PART ONE

THE PENTATEUCH (TORAH)

The narratives of the Pentateuch reflect the conviction that God is the Lord of history who created the world, and who has given his blessing to all nations while entering into a special relationship with the people of Israel. The themes of human sin and of divine punishment are prominent, but forgiveness nevertheless emerges as the most important mark of God’s attitude to the humankind. The dialogue in Gen 18:16–33 forms a special mode of reflection on God’s justice, as exemplified in God’s impending judgment on Sodom.

The clash between God and the Pharaoh, which results in the punishment of the plagues, unfolds the theological background of the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery. The apostasy and reconciliation at Sinai (Exod 32–34) mark the moment when Hebrew monotheism became final and supreme. The complex issue of collective punishment is introduced in the credo formula (Exod 20:5–6 and parallels). Declaration on rewards for obedience, penalties for disobedience, and on restoration and renewal for submitting to reform in Lev 26 and Deut 28 + 30:1–10, clarify the nature of reward, punishment, and forgiveness in the framework of the Covenant and the Law. Deuteronomy serves as a commentary for future generations on how to approach the law and envisages the greatest reward and the truest renewal in the shape of the Promised Land.

The narratives and declarations contain many epistemological gaps which raise serious questions about the issues of reward, punishment, and forgiveness: Why is the actual punishment inflicted sometimes not in accordance with the original threat of punishment, but even milder? For what reasons did God reject Cain’s offering? (Gen 4:5). Is God’s promise after the Flood, “I will never again curse the ground because of man,” conditional or not? Why did Abraham cease to plead to God that Sodom should be saved when the number of the hypothetically righteous inhabitants had been whittled down to ten? Why not one? And what is the cause of disobedience? How, for example, is the claim that the Pharaoh “hardened his heart” to be reconciled with the apparently contradictory claim that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart”? How is the credo formula concerning collective recompense in Exod 20:5–6; 34:5–6 to be understood? Is the complete destruction of a disobedient people implied in the warnings in Lev 26:14–39 and Deut 28:15–68?