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'IS THERE ANYONE LEFT OF THE HOUSE OF SAUL...?'
 AMBIGUITY AND THE CHARACTERIZATION OF DAVID
 IN THE SUCCESSION NARRATIVE*

Leo G. Perdue

I. Introduction

Recent assessments of the David character in the Succession Narrative have led to significantly different portrayals. Walter Brueggemann's David is 'a fully responsible, fully free man' due to the mutual trust that shapes his relationship with God.¹ In describing the characterization of David, Brueggemann focuses on the contrasting views of human nature held by David, Shimei, and Abishai. According to Brueggemann, Shimei affirms an irrevocable causal nexus between sin and divine retribution as well as an immutable fate that incapacitates human freedom, while Abishai rejects the possibility of divine intervention which orders human existence, believing instead that 'history is a totally human enterprise'.² Strikingly different is Brueggemann's David who breaks with the convention of fate while still affirming God's participation in the shaping of human affairs. The pivotal point in David's existence, thinks

* An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Biblical Literature section of the American Academy of Religion during its annual meeting in 1980. I wish to thank David Gunn for his careful reading of this paper and for making a number of insightful suggestions which have improved this essay in several key areas.

1. 'The Trusted Creature', *CBQ* 31 (1969), p. 487. Cf. his 'David and His Theologian', *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 156-81; 'Kingship and Chaos', *CBQ* 33 (1971), pp. 317-32; 'Life and Death in Tenth Century Israel', *JAAR* 40 (1972), pp. 96-109; 'On Trust and Freedom', *Int* 26 (1972), pp. 3-19; 'On Coping with Curse: A Study of 2 Sam. 16.5-14', *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 175-92; and *In Man We Trust* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972), pp. 29-77.

2. 'On Coping with Curse', p. 187.

Brueggemann, is the combination of human freedom and responsibility with trust in God's providence and grace.

A totally different portrait of David is drawn by Jared Jackson, who centers on the king's interaction with Joab as the key to characterization.³ According to this interpretation, Joab is the hardened military warrior who carries out his lord's commands decisively and discreetly, all the while despising the king's languor and enervation. David, by contrast, is the weak, snivelling, and vacillating ruler who is prone to anger, but unable to act decisively. The narrative, in Jackson's opinion, reaches its climax in the confrontation between David and his general in 2 Samuel 18-19 when Joab flagrantly disobeys the royal instructions by murdering Absalom and later humiliating the distraught father. According to Jackson, '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 mourning for the dead son, and this at the moment of external triumph...'⁴

Fokkelman's reading of this narrative concentrates on David's sin and its consequences as the dominant center of the story. While Fokkelman avoids a systematic treatment of the David character, the character who may be extracted from his reading is a complex king of multiple dualities (strong-weak, king-father, and so forth) who perhaps may not have been 'equal to his onerous function, the kingship'. Fokkelman also points to character contrast as a major technique of characterization, especially operative in the scenes he names the 'David-Ziba-Mephibosheth triangle'. In this series of scenes, Fokkelman sees Mephibosheth as the one whose 'detached and principled' behavior follows the highest ideals of *hesed*, for he is the one who is unconditionally loyal to David and expects no material benefit in return. By contrast David is the compromising ruler, the psychologically disabled, often 'hindered by frustrations and fears'.⁵ For instance, David knows that Jonathan's son is not truly involved in the Absalom revolt, and yet he still fears that this physically disabled man, who has a son, may indeed be a threat to his throne. On the other hand, David is aware that Ziba is a calculating liar who nevertheless gave him material aid during his

3. 'David's Throne: Patterns in the Succession Story', *CJT* 11 (1965), pp. 183-95.

4. 'David's Throne', p. 194.

5. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. I. *King David* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 20; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), pp. 39-40.

flight. David, unable to match the idealistic, unconditional loyalty of Mephibosheth, makes the morally reprehensible decision to divide Saul's estate between the two. Crucial for Fokkelman's portrayal is David's sin of adultery and murder. For it is this sin which transforms the king, the initiator of action, into the passive ruler who is ultimately overcome by a series of devastating disasters.

