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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

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# David's Throne: Patterns in the Succession Story

JARED J. JACKSON

THE BEGINNINGS of historical writing in Israel have long been of interest to antiquarians.<sup>1</sup> Old Testament scholars in particular have directed their attention to the problem,<sup>2</sup> and have generally agreed that the so-called "Court History of David," or better, the story of the succession to David's throne in 2 Sam. 6 and 9–20 and 2 Kings 1 and 2, forms the corner-stone of later history writing,<sup>3</sup> and that its anonymous author was the first true historian.<sup>4</sup> Yet the distinction which scholars have made between popular, originally oral types of narrative and the literary genre more properly called "history writing"<sup>5</sup> should not be drawn too rigidly. A study of the succession story may help us to understand the complex relationships between history writing and its predecessors, by revealing their similarities as well as their differences and by disclosing what is really new in the art of writing history.

Historical writing did not appear in Israel until Israel had a history to write about, that is, until the rise of the monarchy under David and the subsequent involvement in international affairs forced Israel to think of herself as a nation among the nations for the first time.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, such a highly developed and polished product as is represented by the succession story cannot have been the unprecedented invention of a genius so far ahead of his age that no preliminary sketches or provisional attempts at the presentation of history may be discerned. And although the *Sitz im Leben* of legendary material is notoriously difficult to determine with any accuracy, that of the succession story must have included access to written records, presumably the royal archives. It is therefore most likely that the actual

1. Cf. Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1931), II/2, pp. 285f.

2. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung im alten Israel," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 32 (1944), 1–42; reprinted in von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), pp. 148–88.

3. Cf. Leonhard Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids," *BWANT*, 42 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926).

4. Cf. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 357: "Ahimaaaz, or whoever wrote the early source in Samuel, is 'the father of history' in a much truer sense than Herodotus half a millennium later. As far as we know, he created history as an art, as a recital of past events dominated by a great idea. In this sense, history did not exist at the time. . . ."

5. Cf. Martin Noth, "Geschichtsschreibung I. im AT," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957–1962), II, 1498–1501.

6. Cf. Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1958), Vol. I, p. 243.

presuppositions for such a delicate art form can themselves only have flourished in a sophisticated age, which means that they must have arisen in the court of the later David and (especially) of Solomon.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between legends or sacred stories (*Sagen und Legenden*) and true historical writing, even when cautiously made, tends to draw the line in terms of the length and continuity of narrative. It is said that legends deal with individual events and episodes out of the lives of historical people, while history writing, even when it treats a narrowly defined field, has as its object a considerable sequence of events.<sup>8</sup> History writing seeks to display the interrelations of men and forces which lie behind, even if they do not fully explain, any set of circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

We may concede that the story of the succession is dominated by a true historical theme and leads to a concrete historical goal, while at the same time it shows, reluctantly and with the utmost restraint, yet clearly and unambiguously, the decisive action of God behind the human events (see 2 Sam. 11:27; 12:24; 17:14). In this sense, then, it is right to view the Court Narrative as a departure from the older ideas of the relations between God and his people. But the distinction is a theological one, not a literary one. Recent study of the stories just the other side of the "borderline"<sup>10</sup> between legend and history has indicated just how carefully the legends were constructed and set forth. L. Alonso-Schökel has shown the techniques by which the story-tellers of the so-called prose narratives of the Ehud-Eglon story in Judges 3, and, surprisingly, of the Jael-Sisera story in chapter 4, have developed their deliberately planned units.<sup>11</sup> His important article paves the way for a study of a number of Hebrew narratives, commonly regarded as legendary and therefore primitive in style. Alonso-Schökel has demonstrated the care lavished upon these supposed prose narratives, no less than the poetic and prophetic portions of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup>

If the legends were so well planned, as it now seems they were,<sup>13</sup> may we not expect as great a refinement of the literary art in the products of "the first great historian of Israel"? And may we not begin our study of the succession story with eyes, or rather ears, open to evidences of careful design and structure, with some confidence that we shall not merely hear the echo of our own ideas about literary composition, but may rather attune

7. Cf. G. von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 29 (*GS*, p. 176).

8. Noth, "Geschichtsschreibung," col. 1498; von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 28 (*GS*, p. 175).

9. Cf. Artur Weiser, *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development* (New York: Association Press, 1961), pp. 65f.

10. Cf. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), Vol. I, p. 52: "The story in Judges IX makes such great demands upon its subject in order to present it that it practically reaches the borderline where historiography begins. But Israel also crossed this borderline and found her way to real historical writing. . . ."

