Matthew McGuire
Box #388
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Prophetic Justice: The Ways of the Prophet in I Samuel 8-16

Historically, the phenomenon of prophecy and the office of prophet in the Old Testament has been a popular subject of research. The prophets are well known for their special access to the divine will, as well as the unique role they play within the leadership structure of Israel. This study will pay particular attention to the role of the prophet as prescribed by the Deuteronomistic Historian within the pages of the Former Prophets. The case study for this inquiry will be the Deuteronomist's presentation of Samuel—the first monarchic prophet—from the time of Israel's request for a king to the occasion of David's anointing.[1] Topics of analysis will include the relationship of prophet to king, the responsibilities of each, the relationship between the word of YHWH to that of the prophet, and the obligation of the people of Israel to submit to the commands of the officeholder.

Two principal passages in Deuteronomy deal with the phenomenon of prophecy, chapters 13 and 18. In seeking out the Deuteronomist's point of view on prophetic activity, these provide a natural starting point, given the guiding influence of Deuteronomy's theology on the narrative of the Former Prophets.[2] The first passage (13.1-6) is entirely negative, as it warns against heeding the words of those prophets or dreamers who would cause the people to turn from YHWH and serve other gods. The second passage (18.15-22) is more expansive. While still acknowledging the potential dangers of prophecy, it recognizes the institution as a legitimate part of society, being listed subsequent to texts dealing with judges (16.18-17.13), kings (17.14-20), and Levitical priests (18.1-8). These distinctive offices "are all held in a delicate balance of power."[3] The paradigm provided for a true prophet in this section is described as one who will mediate, in the spirit of Moses, the commands of YHWH to the nation of Israel. The people are obliged to heed the words of such a prophet, being held accountable by YHWH himself. Once again, a solemn warning is pronounced, this time against those who would speak on behalf of other gods or prophesy without sanction in the name of YHWH. Furthermore, a test is provided to ascertain if a spoken word is not from YHWH: if the word does not come to pass, then it has not been given by YHWH.

Heller argues that, in the "Deuteronomistic worldview" presented in these chapters, the central purpose of the prophet is the same as that of the other positions of leadership in Israel: "point Israel back to the Torah,…encourage Israel to obey the Torah, and…provide warnings to those who disobey the Torah."[4] All other ministries of the prophet are connected to this fundamental concern. As the passages communicate this concept, they provide warnings and

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[1] 1 Samuel 8.1-16.13; Scripture citations, unless otherwise indicated, will be adopted from Keith Bodner, *National Insecurity: A Primer on the First Book of Samuel* (Toronto: Clements Pub., 2003).

[2] Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 3.

[3] Roy L. Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy: The Character of Samuel and the Deuteronomistic Evaluation of Prophecy*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 440 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 24.

[4] Ibid., 141.

tests to aid Israel in discerning a false prophet. Yet a closer look at these criteria shows them to be less helpful than may at first be assumed. If these are comprehensive tests to be employed in verifying a true prophet, the implication would be that if one 1) speaks on behalf of YHWH, 2) does not call for worship of other gods, and 3) accurately predicts a sign, then such must be considered a true Mosaic prophet.[5] Were this the case, however, one might find the four hundred false prophets of 1 Kings 22 to "pass all Deuteronomistic criteria for true prophecy."[6] These tests and warnings, then, ought rather to be taken as a deliberately inexhaustive list. In his detailing of a limited number of negative tests, the author of Deuteronomy teaches on the ambiguity of prophecy. In other words, while some tests are given which identify certain aspects of *false* prophecy, no means is provided that would ever fully assure Israel of *true* prophecy. This is done intentionally so as to call for a nuanced view of the prophetic office and its inherent ambiguity, wherein "prophecy can never be completely trusted or completely discounted."[7]

It is within this context of ambiguity that the case study of Samuel's prophethood will be surveyed. Samuel's actions in chs. 8-16 are particularly important, as they mark the transition from "Israel's last judge" to its "first monarchic prophet."[8] Up until this section, Samuel followed a long line of savior judges that had prevailed over the nation ever since the time of Moses. In the first seven chapters of 1 Samuel, he is portrayed almost exclusively in a positive light, embodying what is best in the traditional form of leadership.[9] Beginning with the eighth chapter, however, Samuel's confusing and seemingly contradictory actions personify the ambiguity depicted in the pages of Deuteronomy. The ambiguity of the second half of Samuel's career may be demonstrated simply by noting that "[e]ach of the stories about Samuel in chs. 8 through 16 can almost always be interpreted—with integrity—in two very different ways."[10] A long series of details and events, starting with the notice about Samuel's corrupt sons in ch. 8, will begin to cast a shadow of incertitude over the now well-aged Samuel.

