

## 1 The Runaways

This book is about the earliest part of Israel's history - the time in which they invaded, settled and conquered the land of Canaan. It concerns the people and the community they became, as they struggled to establish themselves, quarrelled over their rights and privileges, or tried to unite and defend themselves against later invaders. But more than that, it is about their relationship with God, who was in the heart of their struggles, their unity, and their quarrels. It is about the ultimate sovereignty of God, God's rule over God's people, and (which we will find to be the same thing) the identity or reality of a people, about human, personal being.

God, their God, is our God, to whom we can relate because God revealed Godself in that relationship with them, a god of quarrelsome, land-hungry and half-united tribes. Their early history was the beginning of a dialogue in which they came to know God and to understand themselves as a community relating to him, and in that dialogue we too can recognise him, with a new and better understanding of ourselves as a people facing God. The experience or history of Israel gives meaning to the word "God", a way for us to understand and speak of God because it is the way in which God spoke of Godself. In the words of Israel's dialogue with God we find words in which to relate to God, and so to express the deepest relationship of our own existence.

Of course, there are many things we want to know about God and about ourselves, many "problems" or questions for which we crave answers, and we may find that the distant history of Israel gives us little to help: but that little is fundamental, and I believe it will point us to something indispensable. In all the history of Israel, God is revealing Godself, approaching his people to relate to them: and for any people, it is their relationship with God that gives their identity. If that seems too bold a claim, I can only point to the way it worked out in the beginnings of Israel's history. That history, that dialogue with God, will prove to be, even in its crude beginnings, nothing less than the freedom of personal space in which a people find their being and identity.

That is because God himself is so utterly real. When God speaks to you, you are made someone in God's sight, and if in God's sight, then you are someone, without question. God is so constant, that when he relates to a people and speaks to them, they become permanently real, permanently shaped by God's relationship to them, and that is the basis of all human reality, of all human community. So in this book God is our subject: but a subject speaking to us and telling us who we are, as surely as he tells us who he is. God's revelation, his enduring relationship with the community he has created, is our theme, and it begins with the story that the Israelite invaders brought with them, of their escape from Egypt.

For centuries, nomadic peoples had settled in the Nile Delta of Egypt, but some of them had grown to be a threat to the Egyptian population. To keep this sturdy minority under control, they conscripted them to forced labour, reducing them to the position of state

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slaves. The Egyptians had gone from fearing to oppressing the foreign minority in their midst - a not uncommon story. The slaves had no one to defend them. Pharaoh himself treated them as enemies and ordered the oppression; no other government recognised them as nationals, to protest at their treatment; they had no powerful allies or kinsmen to attack Egypt and demand their release. They could only remain a hated, exploited, feared minority, useful to the state for their work, but allowed no freedom and no share in its prosperity or its future hopes - again, a not uncommon story.

Their only relief was to call on whatever god or gods they thought might help them: and that was where their unique story began. The god Yahweh saw them suffering and sent, not an army, but a man named Moses to tell them that Yahweh himself would set them free from their bondage.

Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and  
Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with  
great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:7-8)

In a remarkable series of events, Pharaoh was confronted and challenged to allow the slaves to go out into the desert, where they would worship their ancestral god. He refused, but his resolve and his people's mettle were shaken by a series of disasters. The slaves saw the hand of Yahweh in these disasters, and eventually even Pharaoh was sufficiently convinced to allow them to leave. Habiru slaves of many kinds<sup>1</sup> assembled with the descendants of Joseph and Benjamin and their kin: a motley band composed of a number of related clans and probably any other slave daring enough and desperate enough to throw in his lot with the Yahweh-worshippers.

