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The So-Called Succession Narrative:
A Reappraisal of Rost's Approach to Theme in II Samuel 9-20
and I Kings 1-2

Gillian Keys

The title 'Succession Narrative' leaves little to the imagination, at least as regards theme; and indeed the phrase used in the title of this paper ('the So-Called Succession Narrative') must leave little doubt as to the subject matter under consideration. Nevertheless let us begin by clarifying our aims and objectives here: in this paper we will examine the theme of the material which has become known as the Succession Narrative, and attempt to determine if a succession theme accurately reflects the content of II Samuel 9-20 and I Kings 1-2. However because of the limitations of time, and because of the involvement of other issues, we will not attempt to offer any comprehensive alternative approach. Rather we will confine ourselves to a reappraisal of the succession theme as presented by Rost.

Leonhard Rost is the outstanding figure in the study of the Succession Narrative. Since his Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids /1/ was first published in 1926, his views have almost completely dominated scholarship in this area. Although several of his ideas had been suggested at an earlier date, notably by Wellhausen /2/, Rost's work succeeded in popularizing these and in superseding all the other views which were current at that time.

The pivotal point in Rost's argument was his perception of the succession to the throne of David as the overriding theme of this work. He began with the first two chapters of Kings, taking the statement in I Kings 1:

"Who shall sit upon the throne of my lord the king,
and who shall reign after him?"

as the verbal expression of the theme of the entire narrative. From here he traced the extent of the work,

concluding that it comprised II Samuel 6:16,20-23 (the Michal story); 7:11b, 16 (the core of the dynastic oracle); 9-20; and I Kings 1-2. However perhaps we should point out that subsequent writers have not always followed Rost in linking chapters 6 and 7 with the Succession Narrative. Therefore for the purpose of greater clarity, we will treat the Succession Narrative (or SN, as we will sometimes refer to it) as comprising II Sam.9-20 and I Kings 1-2.

Rost saw the entire work as an exploration of the question as to who would succeed to the throne of David. However he argued that this theme in turn comprised two major branches: the background to the successor (that is, Solomon), and the background to the actual succession. The background to the successor consisted of II Sam.10-12: the account of the Ammonite Wars, David's adultery, his murder of Uriah and the birth of Solomon. The background to the succession consisted of the remainder of the material /3/. Thus Rost saw the narrative as a record of the elimination of each of the various candidates for the throne up until the eventual emergence of Solomon as the heir to his father's domain.

Because of the nature of the material, in that it deals with what are essentially private events, he argued that it could only have been the product of an eyewitness - a member of the Courts of David and Solomon. Therefore he dated the composition of the narrative to the early years of Solomon's reign, seeing it as political propaganda, whose purpose was to glorify Solomon.

In many ways the popularity of Rost's hypothesis may be credited to its plausibility: certainly if we take II Sam.9-20 and I Kings 1-2 together, the resulting unit records the deaths of three of David's sons and the accession of a younger brother. But are we following blindly in Rost's footsteps by treating this material as a unity? And is the very fact that we employ the term Succession Narrative another example of our begging the question? This is the contention of Ackroyd /4/, who in a

recent article asserted:

"If our reading and response are to be with fullest effect, we must not be hindered by restrictions imposed by artificial and hypothetical categorizing of the text; and one such may appear to have been the supposition that there is an identifiable unit to be described as the 'succession narrative,' when, in reality, such a unit is to be seen rather as the product of a too narrow reading and too great a desire to find uniformity where there is in reality diversity and richness. A less rigid reading may open up a wider perspective" /5/.

He stresses the fact that the Succession Narrative Hypothesis is simply a hypothesis, and that it must not be accorded more respect than its theoretical nature warrants. Again he argues:

"No hypothesis in Old Testament scholarship which reaches such a status must be allowed to go unquestioned, not because such questioning provides fodder for doctoral theses, but because a hypothesis must never be allowed to become more than it really is" /6/.

