayal of David's faults that the author comes closest to giving us an unambiguous picture. David's relations with his children provided an unusually good opportunity for a psychological study. The author never states baldly that the tragedies of Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah were due to David's own weaknesses, but he suggests it quite unmistakably in two ways: by portraying the sons as having inherited the weaknesses of their father and by describing in detail, quite objectively, the relations between David and Absalom.

The stories of the rape of Tamar and of Absalom's murder of Amnon show clearly how the sons had inherited the vices of their father. These stories immediately follow that of David's adultery, in which David had been guilty of criminal lust, treachery and murder. These crimes are now repeated by the sons, who are shown to have inherited both the passionate and the calculating sides of David's nature.

The author shows how David, far from taking firm measures to arrest the further effects of these inherited vices, displayed a total ineptitude in his treatment of both Amnon and Absalom. In saying that David was merely 'very angry' at Amnon's rape of Tamar, whereas Absalom 'hated' Amnon (13.21f.), he suggests
that it was David's weakness which made Absalom take the law into his own hands. After the murder of Amnon it was again David's inability to take a decision in matters which concerned his own children (13.39-14.1) which led to further trouble. The notes of time—three years in exile in Gershon, 13.38; 'two full years' waiting in Jerusalem before being publicly reconciled with his father, 14.28—and the scene between Absalom and Joab in which Absalom speaks of his frustration (14.28-32) suggest the corrupting effect which David's inability to make up his mind had on Absalom; and the author then immediately (15.1-6) describes the inevitable result: the reconciliation comes too late, and so the plan of treason which his father's folly had driven a young man whose original crime seems to have sprung from a noble desire to avenge a wicked deed against his sister.

The chapters which follow show that the real cause of David's vacillations was a maudlin sentimentality which overruled his common sense in all matters connected with his children. In the case of Amnon he had been ready to excuse one son for a heinous crime to the extent of wronging the other, who had avenged that crime. Now this same sentimentality was transferred to the second son, this time at the expense of the safety of the State. David, driven by Absalom's treason out of his own capital and made a fugitive in his own land, now had no thought but for the safety of the traitor: he orders Joab and the other commanders to 'deal gently' with him (18.5); his first question to each of the messengers who come to announce victory is not for the details of the battle or for the safety of his men, but for the young man Absalom' (18.29, 32); and in his grief at his death he shows that he cares for no one else (19.1-7). The picture of an obsessive love which brings death to its own objects and misery to the one who loves as well as to others can seldom have been surpassed even by modern novelists.

With characteristic restraint, the author did not judge it necessary to fill in the picture in detail either for Amnon or Adonijah. Apart from the significant comment in 1 Kings 1.6 that David never exercised any parental control over Adonijah, he leaves it to the reader to surmise that there was something amiss with the way in which David educated all his children, which could lead no less than three of them to such crimes as rape of a sister and treason against a father, and to violent deaths. In the case of Amnon, however, he gives us one more remarkable psychological insight: the 'sexual hatred' which caused the lecher, after his desire was sated, to turn against the object of his lust, Tamar, so that 'the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her' (13.15).

The last of the sons of David named in the book—Solomon—can hardly be said to be more than a minor character, even if the whole of 1 Kings 1 and 2 is accepted as original. This reticence on the part of the author is easily understandable. If, as is probable, Solomon was the reigning king when the book was written, any psychological study of him, which would inevitably reveal his faults as well as his virtues, would be dangerous; and the author was hardly the man to spoil his work by concluding it with an insincere piece of flattery. Moreover, a full study of Solomon was hardly called for. His accession was the climax of the story, and a brief picture of Solomon sitting on the throne of his father was all that was needed to complete the work. The accounts of the fates of Adonijah, Abiathar, Joab and Shimei are no more than appendices which show that the author, like a Victorian novelist, felt that the artistic perfection of his work demanded the pulling together of all the strings in the final chapter, so that all suspense should be resolved.