This "old Samuel" narrative introduces Israel's transition of leadership, as the tribal elders demand a king to judge them in light of Samuel's old age and the dubious prospect of Samuel's progeny assuming command of the nation. The perversion of the theocratic order by Joel and Abijah "evokes a crisis that cuts deep into Israel's life and faith. The sons of Samuel are engaged in the undoing of covenantal Israel."[11] The petition of the elders, however, was "evil in the eyes of Samuel" and far from justified. That the judging aspect of the monarchy is emphasized in v. 6 suggests that Samuel is displeased for *personal* reasons, as Samuel may fear being made "vocationally redundant" with the installation of a king.[12] On the other hand, Samuel's immediate response of prayer—in which he learns that the people have rejected

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[5] Ibid., 32.

[6] Ibid., 39.

[7] Ibid., 150.

[8] Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*, II, *I Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 105.

[9] Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 48.

[10] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 85, 142.

[11] Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 61.

[12] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 71-72.

YHWH's leadership rather than Samuel's—points to the *theological* issues he might have concerning the demand for a king.[13]

For one or both of these reasons, Samuel is far from content about YHWH's command to grant the people's request, being as one who "does not recognize the divorce, but must perform the remarriage."[14] Because of this, some commentators have perceived Samuel as either delaying or even subverting YHWH's instructions to initiate the monarchy. While Samuel's commission was to communicate the *mišpat* of the king—which readers might expect to consist of *prescriptive* guidelines of the monarchy in the spirit of Deuteronomy 17—he decides to proclaim a *descriptive* "take speech," detailing the negative repercussions which will inevitably follow the establishment of a monarchy.[15] Polzin notes that this speech functions as an attempt to dissuade Israel of their desire for a king. Moreover, the redundant report of the people's words may even be viewed as Samuel's restive manner of offering YHWH himself an opportunity to repent from his concession to the elders' demand. Finally, Samuel's concluding action of sending the people away strikes an anticlimactic tone and acts as a "short-circuiting" of God's command.[16] The "take speech" also introduces the issue of Samuel's peculiar handling of the oracle of YHWH. In this instance, Samuel is found relating the divine will only partially, as he warns the people of the dangers of monarchy without providing guidance for the same.[17] This puts the people of Israel in a difficult position, for they have no way of knowing the divine will apart from the mediation of the prophet; as far as they know, Samuel's word is as good as that of YHWH. Such a state of affairs alerts the reader to view the character of Samuel, together with his proclamation of the divine word, with a continual cloud of suspicion.[18]

If Samuel's delay tactics at the end of ch. 8 give reason to believe that Samuel impedes the divine will, then ch. 9 hints at the antithesis: God will accomplish his purposes even in spite of resistance from his servants—a theme that will continue to develop in the background of the Samuel narrative. Here YHWH determines that "if Samuel will not go to Saul, then Saul will have to come to Samuel."[19] At the tail end of his donkey-hunting expedition, Saul comes into contact with the "man of God" who has been anticipating his arrival on account of a recent word from YHWH.[20] Rather than embracing the king-to-be with jubilation, Samuel is portrayed as initiating a cyclical communication pattern of "unanswered questions, strange commands, [and] almost caustic remarks" that will pervade the relationship between prophet and king in the

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[13] Ibid.

[14] R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 111.

[15] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 73-75.

[16] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 84.

[17] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 92-93.

[18] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 82.

[19] Ibid., 90.

[20] "Now the LORD had uncovered Samuel's ear the day before Samuel arrived, saying, 'About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. You are to anoint him as leader over my people Israel, and he will save my people from the hand of the Philistines. Indeed, I have seen my people, and their cry of distress has reached me.'" (1 Samuel 9.16) This word emphasizes that, although the kingship was to emerge out of a sinful rejection of the theocratic leadership, YHWH has chosen his king and will use him in carrying out the deliverance of Israel. That the divine will has moved on, as it were, from the establishment of the monarchy precludes any justification on Samuel's part for delaying or subverting the transition of leadership.

episodes to come.[21] Following an awkward dialogue, Saul is brought to take part in a pre-arranged feast at the "high place" of the city. Yet in defiance of the reader's expectations, no public anointing takes place. Rather, Samuel postpones any kingship ceremony until the following morning, when Saul commences his homeward journey. After a secret rooftop meeting and dismissal of Saul's servant companion, Samuel finally proclaims the regal oracle over Saul, albeit in the form of a question.[22] He also administers the anointing, yet by means of a vial, rather than horn, of oil; the use of an abnormal instrument may indicate that what Samuel is dispensing is "a somewhat deficient anointing."[23]