Yet it seems that many have fallen into the trap of forgetting that this is only a hypothesis and have accepted Rost's conclusions unquestioningly.

There have, of course, been those who have objected to particular aspects of Rost's hypothesis, and in recent years such arguments have become more numerous. However few have moved so far from Rost's position as to break completely with the idea of a Succession Narrative. Yet one of those who has done so is Carlson /7/. Adopting the traditio-historical approach of the Uppsala School, he argued for a large portion of Deuteronomistic editing and interpolation in II Samuel. Thence he proposed that the book as a whole divided naturally into two sections. The first eight chapters were concerned with David under the Blessing (because of his obedience to Yahweh), while the remainder of the book showed David under the Curse (as the result of his disobedience). However his views have had no

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significant impact in altering the general emphasis or approach.

Nevertheless others have suggested modifications to Rost's view of the theme of the narrative. Blenkinsopp /8/ and Flanagan /9/ have argued for the isolation of two distinct themes within the document (a court theme and a succession theme). Hagan /10/ has argued that there are other themes within the narrative, as well as that of succession; and more recently both Gunn /11/ and Fokkleman /12/ have proposed that the title 'Succession Narrative' is not an appropriate heading for this material.

Thus we approach the succession theme against a background of scholarship which is not entirely uncritical of Rost's proposal. However despite the views of individual scholars, the general consensus of opinion still holds to Rost's original hypothesis.

Let us turn then to look at the theme of the work. We cannot and should not attempt to deny that when viewed in the context of the accession in I Kings 1, SN provides a background to Solomon's position as heir by recounting the deaths of three of his older brothers (Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah) and two potential usurpers (Mephibosheth and Shimei ben Gera). However this is only a partial background. Although it appears to have gone unnoticed, we may observe that nowhere does the Succession Narrative attempt to record the full story of the succession.

II Samuel 3:2-5 lists David's first six sons in order of birth as Amnon, Chileab, Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah and Ithream, while II Sam.5:14-16 lists the sons subsequently born to him in Jerusalem as Shammua, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, Ithar, Elishua, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada and Eliphelet. If the second list is also in order of birth, as would seem most likely, then Solomon is the tenth of these seventeen sons /13/. Thus six of Solomon's older brothers are not accounted for /14/. It has been suggested

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that I Kings 1:5ff. implies the early death of Chileab /15/, but this need not necessarily be the case and is nevertheless not of particular significance to the question, for there remain five other older sons whose deaths are neither recorded nor implied. Thus if SN is indeed a narrative of succession it tells an incomplete story, for it only accounts for the elimination of three of the nine possible candidates for the throne who were born before Solomon.

Rost and those who have followed him in designating the main theme of the work as 'succession' base their analysis on the assumption that the principle of primogeniture was already established in Israel, and that the accession of Solomon must entail the demise of his older brothers. However there is no evidence that this was necessarily the case, especially as no other son had succeeded his father to the throne of Israel. Indeed II Samuel 7 indicates that even the principle of a hereditary monarchy had not yet been established.

With regard to the inheritance of property, it appears that in Israel the general practice was that on the death of the father his assets were divided between all his sons, with the firstborn receiving twice as much as each of the others /16/. However there are exceptions to this rule, such as in the case of Jephthah, possibly the eldest son of his father, who was deprived of his rights of inheritance by the mutual agreement of his brothers (Judges 11:1f) /17/. Thus it is probable that even in the normal course of events the firstborn was not invariably the chief beneficiary of his father's estate.

We may consider that the idea of the inheritance of the firstborn in Rost's work comes from analogy with the status of Jonathan as heir apparent in I Samuel. However it is equally possible that Jonathan's position as heir derived not from the fact that he was Saul's eldest son, but as a result of his exploits and ability in battle, and his popularity with the people /18/. Yet even if Jonathan was

Saul's heir because he was his eldest son, it does not follow that David's sons should have priority in order of birth. Indeed perhaps we should note that according to I Samuel 16, David himself was the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse.