Rost characterizes the Solomon of these chapters as 'calculating and merciless'; but it may be doubted whether any real attempt is made by the author to depict his character. As with David, Solomon's motives are left in doubt, but in this case only because the portrait is not fully drawn. We do not know why he showed clemency towards Abiathar on the grounds of his past services to David when he had loyally shared his misfortunes (1 Kings 2.26), yet showed none towards Joab (2.28ff), of whom the same could have been said.42 Equally in the cases of Adonijah and Shimei, to whom Solomon offered a second chance (1.52.; 2.36-38) but who were both eventually put to death on the grounds of further misbehaviour (2.13ff., 39ff.) no hint is given.

40 Cf. Herzberg, p. 324. 41 P. 231. 42 1 Sam. 15.7 is obviously a reference to the well known stories of David's and Joab's early careers.
which might enable the reader to decide whether Solomon's motives were sincere or whether he was indeed a 'calculating and merciless' man who intended from the first to remove these two men, but who for some unspecified reasons of policy needed an excuse. The only other glimpse of Solomon's character is given in 2.20f., where he goes back on his promise to his mother that he will not refuse any request which she may make. Here, however, it is Bathsheba's stupidity rather than Solomon's unreliability which is emphasized.

Bathsheba, though also a minor character, is represented quite consistently and realistically in the three scenes in which she appears, as a rather negative person. On each occasion someone makes use of her; David for his lust (II Sam. 11), Nathan in order to defeat Adonijah's plot to seize the throne (I Kings 1) and Adonijah to further his romantic designs (I Kings 2). She is always willing co-operator, never an initiator. On the second of these occasions she ought to have been aware of the threat to her own life and that of Solomon which was implicit in Adonijah's plot, but it was necessary for Nathan not only to persuade her of this (I Kings 1.12) but also to tell her how to use her influence over her aged husband, and how to bring him to the point of decision by alleging that he had already promised her to give the throne to Solomon (1.13, 17). After this we are not surprised to find her good-naturedly helping Adonijah in his romantic affairs (2.13f.), without pausing to consider either whether there was some more sinister scheme behind them, or whether the whole plan was not more likely to send Adonijah to his funeral than to his wedding. We thus have a consistent and thoroughly credible picture of Bathsheba as a good-natured, rather stupid woman who was a natural prey both to more passionate and to cleverer men. We cannot know whether Bathsheba was still alive—and therefore queen-mother—when the book was written; but the author has suggested her character quite definitely, yet without committing himself directly.

Outside David's family, the most remarkable study of character in the book is that of Joab. His story, like that of Absalom, forms a substantial sub-plot second in importance only to that of David himself. He is depicted in a variety of situations which enable his complex character to take on flesh and blood; and we may note that this character is entirely consistent with that which emerges from the other stories about him in the earlier parts of Samuel, with which the author of the Succession Narrative and his readers will have been familiar. Joab was already popularly known for his consistent loyalty to David and also for his capacity for committing sudden acts of murderous violence, carried out by treacherous means, when his honour or that of his family was injured (II Sam. 3.27-30). In the Succession Narrative these isolated traits of character are combined with others in a profound psychological study which, as in the case of David, gives the impression of a real person whose inconsistencies only reveal a complex nature.

By once again refraining from direct comment, the author leaves the reader free to speculate on Joab's motives in several incidents. We cannot exclude the possibility that he executed David's orders to kill Uriah (II Sam. 11.14-25) out of fear or anxiety to stand well with the king, or that his murder of Amasa (II Sam. 20.7-13) was done out of a spirit of personal spite against the man who had replaced him as commander-in-chief; or that his support of Adonijah was motivated by a calculation that his chances of retaining a position of power would be greater under Adonijah than under Solomon. But the overwhelming impression is that the chief motive for all his actions was loyalty. This loyalty, however, although mainly directed towards the person of the king, was not a blind unreasonable loyalty such as may have motivated Benaiah, the man who, ironically, was chosen to kill Joab (I Kings 2.34)—a subtle comment on the difference between David's men and the 'new men' of Solomon. Joab's loyalty throughout was above all a loyalty to Israel, whose security and greatness were his chief concern. To this Uriah, though innocent, must be sacrificed, because a public revelation of David's folly might endanger the safety of the State. Absalom, after his murder of Amnon, must be reconciled fully with David, because to leave him in an ambiguous situation was to court danger for the State. But when, as a result of David's continued weakness and hesitation, Absalom himself endangered the State by rebellion, Joab understood that not only must the rebellion be swiftly

43 In the Succession Narrative there are a number of references and allusions to these other stories: in I Kings 2.5 David refers to Joab's murder of Abner (II Sam. 3.27), and his words 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah?' (II Sam. 16.10; 19.22) recall II Sam. 3.39: 'These men the sons of Zeruiah are too hard for me.'
crushed, but its leader must be despatched without delay, in spite of David’s express command (II Sam. 18.9-15). He was prepared to sacrifice not only the king’s feelings, but also his own position and, it might be, his life, in the same service of the State.