Led, then, by the hand of Yahweh, and with no other guarantee of their future but him, the slaves made their escape from Egypt. But when the Egyptians realised how many of their workforce had pulled out and did not intend to return, the army was sent in pursuit. The swift chariots easily overtook the runaways before they had passed very far from the borders, and they were cornered on the shore of the Sea of Reeds, trapped between the impassable water and the army of their masters. Night fell, and the charioteers waited for morning, to fall on the Habiru. But

all night long Yahweh drove back the sea with a strong easterly wind and he made  
dry land. (Ex 14:21)

Across the lake bed, so providentially turned dry for them, the Habiru made their escape, reaching the other side before daybreak. The Egyptian charioteers, when they realised what had happened, gave chase right into the lake, but there, in the soft, quaking ground, they lost every advantage, and were soon brought to a halt.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 12:28

In the morning watch Yahweh looked down on the army of the Egyptians and threw them into confusion. He so clogged their chariot wheels that they could scarcely make headway. (Ex 14:24-5)

They decided to give up the pursuit, but before they could return to firm ground, disaster struck again. Like a turning tide, the water began to run back to its bed and many of the Egyptians, still struggling to extricate their chariots, were drowned.

It was an awesome sight that faced the slaves when they looked back that morning at the place where they had crossed. Only the night before, caught between the lake and the well-trained Egyptian force, and helpless to defend themselves, they had been ready to turn on their own leader, grumbling at the reckless visionary who had led them into a hopeless trap. Now they, the slaves, the despised Habiru, were looking back as their enemies and former masters drowned in the returning flood of the lake. They had been helpless, but they had not needed to defend themselves, for Yahweh himself had won the day, rescuing them beyond every reasonable expectation, just as Moses had said he would. It was an incredible experience, and one they would never forget. The night before, they had been terrified, cornered runaways, a rag-bag of Habiru slaves; now they had come through the water under Yahweh's protection, and they were Israel, Yahweh's people whom he had rescued out of Egypt. No wonder that tradition records a great song of victory, and tells how the women danced and clapped their timbrels in triumph.

Yahweh I sing: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.  
Yahweh is my strength, my song, he is my salvation.  
This is my God, I praise him: the God of my father, I extol him.  
Yahweh is a warrior; Yahweh is his name.  
The chariots and the army of Pharaoh he has hurled into the sea;  
the pick of his horsemen lie drowned in the Sea of Reeds.  
The depths have closed over them;  
they have sunk to the bottom like a stone.  
"I will give chase and overtake" the enemy said.  
"I shall share out the spoil, my soul will feast on it;  
I shall draw my sword, my hand will destroy them."  
One breath of yours you blew, and the sea closed over them;  
they sank like lead in the terrible waters.  
Who among the gods is your like, Yahweh?

Miriam took up a timbrel, and all the women followed her with timbrels, dancing.  
And Miriam led them in the refrain:

"Sing of Yahweh; he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Ex. 15:1-21)

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The way it is told in the Book of Exodus, the story of the escape from Egypt includes other, more stunningly miraculous elements, like walls of water each side of the fleeing Israelites,<sup>1</sup> and the earth also swallowing their enemies,<sup>2</sup> but that is part of a developed and complex theological work which is concerned to stress and to bring home to a later generation the sheer wonder of Yahweh's great act. I, for one, believe in miracles, but the Bible itself, by running together different accounts in this story, leads us to distinguish different levels of meaning. And I have deliberately chosen to concentrate on the basic story, which can be seen as providential rather than miraculous, because this brings home to us what we can otherwise miss: the most important and fundamental element of our relationship with God, which is trusting faith.

We can be so obsessed with the miraculous and with associated ideas of "proof", that we forget the whole dimension of trust, with which the Bible's story - and, in fact, the whole Bible - is much more concerned. We think of miraculous events "proving" the existence of God (which is seldom if ever the point of the Bible) or we try to identify miracles as things that God must have done because nothing natural could have caused them (which is still only a secondary consideration). What the Bible is concerned with is God's reliable providence: his willingness and ability to act for those who put their trust in him. The first point of stories like that of the escape from Egypt is that God promised to do something, and when a small number of people believed him, taking the plunge and dashing for a prize that would only be there if God was true to his word, he did not let them down. When their case seemed hopeless, he rescued them. Whether he did so miraculously or by some unforeseen combination of natural causes (that is, providence) is a secondary consideration. In any case, Yahweh has all natural causes or forces at his disposal. The story of the Exodus sets out clearly the basis for all God's dealings with humankind, miraculous and providential, and the foundation of his rule over them, which is not power and compulsion, but reliability and trust.