11. L. Alonso-Schökel, "Die Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter," *Biblica*, 42 (1961), pp. 143-72.

12. The charge of subjectivism is not easy to refute, but the cumulative evidence which Alonso-Schökel presents would be difficult to dismiss as a Western, bookish hyperanalysis.

13. See already Eugen Täubler, *Biblische Studien: Die Epoche der Richter* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1958).

ourselves to the rhythm and pulse of life in the vibrant, lusty world of the Israel of David's court?

It is normally said that the succession story was written to justify the contemporary reign of Solomon.<sup>14</sup> While this may have been one result of its publication, the story can hardly be regarded as an official document whose purpose was to glorify and legitimize the existing order.<sup>15</sup> The contrast with the narrative of Solomon's reign which follows in 1 Kings 3-11 is so striking and immediately apparent as to need no further comment. Moreover, it seems rather doubtful that "what the historian wanted to show was the first operation of the Nathan prophecy," as von Rad says,<sup>16</sup> even if this fulfilment is seen in most sombre and secular terms, as he sees it. The story is not told to answer some *Kinderfrage* of the sort: "What mean these stones?"; nor is it the simple answer to the suggested question: "How did it come about that Solomon—at least tenth in line of succession—sits upon David's throne?" The story does of course provide an answer to this question, but much more besides. Actually, the aim and purpose of the author of the succession story, taking as his medium the history of David's throne, and using the techniques of oral narrative while adding some of his own, is to display, in all their richness and depth, the varied relations of men who no longer walk by faith in the cultic religious symbols of the past but contend for temporal power and freedom of self-expression in the mundane world of daily, i.e. secular life.<sup>17</sup>

In our sketch of the structure of the succession story we may distinguish an external framework from an internal design. The external matter simply follows the plot of the struggle between David's sons, and the events leading to Solomon's successful bid for the throne. Milestones along the way are the infrequent comments on YHWH's direction of the course of human affairs, as in 2 Sam. 11:27; 12:24; and 17:14. The internal design of the story, however, is concerned with the delineation of character, not by means of description or the author's commentary, but by the acts and words of the men and women who fill the narrative.<sup>18</sup> The story begins with the major motifs<sup>19</sup> which dominate and alternate throughout, such as life and death,

14. Cf. Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung," p. 86; Weiser, *The Old Testament*, p. 165.

15. It can hardly be regarded as laudatory to proclaim publicly the circumstances surrounding Solomon's birth! Note that the Chronicler chose to omit the tale (1 Chron. 20). For the opposite opinion, see Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung," p. 128.

16. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, p. 316.

17. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

18. Cf. James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 24: Biblical narrative "is completely centered in action and movement . . . Character is indicated by action." See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. by W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 10-13, 17f.

19. C. A. Keller has shown that themes or motifs are a surer and native guide to the discussion of Hebrew narrative than the distinctions of Gattungen or literary genres, often drawn from the study of cultures far removed from the ancient Near East in time and space. Cf. Keller, "Die Gefährdung der Ahnfrau: Ein Beitrag zur gattungs- und motifgeschichtlichen Erforschung alttestamentlicher Erzählungen," *ZAW*, 66 (1954), 181-91.

man and woman, love and hatred. To these we may add honour and disrespect, courage and cowardice, modesty and shamelessness, restraint and insolence. As far as we can tell, the introduction to the account has been joined with the end of the old ark narrative in 2 Sam. 6.<sup>20</sup> The sacred ark was brought up to Jerusalem, the City of David, with joyous celebrations. We first see David dancing before the Lord, and willingly exposing himself to the eyes of his servants' slavegirls. Michal, Saul's daughter whom he had just taken into his harem, observed this performance and rebuked the king, whereupon David proclaimed his own honour and scorn for the fallen house of Saul. Externally, this episode informs us that Michal will bear no child to David, so that the heir to the throne will not be a descendant of Saul. But the author's sympathies are clearly with the aristocratic Michal, despite the requirements of the external plot.

It is difficult to tell what part, if any, of Nathan's prophecy in 2 Sam. 7 belonged to the original form of the narrative, because it has been so heavily redacted by later editors for theological reasons.<sup>21</sup> The external purpose of the chapter is simply to announce that David is not to build a house for YHWH, but that YHWH will build a "house" for David. In any case, little can be gleaned concerning Nathan or David as men of flesh and blood from the present text.