In view of this clear consistency in Joab’s motives, we may reasonably interpret Joab’s murder of Amasa and his support of Adonijah’s plot in a favourable sense: there is certainly no suggestion of disloyalty on his part in the murder of Amasa, and from our knowledge of Joab’s former military success and reputation and the hasty and ill-considered nature of his replacement as commander-in-chief (II Sam. 19.13) we are entitled to believe that he regarded himself as the only man who could command the loyalty of the army and so crush Sheba’s revolt. Here once again an innocent man—Amasa—and Joab’s own safety are sacrificed for the good of the State: for there is no suggestion that Joab intended to use his military position against David. Finally we may well be led by the same reasoning to give credit to Joab for a sincere devotion to the State in his final recorded action, when he supported Adonijah against Solomon.

The moment which determined Joab’s fate was that in which, in what must surely be some of the plainest words spoken by a loyal official to his king in the whole of ancient literature, Joab rebuked David to his face (II Sam. 19.1-8). In these words, spoken by Joab in private and under strong emotion, with an entire absence of the polite phrases which characterize the courtly speeches in the rest of the book, the author not only brings to life the ruggedness and forcefulness of Joab’s character, but also reveals the complexity of his emotions and loyalties and of his relation to the king. The personal loyalty to David is rooted in the comradely sharing of past hardships (‘all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now’) and in a genuine love between the two men: Joab speaks of himself and his companions as ‘those who love you’, and expects—and, it is implied, has always thought that he could count on—love in return. His most bitter accusation against David is that in his obsessive love for the traitor Absalom ‘you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you’, and that ‘you love those that hate you and hate those that love you’. Joab is not prepared to minimize his own part in the achievement and main-

tenance of David’s greatness: he and his companions have ‘saved David’s life’. He cannot conceal his bitter disappointment at David’s lack of gratitude and love.

This moment was crucial for Joab: it forced him, probably for the first time, to consider the nature of his loyalty. For the first time he saw that personal loyalty to David and loyalty to the State which he and David together had created were not necessarily identical; he is forced to choose between them, and he chooses the latter. For the first time he threatens to abandon his beloved leader: unless David will sacrifice his personal grief to the safety of the State, he will have no more to do with him.44 The two stubborn old men who have spent their lives together have come to the parting of the ways. In forcing David to choose as he has chosen, and to trample on his most precious personal feelings, Joab seals his own fate.45 This is one of the high points of tragedy in the book.

The author is not content to depict Joab as capable of only one emotion. Joab is not the simple, bluff soldier for whom loyalty alone is enough. Indeed, he exhibits statesmanlike qualities and shrewdness in the earlier scenes. He knows David’s weaknesses, and is able to turn this knowledge to account, as when he uses the wise woman of Tekoa to play on his sensibilities. He is also prepared to use subtle means to defend himself, as in the carefully prepared message after the death of Uriah (II Sam. 11.18-25). But ultimately he is defeated by David’s obsessive love for Absalom, which all his shrewdness is powerless to control; and in desperation he resorts to fatal, though effective, brutality. The cause of Joab’s tragedy lies not in any change in him, but in a deterioration in the character of David, who seems destined to destroy all whom he touches.

Several of the minor characters, although they appear on the scene only for brief moments, are, as von Rad remarked,46 ‘sharply outlined’ and ‘distinctively portrayed’ in a few words. The main interest of Ahithophel and Hushai lies in their verbal skill; but the note about Ahithophel’s suicide (II Sam. 17.23) gives some insight into his character: he is a professional coun-

44 Cf. McKane’s comment, p. 169: ‘He has no time for a king who allows his private feelings to destroy his political judgment.’
45 So B. Luther, op. cit., p. 195; Auebach, op. cit., p. 248.
46 ‘Beginnings’, p. 190.
sellar whose devotion to logical calculation is so much the
dominating force in his life that he can apply it ruthlessly even to
choosing the moment for his own death: he will not seek to
prolong for a little while longer a life which he knows to be
already forfeit; yet he will not die without setting his house in
order. He is the 'new man', who is determined to be master of
his own fate.