A more convincing delineation of the David character has been made in separate studies by Kenneth Gros Louis and David Gunn. Gros Louis, who takes into consideration the entire David story, begins with the double introduction of the young David in 1 Samuel 16 and 17 and proceeds to argue that the entire narrative is patterned on the tensions between the private and public David.⁶ David excels when public or private duties are clearly defined, but when personal desires and public responsibilities conflict, as in the Bathsheba affair, or when they have equal validity, as in David's relationships with Saul and Absalom, he errs. The David narrative, then, is a reflection on the complexity of kingly rule which involves the struggle between personal desire and the public good. Unlike Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, David's failures result from his inability to suppress his personal desires for the good of the nation. The narrative ends with 'members of his court struggling to achieve their personal desires, even at the expense of the state'.⁷

David Gunn also emphasizes the tension between the private and political spheres of the king, though he limits his discussion to the Succession Narrative.⁸ Central are the effects, often adverse ones, that David's private life has on the political: the adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah, the failure to punish Amnon for his rape of Tamar, and so on. On the political level the story of David has two major themes: David's acquisition and tenure of power and his founding of a dynasty, while the private level has two parallel themes: sexual intrigue involving taking, and paternity. Thus, David's acquisition of power on a public level is paralleled by his sexual possession of Bathsheba, while David as the founder of a dynasty corresponds privately to David as father. According to Gunn, the primary mode of these themes is giving and

6. 'The Difficulty of Ruling Well: King David of Israel', *Semeia* 8 (1977), pp. 15-33.

7. 'The Difficulty of Ruling Well', p. 32.

8. 'David and the Gift of the Kingdom (2 Sam. 2-4, 9-20, 1 Kgs 1-2)', *Semeia* 3 (1975), pp. 14-45; this analysis is developed in *The Story of King David* (JSOTSup, 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

grasping. When David gives he is most successful, but when he grasps the results are disastrous. The point is that power must be given; it cannot be taken. Gunn's David is the most complex of those briefly described. This David is neither an 'ideal' character nor a 'villain', but rather one who acts out of mixed motives about which we are often unclear. For example, Gunn notes in David's dealings with Mephibosheth in ch. 9 that there is 'a delicate irony in the possibility that in 16.1-4 Ziba's gesture of generosity to the dispossessed David may be no less devious than David's to the dispossessed Mephibosheth'.⁹ It is this ambiguity of David as a technique of characterization that, in my estimation, deserves further amplification.

II. Point of View, Ambiguity, and Narrative Fiction¹⁰

One of the major difficulties in assessing the David character results from the type of narrator in the Succession Narrative. In literary criticism, point of view has to do with the involvement of the narrator in the story, coupled with his or her knowledge of events and characters. Any writer of fiction may have his or her narrator assume any one of several

9. *King David*, p. 97.

10. Since the seminal study by R.N. Whybray (*The Succession Narrative* [SBT, 2.9; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1968]), the early consensus that this document is historical narrative has given way to two approaches which deny that the document is historiography. See especially L. Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BWANT, 3.6; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926); ET, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (Introd. by E. Ball; Historic Texts and Interpreters, 1; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982); and G. von Rad, 'The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), pp. 166-204. The 'redactional approach', taken by E. Würthwein (*Die Erzählung von der Thronfolge Davids—theologische oder politische Geschichtsschreibung?* [Theologische Studien, 115; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974]), T. Veijola (*Die Ewige Dynastie* [Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Kirjapaino, 1975], p. 130), and F. Langlamet ('Pour ou contre Salomon? La rédaction prosolomonienne de I Rois I-II', *RB* 83 [1976], pp. 321-79, 481-528), considers the text to be originally anti-Solomonic (or Davidic) propaganda which was then subjected to one or more pro-Solomonic (or Davidic) redactions. The 'literary approach', exemplified in the previously cited works of Gros Louis and Gunn, along with the analyses by C. Conroy (*Absalom Absalom!* [AnBib, 81; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978]) and H. Hagan ('Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sam. 9-20; 1 Kgs 1-2', *Bib* 60 [1979], 301-26), regards the Succession Narrative as more akin to literary fiction than to history-writing or propaganda.

very different postures.¹¹ However, regardless of the posture of the narrator, he or she may be as fictional as any character portrayed in the narrative, even when he or she is not dramatized. Even so, the narrator becomes the medium through whom the events and characters are processed and by whom the reader's reactions to the story are strongly influenced, if not determined. Of course the narrator's influence is largely based on whether he or she appears to be truthful, unbiased, and knowledgeable. However, the fact that a narrator may be portrayed as omniscient should not be taken as evidence that he or she is biased, since this would incriminate the great majority of narrators in ancient and modern fiction.

The type of narrator chosen by the author figures prominently in the writer's efforts to impose his or her fictional world upon the reader and to control the latter's response, though 'in some narratives the author tries to control the reader's response more fully than in others'.¹² In line with this observation, writers of fiction tend to adopt one of two rather broad approaches: 'telling' or 'showing'.¹³ In 'telling', the author constructs a first- or third-person narrator who authoritatively describes and evaluates characters by means of commentary and descriptions and who passes judgment on the significance of events. In this case the reader tends to be passive, accepting the statements of the narrator as true, unless there emerges some legitimate suspicion that the narrator is biased or in error.¹⁴

11. See especially N. Friedman, 'Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept', *PMLA* 70 (1955), pp. 1160-84; W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 63-87.