Having thus established a fundamental difficulty with the overall concept of this material as a succession narrative, let us look more closely at the arguments which have given rise to this view. Perhaps one of the strongest points in favour of Rost's succession theme is that he finds the idea expressly and repeatedly stated in I Kings 1. He says:

"And set in this framework...we have the insistent question: 'Who shall sit upon the throne of my lord the king, and who shall reign after him?' Nathan's conversation with Bathsheba and their talk with David, David's order to Zadok, Nathan and Benaiah, and finally Jonathan's report to those banqueting around Adonijah's table, all centre on this question in agitated excitement. The whole action of the drama revolves around these disquieting words. The whole chapter is dominated by them - and not only the whole chapter, but...the whole work" /19/.

Thus he presents the question "Who shall sit upon the throne of my lord the king, and who shall reign after him?" as a direct quotation used repeatedly in I Kings 1. That this is taken directly from the text has added much weight to his argument and has led most scholars to adopt his approach while rejecting views which vary the nuance of the theme /20/.

Nevertheless despite Rost's implication, this is not a direct quotation from the Massoretic text. Although the English version of Die Überlieferung translates these words, the German editions quote them in Hebrew. Here Rost gives as a transcription from the text of I Kings 1:

מי ישב על-כסא אדני המלך ומי ימלך אחריו

However this does not appear anywhere in the chapter.

The language closest to it is found within the statements of Bathsheba and Nathan in v.20 and v.27 respectively. Here the Hebrew reads:

מי ישב על-כסא אדוני-המלך אחריו

This comprises part, but not all of Rost's quotation.

Thus the 'insistent question' taken by Rost to dominate the chapter is not in fact a direct quotation from the Hebrew text. Rather it is a hybrid reading of vv.20 and 27, supplemented by language found elsewhere in the chapter /21/. This observation is significant in itself, but the difficulties it creates for the Succession Narrative Hypothesis are further compounded by the fact that the 'quotation' is taken out of context. Neither verses 20 nor 27 is actually asking the question which Rost poses. In neither case is the phrase a direct question. Verse 20 forms part of Bathsheba's speech to the king. It reads:

"And now, my lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are upon you, to tell them who shall sit upon the throne of my lord the king after him."

In verse 27 Nathan addresses David and says:

"Has this thing been brought about by my lord the king and you have not told your servants who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?"

By presenting this as a direct question and separating it from its context, Rost dramatically alters its meaning and function.

Another weakness in the argument which is not generally identified concerns the actual theme of succession itself. Although he argues that this is a narrative composed on a single theme, Rost has to divide his succession theme into two distinct sections in order to make it fit the text. In reality there is not one single theme, but two separate 'succession' themes: the History of the Succession and the History of the Successor.

Immediately we may observe a distinct imbalance

between the length of these two sections: the History of the Successor is related in only three chapters (II Sam.10-12), while the History of the Succession takes up the remainder of the narrative and spans thirteen chapters. The link between the two themes is based solely on content and there is no structural support for identifying the two so closely. Reference is never made to Solomon outside two verses in II Samuel 12 and the actual accession material of I Kings 1-2, while Rost offers no explanation as to why the History of the Successor should be inserted into the middle of the Background to the Succession. Thus we might suggest that the succession to the throne, as presented by Rost, is not in fact a single unifying theme but that it is actually a synthesis of two quite different themes, presented together under the hybrid heading of 'succession'.

It is also possible to take exception to one of these strands, the Background to the Successor, at a much more basic level, for we may question whether II Sam.10-12 is in fact a history of the successor.