Pfeiffer may be right in thinking that 2 Sam. 21:1-14 must have preceded chapter 9 in the succession story, for the former passage tells of the slaughter of the Saulides which is presupposed in chapter 9.<sup>22</sup> If so, apart from this external purpose, we are treated to a contrast between David's cowardly and shameless conduct in handing over the seven descendants of Saul to the Gibeonites, and the brave deed of Rizpah, which finally shamed even David into arranging a decent burial for the dead family.

Chapter 9 concludes one element of the external structure of the story, for in it David took special pains to discover and secure the last survivor of the house of Saul, even though he was a cripple, that no possible rival to the throne might arise from that quarter. At the same time we are introduced to Meribbaal, son of Jonathan, and Ziba, his ambitious servant. This pair will reappear from time to time in the story, for they act as a sort of foil for the major theme of the relations between David and his sons and servants.

With chapter 10 we enter the broader scene of international affairs. The first part of the account of the Ammonite war seems to have little to do with the external plot, and may not be considered simply as the introduction

20. Cf. Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung," pp. 105-108, 120, finds the beginning of the "Thronfolgeggeschichte" in 2 Sam. 6:16.20-23.

21. Martin Noth, "David und Israel in 2. Samuel 7," *Mélanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, [1957]), pp. 122-30, denies that the whole chapter was written by the Deuteronomist, but finds evidence of considerable secondary material. See now André Caquot, "La prophétie de Nathan et ses échos lyriques," *Congress Volume Bonn 1962, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. IX (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963), pp. 213-24, and the literature cited there.

22. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 353. Cf. Karl Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel, KHAT*, VIII (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1902), pp. 304ff.

to the David-Bathsheba incident in chapter 11.<sup>23</sup> The first verse of chapter 11 is sufficient to move Joab, Uriah, and the army away from the city and the lovers who remained behind. Chapter 10 serves the author as a vehicle for the foolish insult to David's ambassadors, who were forcibly exposed by having their beards and garments half removed, and for the introduction of Joab as a skilful tactician and brave soldier.

In chapter 11 we turn from public affairs to the most intimate details of the private life of the king. Outwardly, we are told that Bathsheba was taken into David's harem, but that YHWH was displeased with David's deed. Our attention, however, shifts from the character of Joab to that of king David. One purpose of this chapter is to contrast in some detail the two major protagonists of the story—David and Joab. Throughout the narrative they are held apart, seldom taking the stage together. In chapter 10, Joab alone acted. In chapter 11, David is on the stage—or in the boudoir—until we move back to Joab fighting before Rabbah of the Ammonites, and then return to David in the palace.<sup>24</sup> While we usually concentrate upon the relations between David and Bathsheba, perhaps we overlook the jousting between David and Joab, between master and servant, nephew and uncle. David could count upon Joab to act quickly and discreetly (v. 6), but the sources of the later friction between them had already been laid. Joab would do the king's dirty work for him, but he despised his master—whom he regarded as weak and womanish (compare Hector and Paris in the sixth book of the *Iliad*, ll. 326–31).

This episode is "the eternal, sordid story of the man who stays home and takes advantage of a soldier's absence in war to have an affair with his wife."<sup>25</sup> But Uriah did not co-operate, and rebuked the king for suggesting a violation of holy war taboo. Poor David was lectured from every side—first by Michal in chapter 6, then by Uriah in chapter 11, next by Nathan in chapter 12, and even by his courtiers in the same chapter, by Joab at the end of the chapter, by Jonadab his own nephew in chapter 13, by the clever woman of Tekoa in chapter 14, by Ittai the Gittite in chapter 15, by Shimei in chapter 16, by Joab most forcefully in chapter 19, and by Bathsheba and Nathan in 1 Kings 1. No wonder that later Israelites glorified David's sufferings, as in Ps. 132, and modern scholars have sought

23. As does G. B. Caird, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), Vol. II, p. 1094.

24. Eric Voegelin thinks that "there was more than one Bathsheba in the neighborhood of the royal residence who hopefully took a bath where she could be seen from the roof of the King's house"; cf. *Order and History*, Vol. I: *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. 261. Perhaps, but I am not so sure that "the anecdote is preserved in its original context not because of the interest attaching to the details of its subject matter but because it is a part of the political . . . history of the Empire" (*ibid.*). While we may admire, with von Rad ("Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 32; *GS*, p. 179), the reticence of the author in the face of such blunt facts, we should note that he does not hide the facts surrounding Solomon's birth. Indeed, he leaves us no choice; we are forced to come to terms with the character of David, and perhaps also with that of Bathsheba (cf. 1 Kings 1–2).

25. Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. I, p. 260.

to reconstruct the ritual humiliation of the sacral king!<sup>26</sup> But the real significance of Uriah is not his moral indignation at David's suggestion, or his refusal to jeopardize the army at war, and certainly not the external fact that this pesky husband lies between David and Bathsheba—and the birth of Solomon. His importance lies rather in his function as foil to David and Joab—for both of those men appear rather badly in this scene, or rather, both reveal their true natures under these circumstances. We note in passing that the author does not permit himself any judgmental remarks of this sort, here or elsewhere. Uriah's obstinacy is not used solely or even primarily to bring about his death; it forces David to play his hand. And Joab readily obeyed the fateful order (note the motif of carrying one's own death-warrant in the famous story of Bellerophon, *Iliad*, Bk. VI, ll. 160–70; and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2, ll. 20ff.). Indeed, so well did Joab know the character of the king that he instructed the messenger to anticipate David's anger by stressing Uriah's fate. And Joab was right! This further insight into David's soul is almost too much for us to credit, and the author gives us a bit of comic relief in 11:25. David's anger was utterly quashed by the news of Uriah's death, and *he*, this home-front commando, proceeded to lecture *Joab* on the horrors of war—as if Joab needed to be reminded of the irrationality of battle! David even admonished Joab to get on with it, and capture the city—an order which Joab threw back in his teeth in 12:27f.

Once the murder of Uriah was accomplished, Nathan the prophet appeared to rebuke the king. Externally, the judgment at first seems to contradict the promise of a "house" to David in chapter 7, or at least to make its fulfilment exceedingly problematical. How could a child be born to David and Bathsheba under those circumstances, and still inherit the throne—even if David himself was allowed to live? Once again the narrative makes use of the ancient theme of the barren woman (cf. chapter 6), and immediately follows it with God's way out of the insuperable human dilemma. David comforted his new wife, who bore him another son, this time pleasing to YHWH (12:24f.).

The second Nathan interlude in chapter 12, however, plays an important part in the internal development of the story also. How readily the king rose to the bait, how easily he was caught condemning himself! His sudden anger at the rich man matches his wrath on being told of the needless losses on the battlefield in chapter 11, and his contrition is as complete and immediate. David's conduct in humbling himself *before* the death of the child, and seeking to avert the punishment of YHWH by praying for his son but refusing to do so after the baby had died, which so puzzled and

26. See von Rad's protest in his *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, p. 317. Cf. M. Noth, "Gott, König, Volk im Alten Testament," *ZThK*, 47 (1950), 157–91, reprinted in Noth, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, 2d ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960), pp. 188–229, especially pp. 207, 213f. See now K. H. Bernhardt, *Das Problem der altorientalischen Königsideologie im Alten Testament, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VIII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961).

offended even his courtiers, reveals the king's own attitude towards death and his cynical acceptance of the boy's fate. "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (2 Sam. 12:23). This is not some early manifestation of existentialism, but the remark of a man resigned to the realities of life and death, and ready to take advantage of his realism. All the more remarkable, then, is the comment that YHWH loved Solomon (v. 24)! And at this juncture Joab sent a message to remind David that there was a war going on, and he had better put in an appearance on the field of battle, else the spoils of war would belong to Joab. Did ever general speak so to his king, and get away with it?

The next act of the drama, in chapters 13 and 14, is a long one which brings us from the battle back to the most intimate private life of the members of the court. In chapter 13, David played a minor though important role, and Joab was entirely absent. But in chapter 14, the two men are made to face each other for the first time in the story, and the results are momentous. The author does not allow these two great ones to appear together often, but when they do, as here and in chapters 18 and 19, there are fireworks.

Chapter 13 begins with a brutal and premeditated act of violence, the rape of a virgin, an act condemned as *n<sup>o</sup>bālā*—wanton or outrageous folly in Israel. We observe what a great part sex plays in the whole narrative. There is much passion but very little love. And while the external events may signify simply the removal of the oldest son, heir presumptive to the throne, such a plot could have been forwarded with much less trouble and detail than is here displayed. Indeed, we quickly note the care with which each move of the affair is recounted, as well as the fact that events move without a pause to the end of chapter 14. So we must look deeper. The death of David's child by Bathsheba was the direct result of YHWH's displeasure, we were told in 12:14. Yet chapter 13 and its sequel form a far truer consequence of David's undisciplined act, for here he could not control the passions of his sons, any more than his own. He seems even to have entered as accomplice into their passions and schemes, for David played the "Joab" to Amnon's "David," by sending Tamar to his bedside, though he must have seen through the simple plan. It is difficult to believe that David, himself the author of much subtler intrigues, would have been completely taken in by such transparent designs as this one and Absalom's conspiracies in 13:23-27 and 15:7f.