12. R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 82-159.

13. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 3-20.

14. Whybray bases part of his argument that the document is pro-Solomonic propaganda on the conclusion that the narrator is biased (*The Succession Narrative*, pp. 50-55). The same holds true, though in the reverse, for the conclusion by Würthwein, Veijola, and Langlamet that the narrative is anti-Solomonic (or Davidic) and later redacted by royalists (cf. note 8). However, it certainly is not clear in whose favor the document as it now stands is written. Further, the 'redactional approach' that attributes 'pro- or anti-monarchical' remarks to different writers is not only simplistic, but also succeeds in turning a stimulating narrative into an insipid, anti-royal, political pamphlet which for whatever reason was appropriated by royalists who then inserted their own sympathies into the text. But why would propagandists of a royal inclination choose only to add pro-royal sentiments and not also suppress

By contrast, 'showing' involves the withholding of overt evaluations and commentary by the narrator. Thus the reader is forced to scrutinize very carefully the actions and statements of characters, always searching for clues about motive and intentionality, virtue and vice. Of course narrators often move between these two approaches in relating the story.

When one examines the narrator's stance in the Succession Narrative, it is obvious that he does more 'showing' than 'telling'. True, the point of view is on occasion neutral omniscience, that is, the narrator is a privileged bystander who speaks in the third person, selectively tells us about private conversations (e.g. 2 Sam. 13), and even seems to know the mind of God (2 Sam. 11.27-12.1; 12.24; and 17.4). In several instances he chooses to describe the mental states and internal feelings of his human characters, for example, Amnon's love-hate desire for Tamar (2 Sam. 13.2, 15). However, he is reluctant to engage in explicit evaluations of his characters.¹⁵ Two exceptions are his remark about Adonijah's political hubris (1 Kgs 1.5) and Sheba's description as a 'base fellow' (2 Sam. 20.1). What is more, he usually declines to provide the motives behind the characters' actions,¹⁶ a key to characterization often present in other Hebrew narratives, especially in the form of internal monologue.¹⁷ While this narrator will set the scene, narrate actions and dialogue, and summarize events, he is reticent to pass judgment or provide motives. This forces the reader to attempt to discover the characters' intentions and then to draw his or her own conclusions.¹⁸

incriminating accusations? Obviously the Chronicler had no reservation in removing the entire Succession Narrative from his pro-monarchical 'history'. Again, the fact that a narrator is omniscient is not in itself evidence that he or she is biased.

15. By contrast note the narrator's evaluations in Job 1.22; 2.10.

16. See, for example, the exception in 2 Sam. 15.11.

17. Interior monologue is often signaled by the expression, 'said in his heart' (e.g. 1 Sam. 27.1 and Qoheleth).

18. 'For the most part, the narrator is content to show the characters as they talk and act; this dramatic presentation leaves it up to the reader to infer the motivations of the characters and to form a judgement on their actions' (Conroy, *Absalom Absalom!*, p. 105). Nevertheless, Conroy goes on to argue in his delineation of the character of David in 2 Sam. 13-20 that 'the narrator's presentation of David...is sympathetic but not uncritical'. This complexity of the narrator's treatment of David, argues Conroy, should make the interpreter less inclined to see the narrator as suffering from a pro- or anti-Davidic bias (*Absalom Absalom!*, p. 112). Gunn underscores the difficulty the interpreter has in judging characters: 'Characteristically...the narrator refuses to allow us the luxury of making simple judgements. We are left with a perception of the ambivalence of events' (*King David*, p. 97; cf. p. 138 n. 7).

A final point should be made at this juncture. The narrator frequently uses speeches and dialogue as the major catalyst for the sequences and movement of the plot.¹⁹ However, the absence of commentary by the narrator forces the reader to decide about motives and the degree of veracity present, all the while keeping in mind the remark by Mark Harris: 'I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which'.²⁰

With these points in mind, I propose that the narrator's characterization of David is intentionally ambiguous so that two very different interpretations of David may emerge, depending on the reader's own assessment of the motives resting behind the king's actions and speeches.²¹ I am not suggesting that the author is indifferent to the two different ways his character may be read. Rather, the storyteller's design is to demonstrate the complexity of David.

