Parable, Fable, and Anecdote

Storytelling in the Succession Narrative

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Interpreting the stories told within the "succession narrative" depends on a correct recognition of their genre.

I

THE STORY ABOUT THE COMPLEX PROCESS leading to Solomon's succession to the throne of David, II Samuel 9—20, I Kings 1—2, qualifies as an outstanding example of Hebrew prose. Its self-conscious design exhibits not only a remarkable pattern of unity among its component parts, but also a plan that points toward a specific intention.[1] The integrity of this artistic unity, however, has not always remained free from attack. A principal point of issue is the position of the parable about the rich man and the poor man (II Sam. 12:1-4). Henry Preserved Smith, for example, observes: "It is doubtful whether the piece is of the same origin with what precedes and follows. If we leave it out, we get a very good connexion, joining 11:27b directly to 12:15b: *The thing was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh smote the child which the wife of Uriah bore to David* "[2]

1 Leonhard Rost, *Die Uberlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* BWANT, III/6 (Stuttgart, W Kholhammer Verlag, 1926) More recently, David Gunn, "David and the Gift of the Kingdom (2 Sam 2-4, 9 20, I Kgs 1 2)," *Semeia* 3 14 45 (1975), "Traditional Composition in the Succession Narrative," VT 26 214 29 (1976), *The Story of King David Genre and Interpretation* JSOT Sup 6 (Sheffield, University Press, 1978), Jared J Jackson, "David s Throne Patterns in the Succession Story," CJT 11 183 95 (1965), James W Flanagan, "Court History or Succession Document A Study of 2 Samuel 9 20 and 1 Kings 1 2, JBL 91 172 81 (1972), *et al*

2 Henry Preserved Smith, *The Books of Samuel* ICC (New York, Scribners Sons, 1899), p

Substantial support for this position appeared with the form-critical observations of Hermann Gunkel. According to Gunkel's perceptions, this little story demonstrates its own internal integrity as one among the *Märchen* of the Old Testament.[3] But the problem it creates for the unity of the succession story can be seen clearly when its basic design is compared with the application in verses 7-9. Since the rich man had no desire to meet his obligations as a host by using one of his own lambs, he took the one lamb of the poor man. He did not kill the poor man. Rather, he expropriated the poor man's property. But the application focuses on the death of Uriah more than on the adultery with Bathsheba. In verse 9aBb, Nathan's indictment frames its single reference to the adultery with two references to the death of Uriah as an act of murder: "Uriah the Hittite you have slain with the sword, and his wife you have taken for yourself as a wife. And him you have killed with the sword of the Amalekites" (author's trans.). Since the focal point of the application would therefore have no point of contact in the story, it might be necessary to conclude that the story is not an original part of the context.[4]

These judgments about unity in the structure of the succession story rest on conceptions of the relationship between the little story and its application. More recent evaluations of the relationship see no basic problem in the connections, assuming that it is not necessary to insist on rigid correspondence between the two.[5] Yet, in order to evaluate the unity in structure for the succession story, it is necessary to seek adequate controls for defining the relationship of the story and its application. One method for developing such a control would be to ask whether genre necessarily qualifies the facility of the little story to relate to its application. The nature of this methodological proposition must be clear. The question is not about the genre of the succession story as a larger whole. Rather it is about the genre of the little story placed in the mouth of Nathan.

According to almost every statement about genre, the story is obviously a parable.[6] A definition of parable emphasizes the point that a parable sets up some kind of comparison. "The typical parable . . . simple metaphor, . . .

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322 The foundation proposal for this position appeared in an article by Friedrich Schwally, "Zur Quellenkritik der historischen Bucher," ZAW 12 153 57 (1892)

3 Hermann Gunkel, *Das Marchen im Alten Testament* (Tubingen, J C B Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1921)

4 Gunkel, *Ibid* , pp 35f Or the opposite conclusion might be a viable alternative The application may be the secondary part So, M H Segal, "The Composition of the Books of Samuel," JQR 55 320-22 (1964) See also Julius Wellhausen, *Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bucher* (Berlin, Reimer, 1889), pp 258f

5 See, e g , Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel, a Commentary,* trans J S Bowden OTL (London, SCM Press, 1964), p 312

6 So, Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe Lamb An Example of a Juridical Parable," Bibl 48 207-42 (1967), Horst Seebass, "Nathan und David in II Sam 12," ZAW 86 203 11 (1974), *et al*

elaborate similitude, . . . full-length story, presents one single point of comparison. The details are not intended to have independent significance."[7] If the genre of the little story is properly parable and if parable functions to set up a comparison outside of itself, then some confidence can emerge that parable and application belong together. And if the parable involves only one point of comparison, then the gaps in the relationship between Nathan's parable and its application might dissolve.