It may be important for us to believe in a miracle that God has done in the past; but what is more important is that we trust him to do it again whenever necessary; and what is most important of all is accepting that God will often want to take us out into situations where we have no idea what will happen next, and have to trust him. That is what faith is really about. There are many who believe in the crossing of the "Red Sea" (as the Greek Bible translates it) accepting literally walls of water and all, but have no more faith than a sounding gong or a rattling drum; because the faith of which the Bible so often speaks is not just believing in facts, but deep, committed and dangerous trust. The person of faith is not the one who looks back at all the wonders told of God and says "I believe it all really happened", but the one who, having looked back, looks forward to God's next challenge in their own life, and says "All right, I trust you Lord." The faith of Moses and of the Habiru slaves, where it all began, was not in believing the story of a miracle, but in leaving the land of their bondage to go out into the desert with no other guarantee but God's promise.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 14:22. <sup>2</sup> Ex 15:12.

The faith of Moses that was vindicated was not his intellectual assent to a marvellous story of the past, but his conviction in the most hopeless moment that "You will see what Yahweh will do to save you today."<sup>1</sup>

God rules over God's people, but in thinking of the rule of God we should not begin, as we often do mistakenly, with the great power of God in irresistible control of the universe he has made, but with his offer to a helpless band of oppressed slaves: "Trust me and I will rescue you." God's rule is not an inevitable fact of power, but a gift to God's people, an offer: accept me as your leader and I will protect you. It is a relationship of trust and love, and receiving it is the beginning of a new identity. The rule of God, accepted by faith, begins a new and special relationship between God and God's people.

To some, it is a stumbling block that God should chose one people out of all the peoples on earth and intervene uniquely on their behalf. But it was not a matter of favouring one society or culture and giving his stamp of approval to them, while rejecting all others. It was a case of God creating a new people. Until he intervened on their behalf they were not a people at all, but a mixed bag of runaways who could only fall back into slavery or be absorbed in some other way into larger and stronger tribes. By his intervention, he made the people that was his. God created Israel by acting to save them.

In this, he was not only doing something to his creatures, but communicating with them, speaking to them as a people able to respond to him and trust him. As creator of the universe and all it holds, God is constantly pouring out gifts on all people, but that is not communicating, which involves a personal relationship beginning with trust. Here, God was beginning a dialogue with a group small enough to see itself as one people and so to become, by trusting him, his people.

Trust, as we have seen, is a dangerous way to live. The slaves took a risk - with steadfast or hesitant faith, but with faith enough to act - and from that moment they were no longer just Creator and creatures but Yahweh and his people Israel. The question we need to ask is not: "Why doesn't God do the same for all peoples?" but "Must every people begin its own lonely way to God, or can other nations, in time, benefit from the hard experience of Israel?" I don't propose to answer that question within this book, but it is the right question to ask.

The slaves, of course, knew nothing of all that. They only knew that Yahweh had rescued them and confirmed them as his people. They had nothing else to boast of, no other basis for security or hope, for they didn't even have a land to live in; but Yahweh was their god and he himself had taken charge of them and all their needs. They could not stay forever by the Sea of Reeds, gloating over the bodies of drowned Egyptians, so the only way was forward, into the burning desert of the Sinai wilderness.