III. *David as Dynamic Character*

In interpreting the David character, one approach, following Auerbach,²² is to search for a dynamic character who changes within the unfolding of the tragic plot that entwines private and public catastrophes. With this approach one assumes that David's speeches are truthful and that the motives at least for his public actions are usually altruistic. In this case, the narrator presents in David two contrasting views on how to rule a nation: with brute force and ruthlessness or with compassion and forgiveness. The technique used by the narrator to exploit this tension is the series of encounters between David and the sons of Zeruiah, Joab and Abishai.²³ These two warriors believe that proper rule expresses itself in

19. See H.-J. Hermisson, 'Weisheit und Geschichte', in H.W. Wolff (ed.), *Probleme biblischer Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), pp. 136-48.

20. 'Easy Does It Not', in G. Hicks (ed.), *The Living Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 117.

21. A detailed analysis of ambiguity is made by W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955). For an assessment of the proclivity of Henry James towards ambiguity in characterization, see E. Wilson, 'The Ambiguity of Henry James', *Hound and Horn* 7 (1934), pp. 385-406.

22. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 1-43. For a recent discussion of biblical characterization, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 114-30.

23. See Gunn's treatment of this conflict (*King David*, pp. 39-40).

the unreserved, even callous use of power when it is expedient, while compassion and forgiveness are viewed as potentially disastrous for the nation. By contrast, David avows, at least through most of the story, that proper rule should combine compassion with forgiveness in order to keep together a strife-ridden, divided nation. While on occasion David's private desires tend to obstruct his public altruism, on the whole he rejects brute force as the appropriate means for ruling wisely and well.

The opening scene (2 Sam. 9), which typically is the most important in revealing notable dimensions of characterization, focuses on David's public speeches.²⁴ The scene begins with David asking if Saul has any surviving descendants to whom he may 'show רחם [kindness, mercy, loyalty] for Jonathan's sake'. Twice more David publicly reasserts his intention to show רחם to surviving Saulides, first to Ziba, Saul's former servant, and then to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's lame son. And David seemingly makes good on his pledge by returning to Jonathan's son his grandfather's estate, appointing Ziba and his house as personal servants, and providing a royal pension in Jerusalem. This threefold repetition of רחם appears to be the narrator's method of underlining David's public affirmation of his principle of rule.²⁵ While the king's self-avowed motives are not confirmed by the narrator, the reader may choose to believe that his statements are truthful and his actions gracious.

The second scene (2 Sam. 10) opens in a similar fashion, but ends with different results. David once more publicly vows to show רחם, this

24. Alter makes the important observation: 'In any given narrative event, and especially at the beginning of any new story, the point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the exposition of character' (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 74).

25. רחם occurs eight times in this narrative, and occupies a strategic position in key texts (2 Sam. 9.1, 3, 7; 10.2 [twice]; 15.20; 16.17; and 1 Kgs 2.7). Even when the actual word does not occur, its connotations of 'kindness', 'mercy', and 'loyalty' are often at issue. רחם, therefore, serves as the major *Leitwort* which thematically weaves together the entire narrative. For the nature and function of *Leitwörter* in Hebrew narrative, see M. Buber, 'Über die Wortwahl in einer Verdeutschung der Schrift', in *Werke. II. Schriften zur Bibel* (Munich: Kösel, 1964), pp. 1111-74; and J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), pp. 51-95. For detailed analyses of the meanings of רחם see N. Glueck, *Das Wort Hesed* (BZAW, 47; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1927); and K. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (HSM, 17; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

time to Hanun, the new Ammonite ruler, who has recently replaced his deceased father on the throne. The basis for David's intended graciousness is his former relationship, presumably formalized in a treaty, which he had with the dead king. However, the Ammonite counsellors, suspicious of David's intentions, convince Hanun that the Israelite emissaries sent by David are in reality spies sent to prepare the way for invasion. Thus, David's ambassadors are humiliated and returned in disgrace to Jerusalem. The Ammonites then align themselves with Syria and begin to mobilize. David, 'despising' the Ammonites for their contemptuous behavior, sends Joab and the 'mighty men' into battle. Ultimately the victory is won. Again, we may accept David's self-expressed motive and his speech as truthful and blame instead the Ammonite king and his foolish counsellors for the war.

David's private desires which lead to the betrayal of Uriah and ultimately his murder present a rather shocking contrast to a king's attempt to rule on the basis of kindness and mercy. But David, once discovered, does publicly repent. But has his view of rule been seriously altered by this disgraceful course of events occasioned by private lust? The answer resides in the crucial confrontation between Shimei and David in ch. 16, the next place in the story where the king comes to center stage. Shimei, a Saulide, curses David for his slaughter of Saul's sons. Abishai, one of David's loyal commanders, hears the curse and then urges the king to allow him to execute Shimei on the spot. David, however, restrains Abishai, stating that perhaps God indeed may be behind the curse. Later, following his victory over Absalom (2 Sam. 19.17-24), David is returning in triumph to Jerusalem when Shimei prostrates himself before the king and begs for forgiveness. Once again Abishai wishes to execute the Saulide for cursing the Lord's anointed, a capital offense. But David rebukes him, saying: 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should become adversaries to me on this day? Shall anyone be executed in Israel this day? Do I not realize that I am this day king over Israel?' Consequently David publicly pardons his rival, and we may assume it is due to his insistence on compassion and forgiveness as the basis of his rule.

