

Session 7: The Wisdom Tradition

B. The Succession Narrative

In this section we are going to look in detail at one major source, frequently known as the 'succession narrative' or the 'court history'. It is found in 1 Samuel chapters 9 to 20 and 1 Kings chapters 1 and 2. It is a vivid narrative with all the signs of having been written by someone who, if not directly involved, was very close to those who were. One theory, proposed in 1926 by Leonard Rost, is that it was written to justify the accession of Solomon, hence the name 'succession narrative'. Certainly, this would have needed some justification, since Solomon was one of David's youngest sons and there were serious questions over his mother's status. The story shows how the three of the most prominent contenders for the throne, Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah, disqualified themselves and how Solomon's accession was supported by those who had remained most loyal to David. Moreover, it states that Solomon was the 'beloved of Yahweh' (1 Samuel 12:24-25) and thus marked out by the Lord as David's successor.

On the other hand, the narrative contains much that is unfavourable to both David and Solomon. It is difficult to see it as a justification of their actions. In his study, *The Story of King David*, David Gunn suggests that the story is, in fact, an examination of power, its use and abuse, and its effects. Either way, it is probable that it was first written very early, during the great flowering of Israelite culture in the reign of Solomon.

The gist of the story is as follows:

Chapters 9 and 10 set the scene by describing David's attempts to reconcile the survivors of Saul's family to his rule and the origin of the war against Ammon. But it is in chapter 11 that the significant action really begins.

David sends out his army to fight the Ammonites but remains behind in Jerusalem. While taking the air on his palace roof, he catches sight of a beautiful woman bathing. Enquiring who she is, he discovers that she is Bathsheba the wife of Uriah, one of his officers currently away fighting the Ammonites. Undeterred he sends for Bathsheba and they have sex.

Before long, Bathsheba discovers that she is pregnant and tells David. So David sends a message to Joab, the commander of the army, asking him to send Uriah back home, hoping he will take the opportunity of a night with his wife. But Uriah refuses on the grounds that he is still on active service. So David sends him back with another message to Joab, this time instructing him to arrange for Uriah's death in battle.

With Uriah out of the way David marries Bathsheba. But 'the thing that David had done displeased the Lord'. Yahweh sends the prophet Nathan to David with a parable about a rich man who steals his poor neighbour's only lamb as a meal for his guests. The story provokes David into declaring the man worthy of death, whereupon Nathan responds, 'You are the man.'

Immediately David repents, but Nathan tells him that even though Yahweh accepts his repentance the child Bathsheba is carrying will die. There will also be continual strife within David's own family and he will be publicly humiliated when his own wives are taken by another. As predicted, Bathsheba's child dies, but her next child is the boy Solomon. At his birth, Nathan sends a message to say that he is the 'beloved of the Lord'.

The strife predicted in David's family begins when his eldest son Amnon falls in love with his half-sister Tamar and rapes her. Tamar's full brother Absalom is furious and arranges Amnon's murder, at which David banishes him from court. Absalom then engages Joab to persuade David to bring him back from exile. He returns to Jerusalem but David refuses to see him.

Once back in Jerusalem, Absalom begins to build his power base. When the time is ripe he declares rebellion and has himself crowned king. David is forced to flee from Jerusalem and there is a lengthy account of the reactions of the leading courtiers, some of whom remain loyal to David, others defect to Absalom. David leaves behind ten of his concubines to look after his house. Absalom has a tent pitched on the roof of the palace so that everyone can see him going in to have sex with the concubines and thus dishonouring his father.

David's most trusted counsellor, Ahitophel, joins the rebels and when David hears this news he prays that God would 'turn Ahitophel's counsel to foolishness'. On the way out of Jerusalem, he meets another wise man, Hushai the Archite at the place 'where God was worshipped', and sends him into Absalom's camp to act as fifth columnist and to keep him informed. Hushai successfully persuades Absalom to ignore Ahitophel's advice and this wins time for David to get away and muster his army. As a result, when battle is finally joined David is victorious. Absalom is defeated, and murdered by Joab against David's instructions.

David returns to Jerusalem to reward those who have been faithful and punish those who have been disloyal. he also tries unsuccessfully to reduce the influence of Joab, the man who knows his crime against Uriah, by appointing Absalom's general, Amasa, as his commander. But Joab foils this attempt to sideline him by murdering Amasa in revenge for the death in battle of his brother Abishai.

David's eldest son Amnon and his second son Absalom have been removed from the succession. In his old age his third son Adonijah attempts a coup to take the throne. But this is thwarted by Nathan and Bathsheba, who have Solomon crowned with David's support. Thereupon Adonijah's coup collapses and he appeals to Solomon for mercy. Solomon secures his throne by removing the major threats one by one: first Adonijah; then Joab, who had supported him; and finally the leading representative of the house of Saul, Shimei. 'so the kingdom was established in the hands of Solomon' (1 Kings 2:46).