A number of commentators have remarked on the reserve and reticence with which our author treats scenes such as the present one. And yet we note the deliberate detail, the slowed pace of action, and the concentration upon particulars. The story makes use of the technique of repetition: first Jonadab advised Amnon to feign illness and ask David to send Tamar to feed him; then Amnon did so. Next, David relayed the message to Tamar, and finally she came to prepare the cakes for her half-brother. Each time the details of word and action are repeated. Even then, the tale is delayed



while we are treated to a minute account of her preparation of the delicacies—she took dough and kneaded it, patted out the cakes and fried them, brought the pan and dumped out the tasty dish for Amnon. Still the inevitable is put off—Amnon would not eat with his retainers looking on. They were dismissed, and Tamar was again asked to bring the cakes into his private chamber. Why this insistent detail, when the reader knows what will happen from the first words of Jonadab? Surely it is the art of the narrator, who intends us to have no doubt at all about the dark side of the human soul. There is no moralizing here, no editorial comment upon the deed. But we are forced to listen to the deliberate, inevitable progression of events leading to the act itself. In like manner we have already heard of the succession of events which forced David—if we may speak in such terms—to take the extreme step of murdering Uriah, and we are about to hear of Absalom's revenge, which he brooded over for two full years. Now all of these details could hardly have been known to the author, be he Abiathar, Ahimaaz, or some other figure close to the court but unknown to us.<sup>27</sup> Only Amnon and Tamar were present at the climax of chapter 13—and even if Tamar had revealed all to her brother Absalom or some other, it is immediately apparent that the story and the dialogue have been carefully shaped to meet the needs of the story-teller. This is far from denying that the events took place, either in this episode or elsewhere. It simply emphasizes the painstaking care with which the author moulded his material. Indeed, the "faithfulness" of his account could hardly be greater, for he tells us that immediately "Amnon felt an exceedingly violent hatred for her; indeed the hatred with which he hated her was even greater than the love with which he had loved her. So Amnon snapped at her, 'Up! Get out!'"<sup>28</sup> When she refused, and told him that this would be even worse than what he had already done to her, he ordered his servant to "Get this thing (*Z'ōth*) out of my sight outside, and bolt the door after her!" (2 Sam. 13:15-17). One could hardly express more clearly Amnon's revulsion at his act, or the fact that he had treated his half-sister as a thing, not as a person.

When David heard of it, he was characteristically very angry, but he did nothing. Absalom, however, had taken matters into his own hands, and determined to murder the man who stood between him and the throne. Another violent act was then reported to David, who again resorted to open

27. On Ahimaaz, cf. August Klostermann, *Die Bücher Samuelis und der Könige*, Kurzgefasster Kommentar A III (München: Nördlingen, 1887), pp. xxxiv., and Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 356ff. On Abiathar cf. Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia*, KHAT, XI (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1901), pp. 2f., Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel*, pp. xviii., and many moderns. Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung," p. 128, prefers Ahimaaz to Abiathar, to whom he ascribes the "Geschichte von Davids Aufstieg." Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Vol. II, p. 92, mentions with approval Vriezen's suggestion that Zabud, son of Nathan the prophet (cf. 1 Kings 4:5), was the author of the Succession Story; cf. Th. C. Vriezen, "De compositie van de Samuelboeken," *Orientalia Neerlandica*, 1948, pp. 167ff. Proof for any of these hypotheses is of course impossible.

28. This striking translation is taken from R. H. Pfeiffer and W. G. Pollard, *The Hebrew Iliad* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 94.

lament but took no action, passively condoning the deed. Once again the king was humiliated in the sight of all his courtiers, in that he lay helplessly grieving for Amnon on the ground, the victim of his sons' lawless acts. Most remarkable of all, when his nephew Jonadab spoke up, as if in all innocence, to announce that only Amnon of the king's sons was dead, since Absalom had plotted to kill him ever since the abuse of Tamar, the king was silent. We might have expected David to ask how he knew so much about it, but he did nothing of the sort.