Yet there are problems. What precisely constitutes a parable? The problem appears sharply when one explores a variety of definitions for parable. Mowry introduces his proposal by qualifying his subject as "an extended metaphor, or simile, frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used . . . for didactic purposes. Since an allegory is also an extension of a simile and since every metaphor presupposes a simile, confusion between the forms of parable and allegory has frequently and understandably occurred."[8] It would seem to be clear, then, that the term *parable* has not been adequately defined. Particularly if the term refers to a genre of story, how could it include a short simile or a metaphor undeveloped as a story? Mowry continues: "The wide range of literary types designated as parables by biblical authors has also contributed to this confusion."[9] Is a genre definition that includes such diverse types not constructed so broadly that it loses its effectiveness as a tool of interpretation?

In Old Testament circles the same problem appears. Simon defines Nathan's story more precisely as a juridical parable. This genre, according to Simon's definition, "constitutes a realistic story about a violation of the law, related to someone who had committed a similar offence with the purpose of leading the unsuspecting hearer to pass judgment on himself."[10] Must the form critic, however, not raise an objection at just this point? The collection of texts gathered for the sake of defining this genre includes II Samuel 12:1-14; 14:4-7; I Kings 20:39f.; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 3:1-5. How can the story in II Samuel 12:1-4 and the song in Isaiah 5:1-7 belong to the same genre? Perhaps the term refers not simply to the story or the song, but to the story plus application. If it implies story plus application, however, then even greater problems appear. Yee argues: "I submit that two similar but also functionally different literary forms compose Isa 5:1-7, viz., a song and a juridical parable."[11] The juridical parable breaks the pure form of the song. Yet, Yee does not seem to define the genre as a song converted in its tradition history into a

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7 C H Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York, Scribners Sons, 1961), p 7
8 L Mowry, "Parable," IDB (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962), p 699
9 *Ibid*
10 Simon, *op cit* , pp 220f
11 Gale A Yee, "The Form Critical Study of Isaiah 5 1-7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable," CBQ 43 30 40 (1981)

parable. He speaks instead of a pericope that represents two genres. It is both parable and song. But does such a use of genre terms not confuse the task of interpretation even further? How can one text be classified in two distinct categories?

The problem also appears in the structural analysis. The outline of structure suggested by Yee for controlling the juridical parable includes (a) the parable, (b) judgment by the addressee, (c) interpretation by the prophet, (d) recital of the benevolent actions of God, (e) indictment, and (f) sentence.[12] The problem with this structural analysis is that it defines parable in terms of the story or song or metaphor plus the application with all of its narrative parts. In this case, questions about genre of the key element, the story, fade into questions about genre of the larger context. It is even more confusing, then, to find *parable* as one element in the larger structure of a juridical *parable*. Is it not necessary first to ask how element (a), the parable, can be defined before the overarching narrative structure can be labeled as parable? Indeed, is it not necessary to know what the nature of element (a) is before the dynamics of unity in the overarching structure can be understood? Thus, it seems to me to be necessary to control the genre of the story about the rich man and poor man in itself in order to see how the story functions for the larger context.

At its most basic level Nathan's story depends on the antithetical parallel established in the first line: rich man/poor man. Verses 2-3 elaborate the contrast by specifying the particular content of the contrast. (1) The rich man had very many flocks and herds. (2) The poor man had *nothing* except one little ewe which he had bought. The contrast emphasizes the position of the poor man by piling up descriptions of his lamb in human terms. The poor man raised her; the verb, *wayᵉḥayyehā,* has a wide range of meaning, but it can clearly connote personal, human nurture (cf. Ezek. 16:6). The lamb grew up with the poor man and his sons, pointing here to the intimacy of the human relationship. The lamb is not of the barnyard nor even a pet, but is one with his children. The verb, *wattigdal,* clearly carries such personal, human connotations (cf. Gen. 21:8, 20; Exod. 2:10f.; Judg. 13:24; I Sam. 2:21, 26; I Kings 12:8, 10; II Kings 4:18; Ezek. 16:7). To eat food of the family and to drink from the cup are acts of hospitality for visitors, not for pets or barnyard residents (Gen. 18:5; Judg. 19:5f.; I Sam. 28:22). And the final designation of the lamb's relationship (*ûbḥâgô tiškāb*) is patently a description of human relationship. It can refer to a sexual (Gen. 16:5; II Sam. 12:8; I Kings 1:2), but it can also refer to a parent-child relationship (cf. Num. 11:12; Ruth 4:16; I Kings 3:20; 17:19). These descriptions of the familial relationships set up the final simile: "She was like a daughter to him."