After the *regal* anointing in 10.1, Samuel imparts to the fledgling king a long and detailed series of instructions that leads Saul into a venture accompanied by a plethora of signs and culminating in a *prophetic* anointing. Samuel's complex directive is "loaded down with geographic and circumstantial detail that is meant to overwhelm Saul, if not the reader, with its predictive power." Samuel engages in this "prophetic overkill" so as to flaunt his prophetic prowess.[24] The instructions for Saul to prophesy are rather puzzling, as they seem to undermine the balance of power maintained via the separation of prophet and king. As Polzin observes, the prophet in the royal period acts an "institutional and personal check meant by the LORD to keep the king on the good and right path."[25] The confusion of the two offices, then, would inevitably cause that balance to tip, as the predominant mechanism of the king's accountability is diminished. Heller contends that the prophetic activity of Saul links him to the prophetic band and subjugates him to the *de facto* father of the prophets: Samuel himself.[26] Such a scenario would cause Saul to be "doubly under Samuel's direction: as king he would be limited by Samuel the prophet, as prophet by Samuel the head of the prophets."[27] If this is an attempt by Samuel to consolidate control, it is done at the expense of the people of Israel: the precedent set by confusing the prophetic and regal offices could well lead to the idolatry of a leader acting unilaterally in both political and prophetic authority. The reader, then, finds Samuel sorely wanting when assessed in light of the idolatry warnings of Deuteronomy 13.[28]

The subsequent lot-casting ceremony at Mizpah does no better in portraying the benevolent side of Samuel. Although the assembly is seemingly organized to publicly inaugurate the king, it still seems to feature Samuel as the one in charge.[29] Moreover, the choice of Mizpah as the spatial setting—the place of "Samuel's finest hour" in fending off the Philistines (ch. 7)—appears to emphasize the sufficiency of the old order of leadership and the superfluity of the monarchy.[30] The means of lot-casting also undermines the election of Saul, as it associates the new office with guilt and sinfulness.[31] On the other hand, Samuel does seem to fulfill his

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[21] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 89.
[22] "Has not the LORD anointed you over his inheritance as leader?" (1 Samuel 10.1b).
[23] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 93.
[24] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 99, 105.
[25] Ibid., 89.
[26] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 105.
[27] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 115.
[28] Ibid., 106-107.
[29] Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 120.
[30] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 98.
[31] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 104.

previously neglected duty to declare the *mišpat* of the king, which he here records in a book and presents before YHWH (v. 25). This signals that Samuel, although still reluctant, moves forward with the inauguration of the kingship, being tempered by a compromise in which the political and intercessory responsibilities of the savior-judge would be allocated to the offices of king and prophet, respectively.[32] Such a division of power may not be overly disconcerting to Samuel, and he is quick in adapting to a new strategy in order to retain personal control over the affairs of Israel. Polzin recognizes the author's portrayal of the king-to-be as "docile, humble, and diffident." Perhaps Saul is "exactly the kind of man whom Samuel would have every hope of molding into a compliant king who would least limit the prophetic and judicial powers Samuel has been accustomed to exercise in the past and now sees threatened."[33] Essentially, Samuel is hedging his bets: while he publicly emphasizes the sinfulness of the king's installment, he shrewdly moves to position himself as the definitive ruler over that king, indirectly repossessing whatever political authority that he stood to lose. That Samuel retains his command is evident in the absence of any sort of taking-over by Saul after his election; instead, Samuel is the one who adjourns the meeting and sends the people to their respective homes.[34]

Chapter 11 has long been recognized to be Saul's high point in the narrative, much like that of Samuel's in ch. 7. The new king's decisive victory against Nahash and the Ammonites is accomplished in the familiar outcry/savior-judge cycle that dominated the book of Judges. It is worthy to note that this heyday of Saul's career occurs in the absence of Samuel, perhaps suggesting that Saul would have been an effective leader and uniter of Israel, were it not for the muddled interference of a certain prophet.[35] Samuel does, however, make an appearance after the momentous defeat. His act of renewing the kingship appears, on the surface, to be a show of solidarity with the champion-king. Nonetheless, Samuel's renewal ceremony at Gilgal—another site of prominence for the prophet[36]—both postures him as the one in charge and functions as his subtle way of taking credit for the earlier victory, especially as the people are reminded of the prophet's position as a "superintendent" of the king.