In the case of Hushai, the author raises a moral question
which he leaves the reader to decide: can the gross deceit of
giving deliberately false counsel in order to ruin Absalom, who
trusted him, be justified by his motive, which was to serve the
cause of his friend David? Is such a man to be considered as a
loyal friend, or, on the contrary, a man totally lacking in moral
principle? However we decide, we are left with the impression
of a moral dilemma which faced a real person.

In Ziba and Meribaal also we are confronted with an enigma,
and one which David himself was unable to resolve; for having
heard both their stories, he neither punished the one for slander
nor the other for treason, but contented himself with settling
the civil dispute by dividing the disputed property equally between
them. Yet the author seems to convey, by subtle hints, the im-
pression that it is Ziba who is the liar. It is he who cleverly takes
advantage of David's confusion of mind during his flight from
Jerusalem by alleging (II Sam. 17.3) that Meribaal is plotting
the restoration of the house of Saul—a scheme which David in
a normal state of mind would recognize as quite incompatible
with support of Absalom, but which was in fact the very thing
of which David had always been afraid. The author shows his
hand also by stating as a fact that Meribaal had openly mourned
for David throughout his absence (19.24). Although as elsewhere
the author does not explicitly direct the reader's thoughts, he
probably sought to portray Meribaal as a colourless, well-
meaning and rather ingenuous man who is tricked and betrayed
by an unscrupulous servant who has fifteen sons to provide for
(II Sam. 9.10) and who is placed from the beginning in a most
advantageous position, free from proper supervision by a lame
master who is forced to live away from his estates.

Of the other characters, some, like Amasa and the rebel SHeba,
hardly come to life as individuals and are little more than parts
of the historical scenery before which the lives of the major
characters are enacted; Shimei too, though not lacking in positive
qualities, is mainly used to illuminate the characters of David
and Solomon. But even among the quite minor characters there
are some who come to life through some characteristic trait,
whether personal or typical: Tamar, who appears only in II Sam.
13, is no mere puppet but a spirited daughter of David, who tries
to bring Amnon to his senses; her cousin Jonadab is the clever but
irresponsible crony who shows Amnon how to achieve his
criminal purpose but omits to point out the probable consequences
if he succeeds in achieving it (II Sam. 13.5); the wise woman of
Techoa is a superb example of her class and profession; and
finally Benadad, Solomon's hatchet-man, who is sent to despatch
first Adonijah, then Joab, and finally Shimei, and makes our
blood curdle by the very impersonality of the account, is another
character who remains an enigma: is he a man entirely without
feelings, who would do anything to further his ambition—he
succeeded his victim Joab as commander-in-chief (I Kings 2.35)—
or was his ruthlessness the result of a blind and unquestioning
loyalty to Solomon? This combination of a sharp delineation of
a person's overt actions with an ambiguity about his motives,
which we find in both major and minor characters, is one of the
most convincing features of the story, because it corresponds to
a problem which we encounter in real life.

(c) Style. As has already been suggested, much of the literary
achievement of the Succession Narrative is due to mastery of
style. This is manifested both in the choice of individual words
and expressions and in the broader aspects of movement and
pace, contrast and irony. Rost \(^{48}\) pointed out how both narrative
and dialogue are studded with vivid similes and comparisons,
e.g. 'We are like water spilt on the ground', II Sam. 14.14; 'The
counsel which Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the
oracle of God', 16.23; 'as a bride comes home to her husband',
17.3; 'you are worth ten thousand of us', 18.3; 'they are enraged,
like a bear robbed of her cubs', 17.8. He noted the entire absence
of such expressions in, for example, the more formal Ark narra-

\(^{47}\) The most detailed study of this is that of Rost, pp. 218-225.

\(^{48}\) Cf. S. R. Driver, op. cit., p. 183: 'The style is singularly bright, flowing
and picturesque.'

