CHAPTER IX

PUNISHMENT AND FORGIVENESS IN THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL

The tremendous diversity of material and of literary genres within the books of Samuel bears witness to the length of its transmission history. Different sources or traditions, diverse in origin, concern, and function, are combined and interwoven in a manner that no modern critical theories can satisfactorily explain. The variety of indications of internal thematic tensions and duplications sometimes gives the impression that there are even contradictions between individual narratives. According to the fragmentary hypothesis, the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings constitute an independent and unified historical work, composed in the sixth century by a Deuteronomistic author out of older independent units—some larger, some smaller—but the redactional stamp on the material is much less evident in Samuel than in other books. Some scholars consider that there were two or more successive revisions of earlier traditions.1

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It is all the more important to determine what might have been the common denominator of the early strand of Samuel and the point of view that informed the process by which the older materials were brought together in a series of redactional links and editorial expansions. It seems justifiable to claim that the pre-Deuteronomistic stratum was marked by the prophetic interpretation of history, and this principle was not only preserved but became dominant in the final canonical shape and substance of Samuel. The narratives dealing with Samuel, Saul, and David were encompassed within a universal history dating from the creation of the world, thus making understandable the focus on David as God’s chosen and anointed king for ever. From the universal and theocentric viewpoint of this history, which sees all events in the light of a divine purpose, God’s acts of judgment and mercy provide prominent unifying themes. The overarching prophetic perspective of the history had no need to suppress the integrity of distinct and originally independent sources.

1. The Story of Samuel (1:1–7:1)

The obvious purpose of this section is to exemplify and glorify the ideal of prophetic and theocratic leadership in Israel. Like Moses, Samuel acts as a heavenly emissary, and his historical importance explains the author’s interest in the remarkable story of his birth, his youth at Shiloh and his prophetic call. His character and good offices are contrasted with the wickedness of Eli’s sons (2:12–36). The prophetic tale is interrupted by the ark narrative (4:1b–7:1) which belongs to an older stratum of the book and shows how dramatic were the days when Samuel walked the earth.

1.1 Eli’s House and Samuel (1:1–4:1a)

The first passage relevant to our theme is the Song of Hannah (2:1–10), which