With chapter 14, which follows without a pause, Joab is reintroduced. He had observed that David longed to bring Absalom back, but did not dare go quite that far in ignoring the crime which had been committed. Yet Joab knew how to take advantage of his master's weakness. We are again surprised that David fell into such an obvious trap as the clever woman of Tekoa set for him, but her flattery played on his vanity and blinded his common sense until it was too late. He could only grant the request of Joab, who thereupon fetched Absalom back to Jerusalem, where he remained outside of the court circles for two years.

Surely Joab won no great favour with the king by his trickery, nor did Absalom prolong his life by burning Joab's fields! Few men could tamper with that doughty warrior and live. We are not told of Joab's thoughts when he confronted the ungrateful young man, who merely replied: "Look, I sent word to you, saying, 'Come here and I shall send you to the king with this message: "Why did I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now then, I will see the king's face, and if there is guilt in me he may kill me.'"<sup>29</sup> But this insolent speech was not quickly forgotten by Joab, we may be sure, even as he saw how readily the king welcomed Absalom with a kiss. These grim matters have not been handled without humour, for the scenes with the woman of Tekoa and the burning of Joab's crops are essentially moments of comic relief. In the next act of the drama, Absalom's rebellion, an even greater skill in the handling of wit is revealed.

The four years of Absalom's preparation are soon recounted, as is the pretense of the vow at Hebron. Details do not concern our author here, who quickly turns back to Jerusalem where David had decided that he could not hold the city with the few men on whose absolute loyalty he could count. We note that his most trusty soldier Joab is not mentioned in the evacuation of the city, as all eyes concentrate upon David.

The king's humiliating retreat is recounted with particular care and heart-rending pathos. Special use is made of the geographic contours of the area to the east of the city, which act as a stage-set for the following scenes. First, having left ten concubines behind, the king and his retinue waited by the last house at the northeastern end of the city, to review the loyal troops. In a pathetic scene, Ittai of Gath, a foreign mercenary and even a Philistine, proved more faithful than David's own son. So the hired soldiers and David's personal bodyguard went down into the Kidron Valley, as the common

29. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

people of the city loudly bewailed the king's departure. Next, the king crossed the Wadi Kidron himself after the soldiers, and there he was met by Zadok and Abiathar with the sacred ark. David made his first tactical counter-move at this point, by sending the priests back to the city to report to him, through their sons Ahimaaz and Jonathan, what Absalom planned to do.

Meanwhile David and his men toiled up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, as Gressmann said, more in the manner of a religious pilgrimage of penitence than of a military strategic retreat.<sup>30</sup> At this point, when the king was reduced to extremity and self-abasement, he was told of Ahithophel's treachery. This was the nadir of his fortunes. Nor was it any accident that just as David reached the summit of the Mount of Olives, "where one worships God," the author made Hushai the Archite come out to meet the king. For at this zenith David is reported to have made the second and decisive move, humanly speaking, with regard to Absalom's rebellion. Hushai was sent back to counter the shrewd counsel of Ahithophel.

A little beyond the summit, Ziba, the faithless servant of lame Meribbaal, came courting David's favour with a train of his master's stolen provisions and a false story about Meribbaal's joy at Absalom's arrival in Jerusalem. The incident permits us to focus upon the motif of honour and dishonour from another angle.

Further on, beyond Mount Scopus at Bahurim, Shimei the Benjaminite came out taunting and cursing David and throwing stones over at his troops. This scene is handled with remarkable skill, even for our author. Just when the sufferings of king David seem almost unendurable, the author inserts this comic figure, who ran down the path parallel to the hill David was descending, heedless of his personal danger in a moment of triumph and revenge for the slaughter of the house of Saul. Abishai's response is what we would expect from Joab's brother: "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me cross over now and remove his head!" But David was aware of the irony involved, "See, my own son . . . seeks my life; how much more now a Benjaminite!" So the king and his troops proceeded on their forced march, while Shimei continued to shower them with dirt and abuse. Finally all arrived at the Jordan, where the king refreshed himself, and the reader may pause to catch his breath.