\(^{49}\) P. 220.
tive in the earlier part of Samuel. He also drew attention to the
author's use of contrast. This may be verbal, as when Meribbaal,
after referring to himself self-deprecatingly as a 'dead dog'
(II Sam. 9.8) is thereupon honoured as a 'king's son' (9.11), or
it may be a contrast of character, as when Shimei's rage and
hatred is contrasted with David's calm and magnanimity (16.5-
14), or the son's treachery with the foreigner's loyalty (15.13-22).
The way in which the author varies, sometimes quite dramatically,
the speed of the narrative in order to create, and then
release, tension and suspense, has been noted by a number of
writers. B. Luther drew attention to the way in which, in
II Sam. 11ff., the reader is deliberately kept in suspense: the story
of David's adultery is followed not by an account of his punishment
but by a note of Bathsheba's pregnancy (11.5). Again, after
the swiftly told murder of Uriah, there is a further delay (11.26-
27a) before retribution comes in the person of Nathan. Rost
gave another example: the way in which, immediately after
David's dramatic flight from the city, the author lingers almost
unbearably (15.18-16.14) over his departure when the reader is
anxious to know what happened next. The departure scene is
deliberately made more ponderous by the frequent repetition of
the verb 'pass on' (ḏabar, 11 times). Finally, von Rad pointed
out how in II Sam. 18.19ff. 'the narrator heightens the tension
by relating at length how the young and unsuspecting Ahimaaz
is eager to carry tidings of the victory to the king'.

These deliberate delays, to which we should add the occasions
when the author postpones a sequel even longer, as in the story
of Meribbaal and Ziba, build up a tension which is then often
suddenly released in a rapidly told conclusion which leaves the
reader breathless: a fateful deed is done (II Sam. 11.4; 13.14), a
kingdom lost (15.13-16) or a murder committed (20.9ff.) in a
flash. The rapidity with which an action can be carried out which
will have lifelong consequences is conveyed to the reader by the
use—a rarity with this writer—of the simplest form of Hebrew
prose construction: a succinct series of consecutive verbs.

The opposite of suspense is dramatic irony, when the reader
is entertained by knowing in advance what will happen, and so
able to watch the characters playing their parts in ignorance of
their fate. In a sense the whole book is an extended example of

dramatic irony, for the reader already knows how the succession
was settled and what was in store for the main characters. But
the sense of irony is frequently heightened both by hints to the
reader of what is to come, of which some examples have already
been given, and by more concrete touches: David's ignorance of
the real meaning of Nathan's parable and of the wise woman
of Tekoa's story; his encouragement of Tamar's visit to her
supposedly sick brother Amnon (II Sam. 13.7); his permission
to Absalom to invite the king's sons to the fateful feast (13.23-
27); the false rumour that all the king's sons have been killed
(13.35ff.); David's blessing on Absalom's visit to Hebron, sup-
posedly to pay his vow (15.7-9); his impatience to know the
result of the battle (18.24ff.); Adonijah's feasting, in ignorance
of Solomon's proclamation as king (1 Kings 1.41).

From the above study it will be apparent that the praise
accorded to the author of the Succession Narrative as a literary
genius far superior to his predecessors is fully justified, and that
the book is worthy to be compared in all important respects
with a modern novel. Whether this unexpected leap forward in
the art of Hebrew narrative is due entirely to the genius of the
author, building upon earlier native attempts in the genre, or
whether he was influenced by the new insights into human
character and the nature of human society which had flooded into
Israel during his own generation from more sophisticated
civilizations, will be examined in the chapters which follow.

But in arriving at the conclusion that the work is a novel
—albeit a historical novel—rather than a work of history properly
speaking, we are still some way from a full understanding of its
colorature and purpose. No doubt purely literary and artistic aims
and the desire to entertain the reader occupied an important
place in the author's mind. But it is extremely unlikely that these
were his only, or even his main, aims. He would not have chosen
so recent a period of history as the setting for his story if he had
not some other, more practical, purpose. We are therefore
driven to an examination of other possibilities.

52 'Beginnings', p. 186.
53 Pfeiffer, op. cit., pp. 357ff.; Jacob, art. cit., p. 29; North, op. cit., p. 34;