After the kingship of Saul has been firmly established, Samuel delivers what has been viewed by many as a farewell speech. Brueggemann notes that the address involves the "rhetoric of…a court case," with Samuel seeking to vindicate both his personal career and his type of leadership.[37] The prophet goes on to give a miniature version of the "apostasy-oppression-repentance-deliverance" cycle of Israel's history, and he commemorates a long line of judges all the way from Moses to himself. Samuel characterizes the request for a king as a disruption of this line of savior-judges. Additionally, he metes out guilt upon the people by emphasizing their role in choosing the king and minimizing the fact that YHWH himself elected Saul to the office.[38] Samuel then concludes with an admonition, directed at both king and

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[32] Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Bible Commentary, 10 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 127.

[33] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 104.

[34] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 100.

[35] Ibid., 104-105.

[36] Ibid., 107.

[37] Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 90.

[38] Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 128-129; Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 115. Note especially 12.13: "So now, look, the king you've chosen, who you *asked* for! Indeed, the LORD has given you a king."

nation, that details the potential blessing and consequences of heeding or rebelling against the commandment of YHWH. In Heller's view, the Samuel speech follows a formula that has its origins in the pages of Deuteronomy:

> Up to this point, the speech seems to be a farewell address by an eminent, elderly leader of Israel, like those pronounced by Moses (Deut 1:1) and by Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:28), in which the leader reviews the sometimes troubling past of the people, encourages them about the covenant fidelity of YHWH, and warns them to trust YHWH and to heed the Torah. After this "final warning," therefore, Samuel should leave and the narrator should make a statement about his death.[39]

According to this formula, the speech should halt at v. 15. Instead, Samuel's discourse takes a "perverse turn" as he calls forth a disastrous thunderstorm that serves to remind the people of Samuel's personal clout with the Almighty—a trait that no king would be capable of matching.[40] After the people have come to greatly fear both YHWH and his prophet (v. 18), Samuel assigns for himself the perennial responsibilities of praying for and teaching the Israelites, indicating that "he has no intentions of retiring."[41] The reader might be inclined to compare the above circumstance with the beginning of Saul's rocky journey toward the kingship in ch. 9: just as Saul's "aborted type-scene" foresaw his trouble in *assuming* political leadership of Israel,[42] so also does Samuel's "disrupted retirement formula" speak of a similar difficulty in *letting go* of that leadership.

Chapter 13 is a major turning point in the career of Saul. The infamous "unsanctioned sacrifice" event recalls Samuel's doubly-binding command to Saul in ch. 10, where he is instructed both to "do whatever his hand finds to do (v. 7)" and to "wait until Samuel shows him what to do (v. 8)."[43] These seemingly contradictory directives render Saul's decision a rather difficult one. Yet this may be deliberate on Samuel's part. Brueggemann, for instance, understands the predicament to be a setup by Samuel, particularly in light of the highly coincidental timing of his arrival to Gilgal. In his view, Samuel is "testing to see how far he can keep Saul under his control and subordinate to his priestly authority."[44] In other words, now that Samuel has established his seniority over the monarchy, he seeks to test the limits of the king's obedience. That Saul "is not prepared endlessly to risk his army out of deference to Samuel" displeases the prophet,[45] who responds with a railing judgement against Saul and his house. Of special interest is Samuel's statement that Saul did not keep "the command of the LORD your God" (v. 13). A quick perusal of Samuel's instructions in ch. 10 fails to reveal any mention of such a command from the divine mouth. Here the word of Samuel is, for all intents and purposes, equated to that of YHWH.[46] Such a precedent has dangerous possibilities, as it elevates Samuel's

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[39] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 116.
[40] Ibid.; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 94.
[41] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 116.
[42] Ibid., 85.
[43] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 99.
[44] Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 99.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 122.

authority to the realm of the unquestionable. Also of interest in the pericope is the content of Samuel's judgement, in which he proclaims to a distraught Saul that "the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever" (v. 13). Such a dynastic promise is nowhere to be found previously in the narrative, much less from the mouth of YHWH himself. That it eventually finds fulfillment in the Davidic Covenant[47] speaks of a larger theme of YHWH honoring the oracles of his prophets, despite any accompanying "personal crustiness" present in the messengers.[48]