One of the most interesting features of the story, as told in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, is the comparatively few references to God and the content of these. In all 14 chapters these are they:

- in 11:27 the narrator tells us 'the thing that David had done displeased the Lord'.
- in 12:1, 7-14 the Lord send Nathan to David with a challenge and a prophecy
- in 12:24-25 the Lord sends a message via Nathan to tell David that Solomon is loved
- in 15:31 David prays that the Lord may turn the counsel of Ahitophel to foolishness
- in 17:14 the narrator tells us that the Lord had 'ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahitophel, so that the Lord might bring ruin on Absalom
- in 1 Kings 2:15 Adonjah concedes that events have turned out the way they have because the kingdom was Solomon's 'from the Lord'.

It is interesting to compare the small number of direct references to the Lord with another source incorporated in the Deuteronomic history, the Gideon stories of Judges 6 and 7.

- These begin with an appearance of the angel of the Lord, who brings fire from a rock to consume the food Gideon has prepared for him.
- Gideon is afraid that he may die, having seen the Lord and builds an altar in response.
- Next the Lord tells Gideon to tear down the altar of Baal in his village, which he does.
- He is then filled with the Spirit, who empowers him to gather men from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali.
- Next comes the incident of the fleece, in which the Lord allows Gideon to test his call and provides miracles two nights running to reassure him.
- The Lord then reduces Gideon's army to only 300 and gives him a specific battle plan.
- Before the battle, Gideon spies on the Midianite camp and hears a significant dream, which indicates that he will be victorious.
- In the end the battle is won through a divinely induced panic amongst the Midianites.

In the Gideon stories, Yahweh acts through miraculous and spectacular outside intervention. In the Succession Narrative, he acts in a wholly different way: in and through the ordinary everyday actions of human beings. There is A KIND OF DETERMINISM in which Yahweh's will (for example to bring Absalom to ruin or to give Solomon the kingdom) is brought about through the ordinary decisions and actions of human beings, but in such a way that *their freedom of action is never impaired*.

For example, Nathan prophesies that the sword will never depart from David's house; trouble will come upon him from within his own family; his wives will be given to another in the sight of all Israel. These things come about through human motivation and human decision: Amnon rapes Tamar, Absalom rebels, David leaves his concubines behind and Absalom takes them. Or again, David prays for the defeat of Ahitophel's counsel. He then meets Hushai and sends him to be an agent in Absalom's camp and Hushai is successful in persuading Absalom to ignore Ahitophel's advice, leading to the outcome that Yahweh had ordained. In the end Adonijah concedes that since Yahweh had already decided Solomon should have the kingdom, nothing he could do would change that.

Another feature of the narrative is the interest in SIN AND JUDGEMENT. Although David is forgiven for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, he is told that there will be consequences. These consequences are 'natural' in that they arise from the rivalries of his sons, even his own poor nurture of them (13:21 tells us that David failed to punish Amnon because he was his firstborn and 1 Kings 1:6 tells us that David has never effectively disciplined Adonijah). But they are also clearly shown to be ordained by the Lord. And yet, there are no simplistic judgements of good and bad against the conduct of any of the characters in the story. Even the murders of Absalom and Amasa by Joab pass without comment: the reader is asked to make up their own mind about all the honourable, ambiguous and distinctly dubious actions that take place.

This leads to a third highly distinctive feature of the story: the interest in CHARACTER. What today we might call the psychology of the narrative is both realistic and acutely observed. We are shown Amnon burning with desire for his half-sister and, after he rapes her, that lust turning to hatred, true to the psychology of male domination. We are shown the way Tamar is placed in an impossible and dangerous decision, treated like an object at the disposal of the men, and invited to empathise with her despair in disgrace.

Joab is the nearest the story comes to a villain, yet his role is far from straightforward. He is David's right hand man, an association rooted in their shared interest in military strategy. In the exchange between David and Joab over the manner of Uiah's death in 11:18-21 we can hear the echoes of long nights in tents discussing lessons of military history. His willingness to act as the agent of murder on David's behalf gave Joab a hold over the king, which we see magnified when David's own resolve is shattered by the behaviour of his sons. This positions gives him the independence to play his own hand, helping to bring Absalom back to court but eventually murdering him against the king's order.

Ahitophel plays only a walk-on part, yet an entirely convincing one: the royal counsellor who makes a fateful decision to change sides and back the son rather than the father. Having seen his counsel rejected and presumably knowing what the outcome was likely to be the narrative tells us simply that he 'saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city, set his house in order and hanged himself'. If we ask why Ahitophel should have made this fateful decision, sources outside the narrative help us, and incidentally help to strengthen the sense of authenticity: Ahitophel was Bathsheba's grandfather. 2 Samuel 11:3 tells us that Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam, 23:34 that Eliam was the son of Ahitophel. He had seen his grand-daughter seduced and her husband murdered; was this the explanation for his desertion of the man responsible?

Finally, the ATTITUDE TO RELIGION in the Succession narrative owes little to ritual or taboo. In 12:15-21 David fasts in order to prevent his son dying, if he can; but when he dies anyway, he accepts this as the Lord's decision. In 16:5-13 he is not afraid of Shimei's curses but commits his well-being to the Lord. Behind all these is an implicit understanding that what the Lord looks for is not correct ritual but a correct attitude of heart towards him.