CHAPTER FOUR

MORAL, POLITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

Interpretation and the influence of ideology are present in every facet of causation, and meaning and significance in history. Now we turn to a feature of the historiography of Samuel, which by its very nature is the expression of the authors/redactors’ ideology: their moral, political and theological evaluation of people and events in the past. An evaluation of the past looks at questions such as: Did these events have a positive or negative effect on the society, the politics, the future? What is a moral assessment of the individuals or groups who are the agents or actors in history? Were these actions and events condoned, tolerated or condemned by the Divine? Such evaluation is often a vehicle for presenting the ideology or theology of the author through the events, although this can be an unconscious as well as a conscious process. The historians’ evaluation affects the way they present and colour the people and events but can also take the form of explicit comments and conclusions about the history.

Unlike causation and meaning, which are generally regarded as both desirable and necessary in all history, there has been significant debate about whether moral, political and theological evaluation has a place in modern historiography. Many have argued that it is inappropriate for historians to pass moral judgments, although the same arguments can be applied to political and theological evaluation. Objections against moral evaluation in history include: it compromises the objectivity of the historian; historians are not qualified and lack subtlety in such evaluations; it is problematic to judge dead people; judgment should be made against societies not individuals; the historian can never understand an historical agent well enough; and there is some difference between contemporary morals and those of the past.

1 The term ‘ideology’ is not used pejoratively here but rather, as a term encompassing the totality of the historian’s beliefs and values concerning morality, politics and theology.

However, ideology is inescapable in historiography and will manifest in the form of value judgments. In order to avoid moral judgments entirely, even such words as ‘crimes’ or ‘murders’ become problematic. Both Oldfield and Vann argue that many of the other objections made against moral evaluations ought to be taken into consideration but are not necessarily reasons against evaluation altogether. For example, historians ought to be in dialogue with others, such as philosophers or the readers, when making their judgments. Furthermore, judgments are for the living rather than the dead. Although, for some, moral judgments remain an inevitable but undesirable byproduct of the ideological influence on history, other modern scholars consider such evaluation to be a valuable characteristic. Many modern historians believe that history ought to be used for learning lessons for the present and future and evaluation of the past is an important step in this process. As Berkhofer points out regarding impartiality, “in this view the ultimate usefulness of history lies paradoxically in its lack of immediate or obvious utility.” The didactic purpose of history is not universally well regarded in modern history and historians generally seek to avoid reading their own ideologies into the past. Ultimately however, many will evaluate the tragedies and triumphs that have occurred in human history and in this way measure the past against a moral standard or against political or other ideology.

Despite the ambivalent modern attitude towards ideological evaluation in historiography, it is an important and central characteristic of the historiography of Samuel. In particular, theological evaluation is visible to modern eyes, probably because this is a type of ideology eschewed in modern historiography. There have been numerous stud-

---

3 Vann, “Historians and Moral Evaluations,” 12–16. Vann mentions an historian Hilberg, who attempted to eschew all such value-laden terms but found the practice untenable.
5 Vann (p. 10), agreeing with an earlier work of Isaiah Berlin, writes of the necessity and propriety of evaluating human actions from a variety of viewpoints: moral as well as aesthetic and political.
6 E.g. Neville Morley, Writing Ancient History (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 137–59. He gives a number of reasons why history is important including: learning from the past [see also Michael Stanford, A Companion to the Study of History (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 40–41], understanding why there has been change since the past, understanding the present and evaluating the present.