In the confrontation between Joab and David in 2 Samuel 18-19, once again the contrast between views of rule is revealed. David had instructed his troops, including Joab, to show mercy to Absalom, hoping perhaps even yet to effectuate a reconciliation with his rebel son. Yet, in defiance, Joab executes the hapless Absalom, even though he is reminded

beforehand of David's order. Then, when David is incapacitated by his grief over his son's death, Joab berates the sorrowing king for his weakness, accusing him of loving his enemies and hating his supporters. And, to the point, Joab threatens the king that not one man, including himself, will remain loyal, unless he gives an oration to sway support to his side. Here is the classic encounter between the soldier who sees no place for compassion, forgiveness, or even grief in royal existence, since these features often hinder decisive and firm action, and a king whose compassion and desire to forgive have been thwarted by the soldier's treachery.

In the concluding episode involving David in 1 Kings 1-2, the opening description of David bears notice, for it is the first time that a physical depiction of David is provided. Here David is portrayed as old and declining rapidly in health, a description that should signal one to look for a dénouement that results from a transformation in the king's understanding of the proper way to rule. While court factions are attempting to place their successor on the throne, David proclaims Solomon as his successor. Is the king deceived by Nathan and Bathsheba's plot, or is he angry that Adonijah, like Absalom, is attempting to wrest the throne away? Again the narrator does not inform us. However, there is no doubt about David's speech in the final deathbed scene in 1 Kgs 2.1-9, when he instructs Solomon in the proper way to rule. Echoing the language of the sons of Zeruiah (2 Sam. 10.12), David instructs Solomon to use cunning and brute force in executing the dynasty's real or potential enemies. Ironically the first victim of David's changed view of rule is Joab. Then, breaking his earlier public oath and negating his pardon, David orders Solomon to use treachery in order to find a basis for executing Shimei, for the same reason twice offered by Abishai: he had cursed the king.

In this reading, the narrative's portrayal of David centers on the proper way to rule the kingdom. Against the background of the plot involving the private and public disasters of the king, David at the end of his life repudiates his earlier principles of compassion and forgiveness, *דָּוָה*, and adopts the political cynicism of the sons of Zeruiah: only the use of merciless power may effectively quell internal discord and create a united kingdom.²⁶

26. Gunn's observation is unquestionably correct: 'In reality David, Solomon, and Joab all now belong totally to the same world' (*King David*, p. 107).

IV. *David as Static Character*

It is my contention, however, that the David character is ambiguous, so that a very different picture may emerge, one that consistently binds together deceit, treachery, and ruthlessness. Accordingly, David's practice of rule is far more insidious than the one openly proclaimed by the sons of Zeruiah. The specific technique used by the narrator is the frequency of deceptive speeches by the king which involve explicitly or implicitly the motif of *דָּוָה*, especially taken in the sense of 'loyalty'.²⁷ In matters public as well as private, one may argue that David is consistently motivated by self-interest, not altruism. This approach regards David as a static character who does not inwardly change and develop within the movement of the plot.²⁸

The first scene (2 Sam. 9) opens with David's public speech: 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul that I may show him an act of loyalty for Jonathan's sake?'. When Ziba, Saul's former servant, is presented to the king, David repeats his question, only fashioning it in an even more persuasive manner, perhaps designed to overcome what could be the servant's justified scepticism: 'Is there not still someone of the house of Saul to whom I may show an act of divine loyalty?' The third repetition, nuanced by a slight change, occurs when Mephibosheth is ushered in before the king: 'Do not fear,' says David, 'for I will *most certainly* show an act of loyalty for the sake of your father Jonathan'. This third instance heightens (with the addition of an infinitive absolute) the king's claim to act on the basis of *דָּוָה*. Thus David twice appeals to the loyalty that seals the bonds of human friendship and once to the loyalty uniting God to his chosen people in his attempts to convince his hearers of the truthfulness of his pledge and the integrity of his motive. This folkloristic threefold repetition, coupled with an increasing intensification of the claim of truthfulness, immediately attracts attention.

27. Alter's following point is most important: 'Although a character's own statements might seem a straightforward revelation of who he is and what he makes of things, in fact the biblical writers are quite as aware as any James or Proust that speech may reflect the occasion more than the speaker, may be more a drawn shutter than an open window' (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 117).