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 14:13. <sup>2</sup> Ex 12:28

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There, life was uncertain in the extreme. In spite of their freedom, they began to look back with new appreciation on the "good life" in Egypt. Although they had been slaves there, at least food and water came regularly. Here, when they did find water, they could not stay long, or they and their flocks would strip the oasis bare of vegetation and turn the ground into desert again. Yet, away from water, the land burnt like a furnace under a sun that was never clouded. There was no certainty, when they left one watering place, that they would quickly reach the next - and sometimes, when they came at last upon a pool, parched and eager to lap it up as if they would never see water again, they found it too bitter and salty to drink. Scattered patches of thin pasture for their flocks were soon eaten out, and being always on the move, they had no chance of growing anything for themselves. They had to live on whatever came their way, without ever having enough to store up provisions against the worst times.

In short, their involvement with Yahweh turned out to be the most dangerous kind, bringing them close to death by thirst and starvation. But even in this barren place, Yahweh looked after them. Their story tells how flocks of exhausted quails settled on the camp in the evening, so that they could gather them up and have meat to eat. Moreover, they found manna, a delicate stuff lying on the ground with the morning dew. It was edible (perhaps a secretion of insects that lived off the tamarisk bush) and sweet "like wafers made with honey"<sup>1</sup> or like "cake made with oil."<sup>2</sup> (It isn't easy to describe the taste of a thing!) Clearly, it was nourishing enough, and there was sufficient for the Israelites to get tired of it eventually.<sup>3</sup> And water, too, Yahweh provided, showing them how to sweeten bitter water by putting certain woods in it,<sup>4</sup> or causing water to flow from a rock struck by Moses' rod.<sup>5</sup> They did not die of hunger or thirst, but lived, and grew stronger.

They had to meet the hostility of tribes already established in the desert, who jealously guarded the best oases and controlled every decent pasture, suspicious of even passing strangers. One tribe, the Amalekites, turned out to be violently hostile, attacking the Israelites with all the advantages of a tribe on their own ground against a mixed bag of landless intruders. But the Israelites fought them off.<sup>6</sup> With Yahweh's help they repelled the attacks of their enemies as surely as they survived the hammering of nature in the desert.

Once again, the point is not to discuss how miraculous these occurrences were. We do not doubt that God could have done the things recorded in these stories, even in the most miraculous way suggested. But neither should we doubt that it is God's doing, even with the most natural explanation of events. The fact is that they escaped from slavery only to be swallowed up in a shimmering wilderness where their chances of survival were slim. But they survived and became a nation. Yahweh, their one hope, provided for them as surely as he had rescued them at the lake, and he defended them as surely as he provided for them in the barren desert. Their gamble succeeded - or their trust was vindicated. To

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 16:31 <sup>2</sup> Nb 11:8 <sup>3</sup> Nb 11:6 <sup>4</sup> Ex 15:25 <sup>5</sup> Ex 17:6 <sup>6</sup> Ex 17:8-16.

those who experienced it, it was not a lucky gamble, but the faithful reliability of the god they had trusted. At the end of it all, they had survived and were his people.

Yahweh was their god; and their god is our God, in the first place a rescuer or saviour, a provider and defender. To understand the relationship of God with God's people, we have to begin with Yahweh rescuing Israel, providing for them, defending them against attack. We should begin not with the philosopher's sovereign, the remote, almost abstract Supreme Being, nor with the idea of a great king or mighty emperor, ruling in majestic splendour, but with the picture of a bedouin chief, the warrior leader of a desert clan or head of an outlaw gang. That is, we should begin with a kind of leadership rarely experienced in our culture, because it is the leadership called for in utterly desperate and lawless times, to which people will turn when they are helpless and friendless, without the protection of law or established society. It is not based on a legal constitution or on a long line of succession, but is much more direct, and directly relevant to a people's needs. There is not the gap between leader and led that long traditions and large, highly developed societies create. The leader is followed because you trust him, for victory, food and water, because otherwise you will lie dead in the desert. Your loyalty to him is natural, personal and essential for survival.