After a period of absence during Saul's debacle with the Philistines, Samuel makes another comeback in ch. 15 to deliver more instructions to the king. The syntax of his first statement[49] doubly functions to stress the prominence of Samuel and to muddle the distinction between his word and that of YHWH.[50] He thus underscores, once again, the fact that he is still the one in charge. The chapter's overarching cycle of 1) highly detailed orders from Samuel regarding a potential battle, 2) the failure of Saul to correctly observe those orders, and 3) the resulting oracle of judgement pronounced by Samuel over Saul closely parallels the events of ch. 13. This time, however, instead of merely losing the right to a dynasty, Saul's reign itself is "judged by the narrative to be illegitimate."[51] One noticeable difference, though, warrants a closer look. Before he delivers the oracle of judgement, the author records YHWH's revelation to Samuel that he has repented of making Saul king. Surprisingly, the prophet's response to this news is one of anger and, later on, mourning. Bodner finds an analogous scenario in Jonah ch. 4 and posits that Samuel is angry at YHWH for having repented from his previous course of action.[52] The Jonah comparison is helpful, for the narrative of the rebellious prophet to Nineveh unequivocally demonstrates the theme of YHWH accomplishing his sovereign purpose both *through* and *in spite of* his servants. This lens aids the reader in making sense of the tension between Samuel and YHWH, where a turning of tables has taken place: while God previously "*chose* Saul against Samuel's will, he will [now] *reject* Saul against Samuel's will" (emphasis mine),[53] and the aging prophet is the one who is tasked with carrying out these actions.

Chapter 16 marks the *de facto* conclusion of Samuel's prophetic career. While he will indeed return for a few intriguing cameos later on, he will no longer act as the one "in charge" from this point forward. The passage opens with a notice about Samuel's continued mourning over Saul, and his sorrow may well reflect a loss of his authority upon the lapse of Saul's reign.[54] For his vain grieving Samuel is chided by YHWH and commanded to anoint Saul's successor. In the process of carrying out this last assignment, Samuel is twice found acting in disobedience—in his hesitance to commit treason against Saul and in his premature declaration over Eliab. Samuel's career, then, ends on a note of ambiguity, as the oftentimes intractable judge administers the anointing of a new king—one after YHWH's own heart.

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[47] 2 Samuel 7.1-17.
[48] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 116, 126.
[49] "Me the LORD sent to anoint you as king over his people, over Israel." (1 Samuel 15.1a).
[50] Klein, *I Samuel*, 148; Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 126.
[51] Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 108.
[52] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 154.
[53] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 131.
[54] Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 164.

The course of Samuel's career in chs. 8-16 of I Samuel is, in many ways, paradigmatic of the prophetic office in general.[55] It is for this reason that the Deuteronomist is able to employ the various circumstances and actions that constitute Samuel's character zone in his presentation of the "*mišpat hannabî'*," that is, "the ways of the prophet."[56] This guidebook, as it were, functions to aid the exilic audience in understanding how to deal with the enigmatic office of prophet. For the prophets themselves, the Samuel narrative teaches on their role as 1) mechanisms of accountability for the political leadership of Israel and as 2) teachers who guide the general populace into Torah-observance.[57] These responsibilities are to be accomplished through the prophet's unique ability to intercede for and mediate the divine will to the people. On the negative side, the narrative seems to critique any usurpation of political power, an area of authority that is no longer meant to be united with the prophetic office.[58] The appending, withholding, or altering of the oracles of YHWH is also portrayed in a distinctly negative light, and the delivery of prophecy for personal motives proves an unprofitable course of action—not only for the prophet himself, but also for the people under his custody.[59]

For the general populace of Israel, on other hand, this *mišpat* is a handbook for discerning true prophecy and, more importantly, knowing when to follow the words of the prophet. The narrative is effective in pointing out the various potential dangers inherent to the prophetic office, including the critiques listed above. The overall message, however, seems to encourage obedience in spite of suspicion. As noted in the case of Saul, obeying the prophet is all but necessary. Despite the imperfection of the prophet himself, he has a unique means of making known the divine will, and to disobey a prophet of YHWH can be tantamount to disobeying YHWH himself. While the danger of blurring the lines between the word of the prophet and the word of YHWH is duly acknowledged, there is greater danger in refusing to comply with the prophetic authority. The people are to learn the principle that "the speaker may be unpalatable, but the words need to be heeded."[60] This is not to say, however, that the people are admonished to become "puppets of the prophet."[61] On the contrary, it should be remembered that the prophet is far from an autonomous entity, for the ever-present hand of YHWH works in the background to accomplish the divine will through his messengers and in spite of their flaws. With this in mind, the idea of submitting to a prophet of YHWH becomes an act of obedience to YHWH himself. Such is what the Deuteronomist endeavors to teach his audience.

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[55] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 142.
[56] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 91.
[57] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 16; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 80-81.
[58] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 106-107.
[59] Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 143-145.
[60] Bodner, *I Samuel*, 126.
[61] Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 118.