28. Hagan's study of the motif of deception is flawed by his failure to recognize David's own involvement in treachery and deceit. According to Hagan, with the exception of the Bathsheba episode, David is the victim, not the perpetrator, of deception. In his analysis, Hagan thinks that David, though weak, triumphs because of his love for and trust in the Lord ('Deception as Motif and Theme', pp. 324-25).

But it also draws one's suspicion for three reasons. First, there is an increasing emphasis placed by the king on his veracity, reflected in the slight but significant changes he makes in each repetition. Second, a rather common literary technique that exposes deception is a character's repeated affirmation of his or her integrity and goodwill.²⁹ And third, the isolated narrative describing David's eradication of the sons of Saul, save for Mephibosheth, by giving them into the hands of the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21) is obviously in the background of this narrative (cf. 2 Sam. 16.8) and well explains both Mephibosheth's fear and the necessary heightening of emphasis on the king's integrity in ch. 9. Nevertheless, David does turn over to Saul's grandson the former king's lands as well as his family servant. However, the privilege to eat at the king's table was on occasion extended to political prisoners.³⁰ Is David not afraid that surviving Saulides might occasion a revolution, and thus is prompted to identify potential threats from the house of Saul? Is his motivation in giving Mephibosheth a royal pension not that of making Jonathan's son a political prisoner? David's suspicions are exploited by Ziba who later accuses his new master of royal ambitions (2 Sam. 16.1-5).

In ch. 10 David once again makes a public declaration in which דָּוִד is prominently featured: 'I will deal loyally with Hanun, the son of Nahash, even as his father dealt loyally with me'. This time דָּוִד refers to the loyalty that binds two rulers to the stipulations of a political treaty. However, the motif of deceit is provided by the Ammonite advisors who warn their new king that David's true intention is one of treachery: the emissaries are spies of a king lusting after Ammonite land. David is angered by the rebuff that is compounded by both a public affront and war preparations, but, ever the opportunist, he uses this occasion to bring the Syrians to their knees and the Ammonites within his expanding empire.

The next complex of quickly moving vignettes, centering on the Bathsheba affair and its aftermath, reinforces on a private scale this emerging picture of a deceitful king, for these scenes contrast the deception and treachery of the lustful king who sleeps with his absent soldier's wife with the total loyalty of Uriah to king, nation, and fellow warriors, a loyalty that ironically comes from a Hittite mercenary. This loyalty of a foreigner is emphasized twice more in the behavior of Ittai and Hushai. Perry and Sternberg have exposed the multiple ironic levels of this

narrative section in regard to the exchanges between David and Uriah.³¹ However, I would add that the deceit and treachery of the king is further emphasized in the exchange of messages between David and Joab (2 Sam. 11.14-25). Joab so badly mishandles David's order to effectuate Uriah's death in battle that a number of the king's servants are killed. Fearing David's reaction, Joab carefully coaches his messenger in a bit of rhetorical psychology designed to avert the king's anticipated wrath. But, in comic fashion, the messenger, perhaps frightened, bungles his mission, awkwardly blurting out the entirety of his message. But most striking is the realization that Joab's fears of an angry response do not materialize. In spite of the messenger's poor performance, David responds with his own deceitful message to take back to Joab: 'Do not let the affair concern you, for the sword consumes now one and then another. Rather, strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.' The messenger's news has evoked neither anger nor remorse over the death of the king's servants. In fact David's only concern seems to be with the care he takes not to intimate to the messenger that anything devious or underhanded has transpired. And as Joab begins to follow the king's order to take the city, David proceeds to possess the wife of the ill-fated Uriah, the final treachery.

In the scene that follows, the prophet Nathan uses his own rhetorical deception in the guise of a parable that tricks the king into self-condemnation (2 Sam. 12.1-15). Caught in his own deceit, David confesses that he has sinned and even engages in the traditional mourning ritual on behalf of his stricken, innocent child (2 Sam. 12.15-23). But is this true remorse? What attracts one's suspicion about the motive of David's lamentation are his break with tradition and the lack of a father's normal emotional reaction to hearing the news of the death of his child. David, hearing the child is dead, arises, washes himself, anoints his body, changes clothes, and eats. The king's stunned servants, who had anticipated he might do himself harm upon hearing the news of the child's death, express their amazement. Then David explains: 'While the child was still alive I fasted and wept; for I said, "Who knows, perhaps the

29. T. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 59-61.

30. See 2 Kgs 25.29 (= Jer. 52.33).

31. M. Perry and M. Sternberg, 'The King through Ironic Eyes: The Narrator's Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba and Two Excursuses on the Theory of the Narrative Text', *Hasifrut* 1 (1968), pp. 263-92 (English summary, pp. 449-52); and 'Caution, a Literary Text! Problems in the Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative', *Hasifrut* 2 (1970), pp. 608-63 (English summary, pp. 679-82).