It is like an outlaw's loyalty to the leader of his gang. We think of outlaws as a band of hardened and violent men. But in desperate times when social structures have broken down, whole families, clans or tribes can become outlaws: without a corner in society, rejected and despised by all who have managed to keep themselves some sort of place in the world. The first Israelites were such people: cast-offs, struggling to find a living in land that would not support anyone else, or battling against the possessors for a share in the better pastures. To the Amalekites they would have been outlaws and unwarranted intruders on their territory. But dispossessed people, without property or territory within the law, have to live by outlawry, seizing what they can to survive. The Israelites had desperate need on their side and God himself did not scruple to join them, in their need, as their warrior-leader.

We have to think of a baffled and frightened people taking measures to survive. To such a people God came as Yahweh, offering them the victories and the food they needed; and he began by rescuing them in the nick of time from their most imminent danger. Thus, the beginning of the rule of God is in the gratitude and trust accorded to a hero, a rescuer, a provider, to the one who has turned up in the time of need and proven his worth.

We do not know when these Habiru slaves began to call themselves "Israel", but it was surely as they became aware that they were one people under their leader Yahweh, with a future that he would provide for them. From that time, Israel would find its identity in the love and commitment of Yahweh. By the time they emerged from their wanderings, they had already shared the experience of his leadership for over a generation, and it enabled them, and others who joined them, to become a nation of his people. They felt they had entered into a covenant or treaty with Yahweh, as clans and tribes did with kings who had established a right to rule over them. They had accepted his rule and were bound to

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follow his orders. He had proven his reliability, and it was only right that their trust should become a permanent commitment: an agreement to be loyal to him always.

We shall see in the next chapter how such a covenant forged them into a nation, but for now we need think of it only as a summing up of their experience in the wilderness. Much later, the prophet Hosea would look back on this time as a time of betrothal, in which Yahweh won his people as a man woos and wins a bride<sup>1</sup>, or as a time of adoption, when Yahweh called Israel and made them his own son,<sup>2</sup> as a man may legally adopt a boy and make him beyond challenge his son and heir. Later still, the whole experience was written up as it now is in the Book of Exodus,<sup>3</sup> combining different layers of legal tradition and different theologies, some most ancient and primitive, but some later and carefully refined by reflection. For the present, the important thing is that Israel emerged from the wilderness as a covenant people, bound to their warrior god as to a leader with whom they had a sworn agreement.

All the wilderness memories point to a bond that we might call "sacramental", that is, a bond expressed in symbolism that could only be fulfilled in experience with the passing of time, because it expressed a commitment for the future. As the implications of a betrothal, or a legal adoption, or the signing of a treaty, can only be lived out subsequently, there was enacted between Yahweh and his people in the wilderness a symbol of commitment that pointed to the future and made them his people not just for their present moment of need, but for always. Their warrior god would not, at the end of this day, ride off into the sunset to other adventures and other rescues, but was with them to stay, for always, and they were always to be his people.

Which brings us to the last of the wilderness traditions: that of the Israelites' own fickleness and obstinacy. They did not remember those days as a time of unbroken loyalty and devotion. The trust they had put in Yahweh was hesitant to start with, and the loyalty they showed him thereafter was intermittent at best. If the relationship had depended on them, it would have collapsed, and as it was it did not grow smoothly. Yahweh did not let them down, but they often failed him. They grumbled about the food and complained about the water; they opposed his leadership and experimented with other gods; they drew back from his first offer of a land to conquer and settle in, yet, when he was not leading them, they rushed ahead to try and win everything on their own.

Consequently, he was angry with them. When the wanderers refused to go on into Canaan, Joshua and Caleb urged them to trust Yahweh once again:

"If Yahweh is pleased with us, he will lead us into this land and give it to us. Do not rebel against Yahweh. And do not be afraid of the people of this land; we shall

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<sup>1</sup> Hos 2:16-17. <sup>2</sup> Hos 11:1-4. <sup>3</sup> Ex 19-24.

gobble them up. Their protecting god has gone from them so long as Yahweh is with us. Do not be afraid of them." (Nb 14:8-9)

But the Israelites only talked of stoning them. They had been frightened out of their trust by reports of strong opposition, and were not prepared to go on.