The author uses this break to flash back to the city, where Absalom was entering from the south just as Hushai returned from the other side. Then follows the great scene of the rival counsel of Ahithophel and Hushai, which forms the climax of the external progress of Absalom's revolt. High up in the city we see the foreground struggle between Absalom with his advisers and Hushai with the priests and their sons. David, Joab, and the soldiers are in the background, far away by the Jordan but not far from our atten-

30. Hugo Gressmann, *Die Schriften des Alten Testaments in Auswahl uebersetzt*, I/2. 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1922), p. 177, quoted in von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 20 (*GS*, p. 167).

tion. Ahithophel's sound advice to Absalom was twofold: to take possession of David's concubines as public evidence of his royal power and David's impotence,<sup>31</sup> and to pursue David quickly while he was in full retreat, discouraged and disorganized, and kill the king alone, so that his soldiers would have nothing to do but surrender meekly. But Absalom saw fit to ask Hushai for *his* advice, and David's spy was equal to the occasion. The fantastic scheme which he spun out before the dazzled eyes of Absalom's confederates succeeded in gaining time for David,<sup>32</sup> and was quickly reported to the king. The author makes use of the adventures of Jonathan and Ahimaaz to transport his readers back to David and the army—a very neat transitional device.

The story now speeds up again, as we leave the private courts of David and of Absalom for the battlefield. Details of the conflict are thrust aside, and we are only told of David's command to his generals to spare Absalom's life, and of the generals' insistence that David remain behind at Mahanaim, where presumably he would not be in a position to jeopardize the kingdom again! Attention focuses on the unhappy Absalom, who was cut down by Joab without hesitation. This actually is the material end of the story of Absalom's revolt, but not of the present story, which hardly has a pause here. Our interest at once turns back to David, waiting for the news—not of the battle or of his soldiers' welfare, but of Absalom. Once again, however, the narrator heightens the tension by delaying the action. The battle is over and won, and Absalom we know is dead, but the news must go to David.<sup>33</sup> So the episode of the rivalry of Ahimaaz and the Cushite runner is inserted, not only as a transitional device, as with Ahimaaz and Jonathan earlier, but to underscore the value which David placed upon the life of his faithless son.

Chapter 19 opens with the famous and remarkable scene of David's loud lament over Absalom. The victorious soldiers stole back into Mahanaim as if *they* had lost the battle. This theme of the reversal of honour and disgrace is dear to the narrator's heart, as we have seen from the beginning. It is most forcefully expressed in Joab's harsh and almost cruel outburst to his king in 2 Sam. 19:6–8.<sup>34</sup> This speech, which is the direct opposite of Joab's

31. The seizure of another man's woman is a favourite motif of our author: 2 Sam. 11:4, 27, 13:14, 16:21f. (cf. 20:3); 1 Kings 2:17, 21f.; and see also 2 Sam. 3:7f. and vv. 14f.

32. As von Rad says, the reader knows that Hushai was the last man who saw David, and realizes at once that the picture of David "enraged like a bear robbed of her cubs" is the exact opposite of the truth! Cf. von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 21 (*GS*, p. 168). At this point the author inserted one of the rare comments by which he called attention to YHWH's control of history (2 Sam. 17:14).

33. Contrast the reporting of the Israelite defeat in 1 Sam. 4. It is not the news of the slaughter, or of his own sons' death, but of the capture of the ark which kills old Eli. The author makes frequent use of the device of messages: 2 Sam. 13:30f., 15:13f., 17:15f., 18:19f., and 1 Kings 1:42f. Cf. Rost, "Die Ueberlieferung," p. 115.

34. "You have put to shame today all your servants, who have today saved your life—and the lives of your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your concubines—by loving those that hate you and hating those that love you. For you declared today that your commanders and officials are as nothing in your sight—nay, I now know that if Absalom were only alive and all of us were now dead it would be pleasing in your sight. Now then, arise, go out, talk persuasively [*'al lēb*] to your men; for I swear by

words in ch. 14:22, forms the breaking-point in the relations between the two men, and seals Joab's doom. There is no point in talking about the nobility and tragedy of king David, mourning for his dead son, when such a speech is ringing in our ears. David has been reduced, by the weakness and vacillation of his own character and the resultant disasters which have befallen him, to a shell of a man, covering his face and moaning for the dead, and this at the moment of external triumph—when, as he says later, "I am this day king over Israel." Surely this is not just the account of the succession to David's throne. Externally, only Absalom's death and David's restoration is important, but within, what a wealth of human passions are revealed! David's humiliation is starkly contrasted with the bold, even rash action of Joab, who dared to disobey his king's explicit order, murdered the crown prince, and shortly thereafter murdered his own rival, Amasa.