Lord will be gracious to me so that the child may live?" But now that 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.' Are these the words of a grief-stricken father, or of a callous ruler realizing he had failed to negate Nathan's prophecy predicting trouble from the king's own house, a prediction whose initial sign was the death of the child?

The Absalom complex (2 Sam. 13-19) is also filled with examples that exploit the tension between loyalty and treachery, devotion and deceit. But what concerns us most are the significant encounters and dialogues between David and his loyal servants that focus on the motif of loyalty. The first of these involves David's rhetoric designed to test the loyalty of the Gittite leader, Ittai, and his band of compatriots. Ittai responds by swearing loyalty even to death to David and accompanies the king in his flight from Absalom (2 Sam. 15.19-22).³² The second case involves David's commission to Hushai. Telling his Canaanite counsellor that his presence would only impede the royal escape ('be a burden to me'), David exploits Hushai's loyalty by sending him back to Absalom as a spy and almost to certain death. In words characteristically revealing, David says to his advisor: 'If you return to the city and tell Absalom: "I shall be your servant, O king; as I had been your father's servant, so now will I be your servant", you will bring to naught for my sake the counsel of Ahithophel' (2 Sam. 15.33-34). Indeed, when Hushai returns to act as David's spy, he publicly swears his loyalty to the new king, even though Absalom had suspiciously asked: 'Is this your loyalty (חסד) to your friend?' (2 Sam. 16.17). Thus Hushai's deceitful counsel to an unsuspecting Absalom results in the saving of David's life and crown, but the text's ominous silence following Absalom's discovery of the spy suggests the price this loyal servant had to pay to be the 'king's friend' (2 Sam. 15.32-17.23).³³

The third and most dramatic example of treachery and loyalty begins

32. Unfortunately the Hebrew reading in v. 20 is problematical, with the result that the exact meaning of David's use of חסד is obscured. The versions also differ widely, as noted by BHS. I suggest that the difficult expression, וְהָשִׁיב אֶת־אִי־חִידָן עִמָּךְ, is best translated: 'take back with your brothers loyalty and faithfulness'. From the context it appears that David is attempting to persuade Ittai and the Gittites to return to Jerusalem and swear allegiance to Absalom.

33. Of course Hushai's title, 'the king's friend', points to his official position of royal advisor (T.N.D. Mettinger, *Solomonic State Officials* [ConBOT, 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1971], pp. 62-69). However, that his relationship to David also involves the loyalty of friendship is noted in Absalom's suspicion expressed in 2 Sam. 16.17.

to unfold just before the fateful encounter between the armies of David and Absalom. David has just received the public expression of loyalty from his troops, who vow their willingness to die for their sovereign, while refusing to allow him to risk his own life in battle. Now the king publicly instructs his troops: 'Deal gently (לֵנִי), for my sake, with the young man Absalom' (2 Sam. 18.5). While David, presumably intentionally, uses the synonym for חסד, Joab, nevertheless, has heard David's speeches and messages before and has learned to recognize the king's rhetorical deception, especially when he mentions kindness and loyalty. Ironically Joab takes the speech to be a deceitful one, thinking perhaps that David knew that his loyal commander would understand the true intent of the statement. Hence, Joab murders Absalom, all the while thinking he has carried out David's true wishes.

The irony of the king who falls victim to his own deceit is revealed in David's devastated reaction to the news of the Cushite messenger. A messenger, one should note, was used quite often by the king in effectuating his treachery. However, the genuineness of David's grief is this time underscored by the narrator's remark that 'the king was deeply moved' (2 Sam. 19.1). Yet one must ask, Where is the king's remorse over the death of 20,000 warriors? That Joab is confused by David's reaction is revealed in his berating of the king's lack of loyalty to his own family and faithful servants. Joab accuses David of being willing to sacrifice them all if only he could have his beloved traitor back. Then Joab persuades the king to use his powerful gift of rhetoric to recapture the support of his followers, a skill at which the king is all too adept. Otherwise David faces abandonment and the loss of his empire.

When the king is returning victoriously to Jerusalem, he once again employs those skills in swearing by public oath to pardon Shimei for his curse. But is this not evidence once again of a deceitful speech, necessitated by the fact that this Saulide had with him a thousand men from Benjamin (2 Sam. 19.17-24)? David surely recognizes it is not an auspicious time for dispatching his rival, but he also knows that one day a better, more convenient occasion would surely arise for settling old debts. Even David's partial forgiveness of Mephibosheth, implicated in the revolt, is surely based on expediency, for the king must have known that the execution of Jonathan's son would only alienate the tribe of Saul. Nevertheless, by giving to Ziba half of his former master's land to repay his loyalty, David reminds Mephibosheth who now has the real power in Israel (2 Sam. 19.25-31).