Chapters 10-12 give an account of the Ammonite War, David's adultery, his murder of Uriah, his confrontation with Nathan, and the death of the child of adultery. However Rost saw the account of Solomon's birth in 12:24-25 as the high point of the entire section. This is a short note which records Solomon's conception and birth, states that he was "beloved by Yahweh", and spans only three lines in the Hebrew text. Nevertheless he regarded it as the axis of the section and as the sole purpose for recording all the events in chapters 10-12.

Yet as far as the literary structure and the content of the material is concerned, the record of Solomon's birth occupies only a minor position in these chapters. It is brief, lacks detail and does not expand upon any of the facts it records. For example, we are not told why Yahweh loved Solomon; or that he would have any special future; or even that he survived infancy. Indeed the text would suffer no damage if it were to be omitted, for it is

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self-contained and the story would function equally well without it.

If the primary purpose of chapters 10-12 was indeed to record the circumstances of Solomon's birth, we might ask why the two-part Ammonite War should be included. Its function is generally regarded as being to set the scene for the events which were taking place in Jerusalem while the war was in progress. However this does not adequately explain why the narrative returns to this subject again in 12:26, for unless this war was a protracted affair Solomon must have been born long after David finally subdued Ammon. Indeed, regardless of time-scale, it is odd that if the Ammonite War is background to the adultery and murder, interest should again be centred on this early background after the initial events had been developed and the subsequent culmination of these events arrived at.

If the high-point of the narrative were the birth of Solomon (as Rost believes it to be), then the adultery, murder, confrontation with Nathan and death of the infant would be a background to Solomon's birth. Therefore the account of the Ammonite War would be the background to the background to the main interest of the section! Surely such a structure is too involved to be realistic.

Only II Sam.10-12 is placed under the heading 'History of the Successor'. All of the rest of Rost's Succession Narrative belongs to the 'History of the Succession'. Therefore we might consider that there is in fact no 'History of the Successor' for the chief interest of chs.10-12 does not lie in the birth of Solomon. Rather the entire section, including the Solomon verses, revolves around the account of David's adultery and murder. 12:24-25 is peripheral to this. We may suggest that the account of Solomon's birth is in fact a parenthesis which has been included here for two purposes. These were firstly, to show that David did obtain a measure of forgiveness from Yahweh in that despite the death of the

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first child, its fate did not extend to Bathsheba's subsequent offspring; and secondly, as a comment which would be of interest to the audience in rounding off the story by linking it with David's successor, who would certainly be well known to them regardless of the function of succession in the narrative. Indeed McCarter, who also views the story of Solomon's birth as an appendix within chapters 10-12 comments that if we read the whole story for the sake of the appendix alone, we are in fact "letting the tail wag the dog" /23/.

Let us turn now to Rost's assessment of the relationship between I Kings 1-2 and the succession theme. Rost regarded the entire narrative as a build-up to the anointing and coronation of Solomon. Thus he saw I Kings 1-2 as the climax of the work. However these chapters do not at any time give the impression of being a 'grand finale' to the Succession Narrative, and although he claims that it is the zenith of the work, Rost treats it more as a conclusion than as a climax.

Again we encounter a situation where Rost finds the main theme and pivotal point of the Narrative only at its very end. Yet we would normally expect such a major theme to become apparent at a much earlier stage in any work. Undoubtedly 'succession', or perhaps more accurately, the accession of Solomon, is the overriding theme of the first two chapters of I Kings, but is this really true of the rest of the work?

It is doubtful whether, when viewed independently of I Kings 1-2, II Samuel 9-20 does in fact reflect the theme of succession. Conroy deals with this question in the context of his study of II Sam.13-20 /24/ and finds that when this material is treated independently, the succession theme never emerges. Thus he argues that succession is not an intrinsic element of chapters 13-20. We may suggest that this also applies to the preceding chapters, so that when II Sam.9-20 is read independently, succession is not a

significant feature of the narrative.