12. Yee, *ibid* , pp. 33f.

The contrast sets up the situation described in verse 4. One might normally expect, under such circumstances, that the rich man would take an animal from his own abundant flocks or herds and prepare the feast for the visitor. But verse 4 notes explicitly that he "was unwilling to take one from his own." Rather, he took the poor man's one lamb, the member of his family, and prepared it as the entree for his guest. And with that tragic note, the story comes to an end.

The structure of this story does not build on an arc of tension from an initial complication to a resolution. It does not highlight a virtue in the poor man nor even by structural design a vice in the rich man. Rather, the dominant structural feature is the contrast. And the center of the contrast is the lamb, an active member of the poor man's family and a passive victim of the rich man's hospitality. It makes no difference for the structure of the story to observe that an ancient principle of social order relative to the responsibilities of the host permitted appropriation of an animal from a neighbor with the recognition that the host would pay the owner an appropriate fee.[13] Nor does it clarify the story to suggest that the issue at stake is theft since the rich man obviously stole the lamb of the poor man and the story makes no reference to payment.[14] The focus of the structure falls on the contrast, with the lamb functioning as the crux that marks the situation as a tragedy.

It is possible, however, to be more precise about the function of the story. Verses 5-6 provide the narrator's interpretation of the story. According to the narrative context, Nathan the prophet was the storyteller and David the audience. The opening of the context (v. 1a) reports no clear intention for the storytelling event. It notes simply that the Lord sent Nathan to David. Juxtaposition between this notation and the one in 11:27 suggests that the storytelling mission has something to do with the Lord's response to David's affair with Bathsheba. But the goals of the storytelling mission are not set out by the narrator. Verses 5-6 still do not identify the goals explicitly. Rather, they report David's reaction to the story. It is clear that David does not identify himself with the rich man. Rather, he takes the story as a case that calls for some kind of judgment. His speech seems ambiguous, however. The judgment is first a death sentence. In anger he pronounces the rich man a "son of death." But the second part of David's speech softens the sentence with a designation of monetary penalty for the crime.[15] The interpretation of the story, however, runs aground if the interpreter assumes the issue to be simply theft, with ap-

13 Simon, "Ewe Lamb," p 227

14 *Ibid*, p 223

15 A Phillips, "The Interpretation of 2 Samuel xii 5 6," VT 16 242 44 (1966) Simon (p 230) takes the expression as an "exaggeration designed to express the gravity of the sin involved in the callous ignoring of the poor man's attachment to his ewe "

propriate repayment, or even adultery. Rather, the conclusion in David's speech puts the interpretation on the human point: "Because he did not show pity."

But is the interpretation appropriate for the story? In what manner does the story facilitate the judgment that the rich man had no pity? Significantly, the key verb, *ḥāmal,* appears in the interpretation and the story.[16] The verb connotes an action of compassion and sympathy (Ezek. 16:5), even physical mercy that would spare a potential victim from some form of violence (I Sam. 23:21; II Sam. 21:7). The absence of pity leads to ruthless rejection (I Sam. 15:3, 9, 15; Isa. 30:14). Verse 4*a* (II Sam. 12) notes that as a part of the critical contrast between the two antagonists, the rich man acted with pity toward his own flocks and herds. The opposite pole in the contrast (v. 4*b*) does not use the key verb. But it clearly intends to describe the opposite act as the rich man's relationship to the poor man and his lamb. Thus, it would seem to be clear that the story does not indict the rich man for adultery or theft, for failure to pay the right fee for the lamb, or for any other public crime. It indicts the man for failure to show pity. Moreover, the interpretation in verses 5–6 relates the story in an appropriate way to its principal concern. David judges the rich man precisely because he did not show such human compassion. The story and the interpretation provided by verses 5–6 should therefore not be split as discontinuous parts.