The final scenes in 1 Kings 1–2 are replete with contrasts between loyalty, at least self-professed, and treachery, between faithfulness and deception. The plot by Nathan and Bathsheba to place Solomon, not Adonijah, on David's throne succeeds because of the prophet's strong emphasis on his and Bathsheba's loyalty, coupled with that of Benaiah and Solomon. By contrast Nathan points to the treachery of Adonijah and his party, who are plotting to take the throne. Thus David, consumed with his own passion for loyalty from his subjects, selects Solomon as his successor. Once again the king is no match for the scheming wit of this prophet of Yahweh.

But the royal deceiver engages in one final act of treachery. On his deathbed, David orders Solomon to 'use his wisdom' (i.e., engage in political deception) to find a legal means by which to execute the ever-dangerous Joab and Shimei. Joab, David's most loyal and devoted servant, the one who won his victories in the name of the king, who saves David's throne on at least two occasions, and who discreetly carries out the royal execution orders, is ironically repaid with betrayal in the form of David's execution order to Solomon. Likewise David's shameless lie in regard to his earlier oath of pardon given to Shimei is clearly evidenced in his instruction to Solomon to find a legal basis to execute his old enemy. Then the king instructs his successor to repay Barzillai for his loyalty during the Absalom rebellion by allowing his sons to eat at the king's table. With the echo of loyalty (דֹּפֵן) and the reference to eating at the royal table we are at full circle. With this obvious closure the narrator ends his story of David. Indeed, Solomon carries out David's instructions to the letter, even adding to them in executing Adonijah and exiling Abiathar. However, the sons of Barzillai are not again mentioned. Do they refuse the king's offer to eat at the royal table, knowing the ambiguous nature of such a 'reward', or is it that Solomon, like Joab, has heard his father's deceitful speeches about loyalty and thus dismisses this part of the instruction?

In this second reading, David is consistently deceitful, ruthless, and treacherous, with self-interest the driving force behind his speeches and actions. His final oration to Solomon then is not surprising. This speech corresponds to David's statements and actions throughout the narrative. And now Solomon, like his father before him, initiates his reign with the same callous deceit, treachery, and brutality. Indeed, a new David sits on the throne of Israel.

V. Conclusion

Of the two portraits of David just drawn, which one do we choose? Do we select the David who valiantly attempts to rule his kingdom with compassion and forgiveness, changing only at the end of his life when, as an old, embittered, and dying man, he comes to recognize that ruthless force is the only way to suppress revolution? Or is the other David more convincing, the king who is consistently deceitful, treacherous, and ruthless, demanding loyalty from his subjects, but repaying it only if it promotes his own self-interest? But must we choose? Robert Alter has stated in regard to biblical characterization: 'We are compelled to get at character and motive...through a process of inference from fragmentary data, often with crucial pieces of narrative exposition strategically withheld, and this leads to multiple or sometimes even wavering perspectives on the characters. There is, in other words, an abiding mystery in character as the biblical writers conceive it, which they embody in their typical methods of presentation.'³⁴ I would only add here that the type of ambiguity surrounding the David figure in the Succession Narrative is the result of skilful craftsmanship.

But is the ambiguity of the David character merely a typical feature of biblical narrative, or is there some intention on the author's part in portraying David in such a manner? Since an author's intention is often well concealed, one may only speculate. But is it not possible that the double portrait of David reflects the ambiguity many Israelites held about the institution of monarchy in general, an ambiguity reflected in many biblical texts? 'Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul, that I may show him an act of kindness for Jonathan's sake?'³⁵

34. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 126. Gunn has suggested in private correspondence that Alter may be placing too much emphasis on mystery as an intrinsic feature of human nature, when mystery may instead be more a matter of (our) perception.

35. P. Miscall's book (*The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* [SBL Semeia Series; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983]) appeared after this essay was finished. It is significant, however, that he has argued for a similar reading of David in 1 Sam. 16–22 (cf. pp. 47–138). The 'undecidability' of the David character (i.e. David is at the same time 'good' and 'bad') is especially clear, argues Miscall, in the Goliath episode (ch. 17). Miscall writes: 'David is a cunning and unscrupulous schemer, and he is also an innocent "man of destiny" for whom all goes right. The text supports a spectrum of portrayals of David and thereby does not support any one definitive or probable portrayal' (p. 83).