Moreover Rost's stress on I Kings 1-2 may create some difficulties in itself, for it is thus both conclusion and climax of the narrative - the focal point of the entire work. However it seems unnatural to place such a strong emphasis on material at the very end of a work. It gives the piece a somewhat unbalanced air, for in effect what Rost is saying is that the work consists of a very lengthy introduction (II Sam.9-20), followed by a comparatively brief section of major interest (I Kings 1-2).

Rost's view of theme leans heavily upon his analysis of these chapters. Yet neither chronologically nor stylistically is the relationship between II Sam.9-20 and I Kings 1-2 so firmly rooted as he would imply. Worthy of note is the fact that the first two chapters of Kings are separated from the bulk of SN by the four chapters of the Samuel Appendix, found at the end of II Samuel. Thus we are once more reminded of Ackroyd's emphasis on the hypothetical nature of the argument. I Kings 1-2 does not follow on directly from II Sam.9-20, so their unity should not be assumed lightly, for if the Kings chapters were not part of SN, then the 'succession' idea would be seriously undermined. Rather it seems that the 'succession' theme has arisen as a result of too great an emphasis upon I Kings 1-2 and that an imbalanced view of the whole has resulted from this overemphasis.

Rost contended that the succession was the central idea in the work, constituting both its motivating force and subject matter. Yet as he has indicated, the orientation of a 'succession' theme must be away from the king, focusing attention either on the successor or the process of succession. However, on any examination of the narrative, it becomes clear that outside the Kings chapters, all of the stories are about King David and that it is he who is the central figure and main interest in the text.

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If we accept the idea of 'succession', then we must relegate David to a minor position in every episode. Thus it should be Solomon who is the focus of attention in chapters 11-12, the death of Amnon should be the outstanding feature of chs.13-14, and the usurpers should be the main interest of chs.15-20. However none of these suggestions offer viable readings of the material.

In chapters 10-12 we have seen that the text concentrates on the adultery and murder and thus attention is focused firmly upon the person of David.

In chs.13 and 14 the death of Amnon is of some importance to the story and to the sequence of events, nevertheless it is not given the attention which would be merited by the death of the heir presumptive in a chronicle of the succession to the throne. Rather the text is more interested in his rape of Tamar and in the vengeance taken by Absalom. The murder is recounted in 13:28-29, but the text concentrates more on the preparations made by Absalom than in the actual deed itself. Indeed even David's grief is abated when he realizes that it is only one son, Amnon, who was killed, and not all the princes as he had originally feared.

Even in the story of Absalom's Rebellion the emphasis is not that of a succession narrative. In chs.15-19, Absalom only figures in a relatively small proportion of the text: the rest of the material is concerned solely with David. His retreat from, and return to Jerusalem are described in great detail, and while the bulk of chapters 18 and 19 is ostensibly about the battle against Absalom's forces, it includes an extensive account of David's grief at the death of his son.

Nor is there any discussion or suggestion of the idea of succession in the story of Sheba ben Bichri's revolt in ch.20. Rost suggests that its purpose is to air the possibility that little of David's kingdom might be left

for his successor. Attention however, is not centred upon this, but upon Joab's murder of Amasa and the action of the wise woman in Abel-Bethmaacah. There is no mention of David's successor or his future inheritance here. Indeed it would seem to be an odd point at which to discuss the succession - when David has just regained his own kingdom. The text is not interested in the succession here, but in the re-establishment of David's position.

Thus we may see that the interest of the narrator is firmly centered upon the person of David up until I Kings 1. His attention is concentrated on the king at the expense of the factors which would be central in an excursus on the theme of succession. Therefore we may suggest that Rost's view of theme is not an accurate reflection of the content and nature of II Samuel 9-20.