If the structure of the story supports an interpretation that recognizes one point as the intention and establishes a clear point of harmony between story and interpretation, then what conclusions can be drawn about the genre of the story? The question is particularly important in light of the initial suggestions that "parable" is not an adequate category for classification of the story. A parable might be something that has a single point and relates to an interpretation. But various genres can do that. What, then, can be concluded about genre for the "parable" of the ewe lamb?

A fable paints a picture of relationships in the human world by casting those relationships in exaggerated form with characters from the subhuman world.[17] Moreover, the picture generally does not focus on a sequence of

16 Simon argues that these two occurrences of the verb have two different connotations The one is in the sense of saving himself the expense, the other in the sense of pilloring callousness But such a radical difference between the two texts is not justified ("Ewe Lamb," p 231)

17 Von Rad observed that the fable "does not pursue moral goals but tries simply to present a truth, a reality, something which is typical and which is as it is" (*Wisdom in Israel* [Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1972], p 43) It is true that the fable does not moralize, but its truth is nonetheless presented with a bite See also Ronald J Williams "In its strictest sense, it [the fable] should denote a story with animal, plant, or even inanimate characters which are endowed with various human qualities including speech The genre began with the simple animal ‹tory having no moral purpose, but intended solely for entertainment Later, such tales are told in order to set forth a prudential maxim, frequently as an instrument of social criticism" ("The

events, each with its own significance in the overarching plan of the story, but rather it focuses on one or two events that describe the relationships at the center of the picture. And the picture then enables the storyteller to establish a moral, commonly a point of social criticism, and commonly a social criticism that attacks the position of the powerful or famous. The picture may involve only principals of the subhuman world, acting and speaking as if they were humans. It may involve, however, principals of the subhuman world interacting with humans, both acting and speaking as if they were human.

Thus, Jotham's fable (Judg. 9:7-15) appears in a larger narrative context that depicts Jotham telling his story as a response to Abimelech's ascension to a throne in Shechem. The story does not develop a plot that runs from crisis to resolution. Rather, it is static, a serial of scenes depicting the trees in search for a king. In identical panels, the trees petition the olive, the fig, and the vine to become their king, only to have the candidates reject the offer in favor of continued involvement with their current responsibilities. When the trees offer the kingship to the bramble, however, the bramble accepts with a threat. Moreover, the threat builds on a contrast. If the invitation was made in good faith, then all the trees can find refuge in the shade of the bramble. This pole of the threat obviously employs irony. In what manner could the great trees take refuge under the protective shade of the bramble (contrast II Sam. 22:31)? But the irony functions in a way that reduces the kingly designs of the bramble—and thus of Abimelech—to ridicule. The interpretation in verse 16 seems to be broken. In an "if" clause, the first part of the bramble's speech suggests that Shechem might seek refuge in Abimelech. But verses 17-18 do not mesh with such positive imagery. Rather, they play on the tragedy of Abimelech's attack against and subsequent slaughter of his brothers. Verse 19 then completes the "if" clause with an admonition to rejoice in Abimelech.[18] But it is precisely the contrast between verses 17-18 on the one hand and the frame in verses 16 and 19 that constitutes the irony of the scene and thus the appropriate connection between the fable and its context. It is ridiculous to put Abimelech on the throne just as it would be ridiculous to crown the bramble in order to secure shade as refuge for the trees.

The fable of Jehoash (II Kings 14:9) works in the same way, although in structure it employs but one scene: the thistle sent to the cedar in order to petition for a daughter to be given his son as a wife. But in the process a wild beast trampled the thistle. The point of the fable is that the thistle was in a place where he did not belong. He attempted to play his game out of his league.

Fable in the Ancient Near East," in Edward C. Hobbs, ed., *A Stubborn Faith* [Dallas, SMU Press, 1956] p. 5).

18. Williams observes the break between the tendency of the fable and the intention of the application ("The Fable," p. 11).

