A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF 1 KINGS I 41-53, WITH METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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After some brief remarks on the challenge posed to current exegetical practice by the newer approaches inspired by developments in linguistics and literary study, the paper will analyse features of the literary dimension of 1 Kgs i 41-53 and conclude with some comments on a recent redaction-critical proposal about part of that pericope.¹

I

The emergence of what is broadly called the literary approach to the Bible can perhaps best be viewed as an attempt at interdisciplinary dialogue with the expanding and influential fields of general linguistics and literary studies (theory and criticism). Interdisciplinary dialogue is by no means a new phenomenon in biblical study. To mention just one example: the pioneers of the historical-critical approach worked under the stimulus of the growing influence of modern critical historiography,² and the results of almost two centuries of historical-critical analysis are there to show how energetically that challenge was met. Today’s challenge, however, comes rather from the critical study of language and literature, and biblical scholars are called upon to respond with the same open-mindedness as that shown by the pioneers of the historical-critical approach in the cultural situation of their time.

To accept this new challenge does not at all entail the abandonment of the historical-critical approach. On the contrary, a thorough consideration of the literary dimension of a biblical text will inevitably bring up the question of its original communicative situation, just as serious literary

¹ At the Congress this paper was presented together with that of Professor T. Ishida; a public discussion followed on the respective contributions of the historical and literary approaches.

study of a Shakespearian play will inevitably bring up the question of
the original audience and stage-practice. In the case of many biblical texts,
moreover, it will be necessary to distinguish the original communicative
situation from successive communicative situations to which the texts
were variously adapted. And for all this the techniques of historical
criticism remain essential.

It is not a question, then, of "literary versus historical" in the sense of
an either/or antagonism, but rather of working towards a responsible in-
tegration of the two areas of scholarly endeavour, while taking into ac-
count the particular nature of the text one happens to be studying. Just as
historical criticism has been, and remains, essential for biblical study, so
too a reasonable acquaintance with the theoretical and practical aspects
of linguistics and literary study should be seen as indispensable in today’s
cultural situation. It will no longer do to regard such matters as harmless
eccentricities or as subjective and non-scientific aberrations. Indeed, to
persist in ignoring the possible literary dimension of a biblical text is pro-
foundly contrary to the scholarly spirit, since it means closing one’s eyes
to an aspect of the reality one is studying. Certain biblical texts are nar-
ratives, not by a subjective decision of the interpreter but by their literary
nature. To take account of this is not an optional extra, and to take ac-
count of it responsibly calls for a familiarity with contemporary discus-
sion on narrative in general.3

II

An adequate discussion of the literary dimension of 1 Kgs i-ii would re-
quire far more space than is available here.4 Rather than touch super-
ficially on a large number of points or on general thematic questions, the
following analysis will limit itself to an important pericope (1 Kgs i
41-53), which happens to have played a crucial part in recent historical-

3 Two useful English-language works can be selected from the extensive international
bibliography on narrative: S. Chatman, Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and
Film (Ithaca and London, 1978); G. Prince, Narratology. The Form and Functioning of Nar-
rative (Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, 1982). There are two recent general treatments
of classical Hebrew narrative: J. Licht, Storytelling in the Bible (Jerusalem, 1978); R. Alter,

4 Recent literary studies that discuss 1 Kgs i-ii include: D. M. Gunn, The Story of King
David. Genre and Interpretation (Sheffield, 1978); J. P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art and Poetry in
the Books of Samuel. A Full Interpretation based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses 1: King David (II
Sam. 9-20 & I Kings 1-2) (Assen, 1981); B. O. Long, "A Darkness between Brothers:
Literary Structure of ‘The Succession Narrative’", in T. Ishida (ed.), Studies in the Period
of David and Solomon, and other essays (Tokyo, 1982), pp. 27-54. Valuable literary observa-
tions can also be found in some more historically-oriented studies, especially those of F.
Langlamet (cf. n. 16).