Let us draw to a conclusion then. In the foregoing discussion, we have attempted to illustrate that the notion of II Sam.9-20 and I Kings 1-2 as a narrative composed on the theme of succession is not unproblematic. Initially we found that even if the firstborn was the natural successor, the Succession Narrative is still incomplete in recording the elimination of only three of Solomon's nine older brothers. Then we looked more specifically at the difficulties which are encountered with Rost's reasoning in advocating this view. Here we found that:

1. There is no repeated verbal expression of the theme in I Kings 1 as Rost claims;
2. there is no single succession theme, only two quite distinct strands which he relates to this idea;
3. his strong emphasis on the importance of I Kings 1-2 as the climax of the story does not coincide with the natural emphases of the narrative; and
4. his approach to the material undermines the role of David in the text.

Therefore the idea of succession as the main theme of II Sam.9-20 and I Kings 1-2 entails grave difficulties. Indeed we must suggest that it cannot be maintained as a viable reading of the text, and that the title "Succession Narrative" is a misnomer, according a significance to this theme which far surpasses its natural function in the work.

NOTES

- 1 BWANT III/6, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926; reprinted in Das Kleine Credo und andere Studien zum Alten Testament Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1965, pp.119-253; English translation: The Succession to the Throne of David, Sheffield: Almond, 1982.
- 2 J.Wellhauser, Die Composition des Hexateuchs, und der Historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1963, pp.255ff.; Prolegomena to the History of Israel, Cleveland: World, 1957, p.262.
- 3 II Sam.6:16,20ff.; 7:11b,16; 9; 13-20; I Kings 1-2.
- 4 P.R. Ackroyd, "The Succession Narrative (so-called)," Interpretation 35 (1981), pp.383-395.
- 5 op. cit. p.396.
- 6 op. cit. p.388.
- 7 R.A. Carlson, David the Chosen King. A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964.
- 8 J. Blenkinsopp, "Theme and Motif in the Succession History (2 Sam. XI 2ff.) and the Yahwist Corpus," Volume du Congrès, Genève 1965, SVT 15, Leiden: Brill, 1966, pp.44-57.

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- 9 J.W. Flanagan, "Court History or Succession Document? A Study of 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2," JBL 91 (1972), pp.172-181.
- 10 H. Hagan, "Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sam.9-20, 1 Kings 1-2," Biblica 60 (1979), pp.301-326.
- 11 D.M. Gunn, The Story of King David. Genre and Interpretation, JSOTS 6, Sheffield: JSOT, 1978.
- 12 J.P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. Vol.I:King David (II Sam.9-20 & I Kings 1-2), Assen: van Gorcum, 1981, see especially pp.427ff.
- 13 Noted also by J.J. Jackson, "David's Throne: Patterns in the Succession Story," Canadian Journal of Theology 11 (1965), p.185; Gunn, op. cit. p.136n.54.
- 14 However even if the second list is not in order of birth, Solomon can only be advanced to seventh position and Chileab, Shephatiah and Ithream still precede him.
- 15 See for example: J.A. Montgomery and H.S. Gehman, The Books of Kings, ICC, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1951, p.72.
- 16 Cf. Deut.21:15ff.
- 17 So N.K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh. A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 C.E., London: SCM, 1980, 286f.
- 18 Cf. I Samuel 14.
- 19 Rost, 1982:68.
- 20 For example, T.C.G. Thornton, "Solomonic Apologetic in

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Samuel and Kings," Church Quarterly Review 169 (1968), pp.159-166, suggested that the question underlying the Succession Narrative was not "Who will succeed to the throne of David," but was in fact "Why was it Solomon who succeeded David to the throne?"

- 21 I Kings 1:13, 17 and 30 all contain the expression:
כי-שלמה בנך ימלך אחרי והוא ישב על-כסאִי
This also bears a distinct resemblance to Rost's 'quotation'.
- 22 II Sam.6:16, 20ff.; 7:11b, 16; 9; 13-20; I Kings 1-2.
- 23 P.K. McCarter, Jr., II Samuel, Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1984, p.308.
- 24 C.Conroy, Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam.13-20, Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978, pp.101ff.

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