And as a consequence, he lost everything to his strange new environment. In this case, the context is clearly the interpreter. Amaziah had sent messengers to Jehoash in order to establish diplomatic relationships. The fable is the reply: "Play in your own league." Even if it is true that Amaziah had had some international success, the time was not right, according to Jehoash, for negotiations. "Enjoy the honor. Stay in your house. Why stir up trouble so that you will fall and Judah with you?" Again, the fable builds on ridicule. It functions as a rejection of a significant figure in the world of politics by casting the figure under the pale of ridicule.[19]

A different narrative context for a fable and a different pattern of structure appear in the Balaam story (Num. 22:21-35). The narrative about Balaam the seer who has a faithful animal appears as an episode in the larger narrative about Balaam the saint who could say nothing other than what God gave him. This little narrative involves a human and an animal rather than a cast of all animals or plants. Yet, in structure and function it seems clearly the same kind of story. The human and the animal act with human emotions in a human world. But, as in the fables with all subhuman principals, so here the mover of the story is the animal. Her perception sets up the irony in the story. And her speech brings the story to its moral. In a series of scenes, Balaam runs into conflict with his animal. In each of these scenes (vs. 22-23, 24-25, 26-27) the emphasis falls on the ability of the ass to see what the seer could not see. Finally (vs. 28-30) the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, so that the ass could accuse her master: "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam's response to the ass picks up the irony of the scene as a device for ridicule. "Because you have made light of me." The issue in the fable is the injustice of the seer. One might say that the seer showed the ass no pity. But the intention of the fable is to ridicule the seer who could not see as well as the ass.

The frame around the fable (vs. 21-22*a* and v. 34) suggests the interpretation of the fable. Balaam had agreed to go with the messengers of Balak against the wishes of God. And, as a result, God sets the famous seer into his proper place by showing the audience that even an ass could see better than the seer. It is important to note, however, that the larger context for this fable and its frame will not support the fable's intention. To the contrary, the fable is discontinuous with the larger context and thus occupies a secondary position in the Balaam legend.[20] The moral of the fable does not correspond to the tendency of the surrounding narrative. Just in this text, then, the methodological

19. Contrast the comments by Williams, *ibid.*
20. On the character of the larger narrative and the contrast created by the fable, see Coats, "Balaam: Sinner or Saint?" BR 18:1 (1973), esp. p. 1.

principles prove useful in showing the validity of arguments about unity in a narrative that carries such stories.

The way is now open to suggest that Nathan's parable to David is a fable.[21] To be sure, some objections may properly be raised. The story features the actions of humans, and the animal is passive. There is no speech at all in the story. Rather, the contrast is drawn between the rich man and the poor man. But the contrast clearly builds on the position of the animal who lives in a human world, does human things, and functions in the family as a human member. Moreover, the relationships described in the story are effected by the animal. The rich man acts in a way that contradicts expectations. He has many animals. But he takes the poor man's one who is in every way a member of his own human family. The irony is sharp. And it ridicules the rich man by showing his failure as a human creature to honor a human community. The severe judgment announced by David comes not because the rich man violated a law concerning theft or hospitality. It comes because the rich man's act was so extreme in its lack of human pity that the judge would prove himself ridiculous if he should fail to condemn the act. To deny that this story is a fable because the animal does not speak or because humans carry the active roles is to define the genre by reference to particular features in the story's content. I would suggest to the contrary that the story functions intrinsically as well as within the larger context precisely as fable, a critique of the power wielded by the famous to the pain of those subject to the power.

If Nathan's parable is properly a fable, and if the exegesis is correct that the moral of the fable depicts the rich man as a man of power and wealth who has no compassion for the poor man and his lamb, then the role of the fable in the larger context should be more clearly defined. The fable (vs. 1-4) connects immediately and appropriately with David's interpretation (vs. 5-6). But verses 5-6 belong to a larger context, the description of the storytelling process and its consequences. The context thus suggests that the *telling* of this fable intends to elicit a judgment from David.[22] Nathan's oracle of judgment against David then builds on the thrust of David's interpretation. But the oracle emphasizes David's act of murder more than his act of adultery. The indictment (v. 9*b*) frames a single reference to the adultery with two references to the act of murder as noted above. The judgment sentence (v. 10), however, employs only the indictment for adultery. The verb here, as in verse 9*b*, is *lāqaḥ*. And in fact the verb in the story describing the rich man's act is *lāqaḥ*.

21. Von Rad discusses Nathan's story as a fable; but he offers no explanation of the characteristics that define the genre of the story appropriately as fable (*Wisdom*, p. 43). See also Gunkel, *Das Märchen*, p. 36.

22. So Simon, "Ewe-Lamb," p. 221.

The judgment against David rests on the same act as the principal act of the rich man.

