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Vette, Joachim

Samuel und Saul: Ein Beitrag zur narrativen Poetik des Samuelbuches

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Ralph W. Klein
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Chicago, IL 60615

This book is a slightly revised version of a dissertation written at Heidelberg under the supervision of Manfred Oeming. Its focus is on 1 Sam 8–12. The first three chapters are methodological and hermeneutical reflections on narrative poetics, drawing heavily on the work of Meir Sternberg but paying appropriate attention also to Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Shimon Bar-Efrat, J. L. Ska, David J. A. Clines, and David Gunn. Throughout the book Vette recognizes the need for dialogue between narrative-critical and historical-critical studies, with no one method providing final answers. The first two chapters are structured in a similar way and discuss various aspects of narrative poetics as they are practiced, with attention also to their presuppositions. The third chapter is a history of research of narrative- and historical-critical studies on 1 Sam 8–12, with brief critical and evaluative comments on each scholar.

The second part of the book is exegetical, devoting chapters to 1 Sam 8:1–22; 9:1–10:16; 10:17–27; 11:1–13; and 11:14–12:25. While attention is given to textual problems and some historical-critical issues, the main focus is on plot, characterization, and the polyphonic interaction between the different voices in the text (the people, Samuel, and ADONAI [Vette's rendition of the Tetragrammaton] and the perspective of the narrator.

Chapter 6, which deals with 1 Sam 10:17–27, can be used to illustrate the procedure. This unit, like all the others, is not exclusively pro- or antimonarchical. Veijola solved the problem by assigning verses 18abg–19a, which are antimonarchical, to a late Deuteronomistic redactor, deeming the remaining verses promonarchical. Other historical critics have assigned 1 Sam 9:1–10:16 and 10:17–27 to different tradition complexes, since Saul is anointed in the first pericope by Samuel and chosen by lot in the second, seemingly representing duplicate divine designations. Vette reads synchronically, noting that the assembly at Mizpah is at the same site where Samuel proved his ability to save Israel from the Philistines in 1 Sam 7. Samuel, here and elsewhere, is the primary antimonarchical spokesperson (see 10:17–19), and he is also the one who conducts the casting of lots in the following verses. Vette notes that lot-casting in Josh 7 and 1 Sam 14 is used to indicate a guilty person and concludes that the lot-casting in 1 Sam 10 also has a negative connotation. Saul is selected out as the king whom the people have disobeyedly sought. The voices of ADONAI and the people celebrate the choice of Saul positively. At the end of the chapter Saul is supported by a group whose hearts God has touched, but he is opposed by “sons of Belial,” who may, in Vette’s opinion, be Samuel’s own sons.

Throughout 1 Sam 8–12 passages critical of kingship always appear with the active participation of Samuel. When Samuel plays no role, the attitude toward kingship is positive. The voice of Samuel is not the voice of God or of the narrator. Vette identifies four crucial moments in Saul’s rise to power: the sacrificial meal in 9:22–24; the secret anointing 10:1; his presentation in 10:24, which continues the accusation of guilt in 10:17–19; and his installation in 11:14–15. In these chapters there is a complex interaction of contrapuntal voices. Samuel and Saul are not holders of two different offices, according to this reading, but competitors for the same office, that of judge. The installation of Saul is a loss of power for Samuel, who is not ready to hand over his power to Saul. With Samuel’s resumption of power in 1 Sam 12, the question is posed about whom Saul will submit himself to in the subsequent chapters. In the end, Saul succeeds when he submits himself to ADONAI and fails when he does not.

Vette identifies two major roadblocks to synchronic reading: the double gift of the spirit in 1 Sam 10:9–10 and 11:6 and ADONAI’s theophanic endorsement of Samuel in 1 Sam 12:18, which does not conform to their earlier tensions. He endorses Alonso-Schökel’s call for dialogue between narratology and historical criticism. Both disciplines would profit by methodological transparency and by close reading of texts (sometimes lacking, in Vette’s opinion, by narrative critics). Vette finds similar evaluation of Samuel’s role in the historical-critical study of these passages by P. Mommer in 1991.

Vette clearly and cogently argues his case. My own predilection is for a diachronic reading, with 1 Sam 12 being the Deuteronomistic Historian's attempt to draw a balance between the ambivalent traditions he had received about Saul's rise to power. Still, I recognize that literary-critical surgery may not be the only or even the best way to read a text, and I acknowledge the force of Vette's methodological proposals and his conclusion that the book of Samuel has a thematic sequence: from the house of Eli, to the house of Samuel, to the house of Saul, and, finally, to the house of David. None of these transitions takes place without tensions and complications.