Yahweh then appeared at the meeting tent, where, in his anger, he said to Moses:

"How long will this people insult me? How long will they refuse to believe in me despite the signs I have worked among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them. And of you I shall make a new nation, greater than they are." (Nb 14:11-12)

Yahweh's anger is quite real, but Moses knows how to meet it and appeal for mercy. He reminds Yahweh of his commitment to this people, how, like a leader who has sponsored a hopeless cause, he has staked his reputation on the future of Israel.<sup>1</sup> So Yahweh forgives them, but his anger is still effective:

"I forgive them as you ask. But, as I live, of all the men who have seen my glory and the signs that I worked in Egypt and in the wilderness, who have put me to the test ten times already, and have not obeyed my voice, not one shall see the land. Tomorrow you will turn around and go back into the wilderness." (Nb 14:20-25)

The Israelites' relationship with Yahweh is a stormy one. It experiences the knocks and upheavals of any real personal relationship, for Yahweh cannot be changed or wished away to suit their own ideas and moods, and it is common for us, in a personal relationship, often to want to change our partner into something more to our own liking or likeness. I chose the above story out of many others, because it is typical of their subsequent relationship with the god who led them: their faithlessness and his anger, which is real, but never stronger than his commitment to them and his generous forgiveness.

There is much we could say about the anger of God, even questioning the possibility of his being angry; but clearly Yahweh was angry at times. Anger is our reaction to wrong when we really care about what is wrong, and Yahweh cared about his people. What they did mattered to him, and it mattered to him whether they trusted and remained loyal to him or not. When we say that God got angry, we are in effect saying that their disloyalty really mattered to him. An efficient judge in a court of law passes sentence dispassionately, for he knows he acts for the law, and, not being personally offended, he carries out his duty without personal involvement. When a woman reads about the problems of vandalism in a foreign country, it may well be no more than idle interest which is aroused. When she finds her own children engaged in vandalism at home in their own neighbourhood, she gets

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<sup>1</sup> Nb 14:13-19.

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angry. God, in his sovereign dealing with his recalcitrant people, chooses to reveal himself not as the cool and legally correct judge, nor as the casually interested observer; but as the leader so close to his followers and so involved with them, that he gets angry when they disobey or betray him.

This idea of God's anger may offend our niceness, and certainly it wants refining; but if we ever replace the leader who punishes angrily with a dispassionate arbiter who simply enforces the law, or a remote observer who lets crime receive its natural punishment, we have lost sight of the personal God who revealed himself to the Israelites, and cared enough to build a permanent relationship with them.

In this chapter, I have dealt with the Exodus in its barest essentials, as a kind of preface to the history of Israel, which begins in earnest with the invasion of Canaan. I have tried to highlight those traditions which, based on the experiences of a small group of Habiru slaves, became the core and formative idea for the nation of Israel. At the very centre was their experience of Yahweh, the warrior god who came to their rescue, then protected and provided for them throughout their wandering in the desert of Sinai, a god to whom they were committed as to their clan chief or outlaw leader. He offered them a relationship based on reliability and trust, a commitment calling for committed faith on their part. They accepted, but because their faith was inconstant, they experienced his commitment both as practical love and as concerned and passionate anger.

This, the beginning of their experience, is the beginning of our experience of God. For Yahweh is God. We do not discover God, but God revealed Godself to us, as Yahweh, the god of Israel. God's rule over us is not an abstract conclusion from the nature of the universe, but an act of his, offering us a new relationship with him. Nor is the story of the runaway slaves just a paradigm of our private spiritual experience. It is the actual beginning of our shared relationship with God, since we do not live in isolation but follow those who have lived before us, as a community inheriting their experience. The full story of it goes well beyond this book, but the commitment made between Yahweh and Israel began a relationship which lasts into our time, and into which we too have entered.