But the effectiveness of the fable as a tool to set up the scene does not rest so much on David's act of "taking" parallel to the rich man's act of "taking." That rigidity would lose sight of the murder altogether. It rests rather on the loss of human emotion, a loss that would open the door to both murder and adultery. It is appropriate, then, that Nathan's judgment rests not so much on an indictment against adultery or murder, but rather on another emotional term. In verse 9 the accusation makes the point: "Why have you despised the word of the Lord?" Then verse 10*b* avers: "Because you have despised me . . . ." The key verbs, *bāzāh* and *ḥāmal*,[23] are not synonyms. The fable may thus relate rather woodenly to the application in the larger narrative. Yet, the requirement for correspondence between the fable and its context cannot be too rigid. The two may not mesh as finely as Jotham's fable does with its context. But they do not show the sharp discontinuity apparent, for example, in the Balaam story. Can the fable not support on a more general plane a point of contact with the judgment against David on the basis of the following equation: For the rich man to show no pity on the poor man and his lamb is for David to show no pity on Uriah. And for David to show no pity on Uriah is for David to despise God.

II

A definition of the genre thus enables some control on questions about connection between the story and its context to emerge. The connection does not rest on parallel in all details. It rests rather on the moral of the fable as a point provoking judgment from David, a point which parallels in a general way the violation of David against Uriah. In order to advance the perception of unity in the larger narrative, then, it would be instructive to ask how the succession story employs the device of storytelling elsewhere. The other example is the story told by the woman of Tekoa to David (II Sam. 14:5-7).[24]

Again, the narrative context sets up conditions that call for a storyteller to tell a story. And again, the point of the storytelling process is to elicit a judgment from the audience. Joab perceives that David's effectiveness has been weakened because he spends his time mourning the loss of Absalom. Thus, he hires a woman of Tekoa to tell a story. For the sake of this analysis, the structure and genre of the story are critical.

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23. An interesting contrast with these two verbal roots appears in I Sam. 15.9. Samuel and the people did show pity (*wayyaḥmōl*) on Agag and in his place offered a despised thing to God (*nᵉmibzah*). In II Chron. 36:15-16, God had pity on his people (*ḥāmal ʿal-ʿammô*), even though they despised his words (*ubôzîm*).

24. J. Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman," VT 20:419-44 (1970).

This story does not develop from an antithetical parallel, even though it features a quarrel between two brothers. To be sure, a surface parallel between this situation and the tale about Cain and Abel suggests not only that a plot might control the structure but also that a contrast between the two siblings exists.[25] The potential for a contrast as the substance of the story, however, remains undeveloped. Rather, the story simply reports the conflict between the two in order to arrive at a further point. Thus, verse 5*b* identifies the storyteller as a part of the following story. She is herself one of the principals. Moreover, as a part of the story, she names herself as a widow. The doubling of the self-identification places special emphasis on her role in the story. "I am a widow, and my husband is dead." The body of the story thus unfolds under the heavy emphasis on the woman's status as widow. Verses 6-7*a* describes a fight between the widow's two sons. The critical point is not so much the contrast between the two as it is the fight itself. But the structure of the story moves beyond the quarrel and resulting death to another facet. Introduced by the particle *hinnēh,* verse 7 reports that under the rule of blood vengeance the relatives now seek the life of the widow's remaining son. The problem described by the story is that because of the blood revenge the widow now stands to lose her last son and thus her own inheritance and the prospect of a name for her dead husband. The issue focuses on the widow and the family's right to a name for the dead husband.

The story itself has no single point and does not elicit an immediate judgment from the audience as did Nathan's fable. It is not possible to see a plot, to identify a virtue or vice in the woman or her sons, or even to pinpoint a moral that establishes some kind of social criticism. Rather, the structure unfolds on the basis of a sequence of events as cause and effect. This judgment can be confirmed by reference to the necessity depicted by the narrative frame for the widow to ask explicitly for the king to set aside the rule of vengeance and thus to save her one remaining son. And indeed, the judgment of the king points in the same direction. It provides explicitly the legal decision to exempt the remaining son from the death sought by the relatives. David asserts his authority: "By the life of the Lord, not one of the hairs of your son will fall to the earth (v. 11)." The judgment is quite appropriate for the story, as was the judgment elicited by Nathan's fable. Yet, there are marked differences in structure and tendency of the story. It seems to be clear that while the two stories share a goal in the narrative frame to provoke the king to a judgment and thus to a ruling against himself, they do not represent the same genre of story. And since they do not belong to the same genre, they cannot necessarily

25. Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel,* CBC (London, Cambridge Press, 1977), p. 131. Walter Brueggemann, "David and His Theologian," CBQ 30:164-67 (1968).

relate to the larger context in the same way. One might expect, to the contrary, that since this story needs the whole sequence of events in cause-effect relationship, the whole sequence would be important in some manner for developing the context. Can the point be confirmed by defining the genre of the story?