From this point on, the action turns towards its close, since the climax has been passed and the tension is released. The next question which concerns the course of history is the identity of the new heir to the throne, but the narrator does not wish to take up that problem immediately. He leads the reader on the long trek back to the capital, with side incidents along the way. The events narrated correspond to the stages on the retreat from Jerusalem to the Jordan, as virtually the same figures come to meet the now triumphant king.

The next major episode has no apparent relationship to the account of the succession to the throne, but does contribute to the final struggle between David and Joab. The king and his retinue had scarcely crossed the Jordan at Gilgal, when another Benjaminite, one Sheba ben Bichri, raised the cry of independence again, and drew all Israel away from David.<sup>35</sup> This new revolt is of interest to the narrator because of Joab's decisive part in its suppression. Amasa had failed to muster the militia in haste and had delayed past the time set by David, so Abishai was sent out with the professionals and the ever-ready Joab, who swiftly dispatched Amasa and swept on with hardly a pause, in pursuit of the rebels. The terse exchange between Joab and the clever woman of Abel-beth-maacah is a particularly revealing one. His rough character seems to stand out well against such a background—what a difference from David's treatment of women!

The final steps in the ascent of Solomon to David's throne, 1 Kings 1 and 2, are the most important for the story of succession, but serve the author simply as the vehicle for closing his account of the themes of life and death,

Yahweh that unless you go out, not a single man will stay overnight with you, and this calamity will be for you worse than all the calamities that have come upon you from your youth until now" (Pfeiffer and Pollard, *The Hebrew Iliad*, pp. 108f.).

35. Historically speaking, we can see that the person of the king alone held together the separate states of north and south, and that Absalom had not created the bitterness between the two but had only taken advantage of it; cf. Albrecht Alt, "Die Staatenbildung der Israeliten in Palästina," *Reformationsprogramm der Universität Leipzig 1930*, especially pp. 49ff., reprinted in Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, 2d ed. (München: C. H. Beck, 1959), Vol. II, pp. 1-65, especially pp. 39ff. Our author, however, is not primarily interested in such "historical" judgments.

love and hatred, honour and dishonour. Once again we are invited to overhear the court intrigues which surround the old king, now past siring any more sons who might be rivals for the throne. In a series of brilliant moves, Nathan manoeuvred Bathsheba and her son past the premature celebrations of Adonijah and his supporters, Joab and Abiathar. We should notice that Abiathar's son Jonathan again played the messenger, just as Ahimaaz had in 2 Sam. 18, and here he was greeted with almost the same ironic words: "Come in, for you are a worthy man and bring good news." Adonijah then sought asylum and was spared provisionally, but rashly asked for Abishag, his father's beautiful nurse, and with Bathsheba as his go-between! Solomon took the request as a claim upon the throne, and immediately had Adonijah executed, together with Joab, the most dangerous supporter of his rival. Abiathar was defrocked and banished from court, Shimei was restricted to the city and executed when he ignored the king's command. And thus "the kingdom was completely established in the hand of Solomon" (1 Kings 2:46b; Chicago Bible translation).

In summary, we may say that the story of the succession to David's throne, as the earliest and greatest example of Hebrew historiography, is a masterpiece of the narrator's art, fashioned and polished in every detail, the structure imposed upon the events exactly fitting and giving perfect expression to the internal design of his work.<sup>36</sup> This is no accident, for the author had inherited and improved the techniques of his predecessors. As we have seen, he made full use of such principles as the alternating of tension and relaxation, the heightening of suspense towards a climax and gradual slackening of intensity, wealth of detail at crucial points balanced by terse brevity or extreme economy of style. He has also employed a contrast between two figures placed over against each other as representatives of different types, made use of geographical or physical features as the "layout" to set the scene and assist with the progress of the plot, and has inserted delaying or retarding episodes as a literary device. All of these techniques are present and discernible in the final stages of legend composition.<sup>37</sup> In addition, our author has introduced the simultaneous presentation of internal and external or private and public planes of meaning, the interweaving of minor themes such as the Meriba'al-Ziba motif as a contrast and perspective to the major themes, and the rapid but purposeful alternation of scenes which is made possible by the increased length and continuity of historical, as distinct from legendary, narrative. Therefore, whatever one's definition of "true history writing," it will surely have to make room for both the freedom and the sure-handed skill with which our author approached his sources, recognizing the deliberate purpose with which he has selected and ordered the materials available to him.

36. As Muilenburg observes: "The proper articulation of form yields the proper articulation of meaning."

37. Cf. Alonso-Schökel, "Die Erzählkunst," pp. 154ff.; Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Vol. I, p. 244.