An anecdote narrates an event or a sequence of events out of a person's past in order to represent the event or events as intrinsically interesting, amusing, or otherwise important. The narrator may have a personal involvement in the story, a storyteller whose first person account recognizes his own involvement as a principal in the key sequence of events. Or the narrator may describe the events in a third-person account, a recital of a sequence or even one deed that carries significance. But even at that point, the significance relates in some manner to the affairs of the storyteller.[26]

In I Kings 3:16-28 King Solomon receives two women, and one tells a story in first person, an account of an event out of her own experience. Both women lived in the same house. Both women had had a baby. But one baby died. And then each woman claimed the remaining child as her own. No other witness could attest to the event. No proof could establish the proper claim on the child. But then the storyteller accuses the other woman of malfeasance, of having killed the baby in her sleep by lying on the child. The scene then ends with an exchange of claims calling for judgment from the king. This story is no tale, no legend, no fable. It has no plot designed to hold interest until the final release of tension. It illustrates no virtue in either of the principal figures. There is no moral effecting a social critique. Rather, the story is simply a first-person account of a sequence of events in cause-effect relationship. And a result of the sequence is a situation that elicits a judgment from the king. It is the whole sequence that leads to the point of judgment. The story is an anecdote, designed to cast the sequence as significant in itself. There is no particular application of the story in the larger context. To the contrary, the narrative description of the king's judgment extends the story in order to emphasize the king's wisdom. The point of significance for interpretation of the story is that it is the sequence of events that sets up the judgment. The whole sequence is significant and, should the story have been used with parabolic intent, might have required an appropriate position in an application.

In a remarkably similar parallel (II Kings 6:26-29), two women confront the king of Israel. When the king grants an audience, one woman reports an event of their common past that has created a quarrel. A famine gripped the world where the women, both mothers of sons, lived. In order to avoid their

26 Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto, *A Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic, and Cinematic Terms* (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1960), p. 5. The anecdote is a "short account of an episode, usually of biographical interest."

common fate, they agreed to eat one son on one day, the other son on the next day. According to the woman's story, her own son had been boiled and eaten on one day. But when the time came to eat the other son, the mother reneged, apparently hiding her son from the woman who now tells her story. The anecdote draws no moral. It develops no plot. It highlights no virtue or vice. It simply describes a situation. And like the other (I Kings 3:16-28), this anecdote apparently calls for some judgment from the king. The context does not offer a royal judgment, however. Indeed, the development of the narrative seems to lose sight of the situation painted by the anecdote by moving the king beyond the plight of the two women to a lament and then to an oath against Elisha whom the king blames for the famine. The context thus does not clarify the way an anecdote relates to the context. Yet, one might hypothesize that if the anecdote had developed some kind of closer context relationship, it would have been in the form of a judgment elicited by the whole sequence. The point, however, is that the anecdote can be told quite apart from an exact interpretation of its parts in the surrounding narrative.

With this comparative material in hand, I now return to the anecdote told by the wise woman of Tekoa. The king's judgment in response to the anecdote is clearly appropriate to the intention of the story. The rule of vengeance must be set aside. But the relationship between the anecdote with its interpretation and the application in the larger context is much looser than might be expected, for example, on the basis of I Kings 20:39-40. The woman from Tekoa connects the anecdote she tells with the king's problem over Absalom not by arguing from the king's judgment about blood revenge to a threat on the life of Absalom, but rather by appealing to the king not to continue Absalom's banishment. The anecdote has no parallel element for banishment. Its weight rests on a threat to the son's life. It might be argued that banishment is tantamount to death at the hands of vengeful relatives. But the relationship does not seem to support such an equation. Is the anecdote thus a disruptive element in the context? The looser relationship between anecdote and application might imply something about the unity of the narrative. Yet, it is precisely that loose relationship which appeared in the fable of Nathan and its application. It would be inappropriate, so it seems to me, to insist in both cases that the otherwise well unified narrative must have been violated twice in precisely the same way by precisely the same narrative technique. Does the genre of story in both cases not suggest some other manner by which unity in the larger context can be determined?

III

In what manner have these questions about genre for the two stories within

the succession narrative clarified the issues about unity and intention for the larger context? Part of the problem in defining the genre of both was the consistent reference to the stories as parables. How could two stories that are strikingly different belong to the same genre? The problem intensifies when one considers that a wide variety of pieces, not only different kinds of stories, but also non-narrative pieces such as songs or sayings, have been labeled with the term *parable*. The point in common among these stories and songs is not genre but rather function.[27] Each sets up a point of judgment or some other kind of truism from the story or song for the circumstances surrounding the storyteller. The category "parable" thus does not seem to qualify the genre of the piece.

It would be possible, then, to argue that the term qualifies the structure of the larger context in which the story or song appears. This point is apparently the assumption of Yee's analysis. Yet, the confusion remains. The larger context contains a parable and yet is itself a parable. Must the structure not be evaluated in some way to indicate a process of storytelling? Would the genre not then be qualified in some manner as a report about parable telling? But if that is the case, the term *parable* remains obscure, not the proper qualification of the structure in the larger whole. I would suggest, to the contrary, that parable refers most effectively, at least for the texts under discussion here, to the function accomplished by the story or song. In a particular text, a fable might have a parabolic intention. But a song, a simile, report, or anecdote that functions to set up a point of comparison outside of itself might also have parabolic intention. The specific quality of the term *parable* as a description of intention would be determined by the quality of the particular situation external to the story and the effectiveness of the story or song to connect to it.

This function of fable and anecdote offers some control for defining the unity of the story within its context. For the two stories in the succession narrative, unity with context appears strong. That unity depends not on a strict, one to one, correlation between all details of the story and its application, although one might expect closer correlation with an anecdote than with a fable. To the contrary, the connection between story and application within the succession narrative seems looser. Yet that looser connection does not underwrite a conclusion that either the story or the application is secondary. In what manner, then, can these particular stories be described as effective pieces in their contexts?

The fable highlights a particular moral: The rich man showed no pity on

27. This conclusion would be supported, I believe, by the definitions of parable from a structuralist perspective. See Wolfgang Roth, "You are the Man! Structural Interaction in 2 Samuel 10-12," *Semeia* 8:1-12 (1977).

the poor man. But that moral takes on unique form for the succession story by means of the ironical contrast.[28] The rich man had many animals and should have used one of them. He would hardly have missed it. But instead, he used the one lamb of the poor man's family. The irony serves to reduce the rich man to the ridiculous not because the rich man broke a law, but because his act was so extreme. The connection with the application comes not by having David establish a legal precedent for the case involving the rich man, but rather by showing that the rich man and the man at the point of the comparison in the application are both ridiculous in the eyes of the audience. David confesses, then, not because he has convicted himself legally. That connection does not really fit the context. He confesses because in the eyes of the audience, the witnesses to the parabolic story, he no longer has power to do otherwise. He has been exposed. And now he is limited in the eyes of society if not also in actual practice.

The anecdote functions in a similar way. The woman has lost a son. Now she faces the prospect of losing her other son. The anecdote thus builds on a cruel irony. In order to bring one tragedy to a just conclusion, her relatives will foist another tragedy on her. And the second tragedy will cut off her rights as a widow. David responds out of a sense of justice as well as some human sympathy. Why should the widow lose a basic human right in order to satisfy the rigid drive for familial justice? The application does not deal with a threat to the life of Absalom but rather with his banishment. It thus does not fit on a rigid basis. But as in the Nathan fable, so here the point of connection does not work on legal precedence but rather on the absurdity that would result if rigid legal process were carried to its conclusion. David does not concede to Joab because of his own legal proclamation. He does so because in the eyes of the audience, it would be absurd not to do so. Moreover, the public limitation on David's power and position carries a theological dimension. To act again as he did in the case attacked by the parabolic story would be to violate not only a public sanction on his power, but also to violate a divine sanction. In both cases, David gives affirmation to the character of the case with an oath in the name of the Lord. He avers "As the Lord lives" (II Sam. 12:5), then repeats "As the Lord lives" (II Sam. 14:11).

Thus, the two stories serve the larger intention of the succession story as tools for placing a hedge around the power of the king. The king retains power in fact. But now his public knows that certain acts of the king can be recognized as ridiculous or absurd. It is that ironical hedge that captures the function of the stories for the succession narrative.

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28. George P Ridout, defines irony as one of the principal characteristics in the style of the succession narrative (*Prose Compositional Techniques in the Succession Narrative (2 Sam 7, 9–20, 1 Kings 1–2)* [Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1971], pp. 122-70).