

## 2 Yahweh's People

We began this book with a glimpse of chaos, as the civilised towns of Canaan fell to raiding tribes from the wilderness. These were the Habiru, the bandits that plundered and butchered, or the voracious land hunters who seized the livelihood of Canaan for their own survival. Among them, perhaps the most determined, were the Israelites, who after more than a generation of wandering in the deserts of Sinai were linking up with kindred people in the region and pouring into the land like a torrent in a flash-flood. They fought hard for possession of pastures, fields and towns, convinced that Yahweh, the warrior god who had rescued them from Egypt, would give them the victory. They called him the Lord of Armies, a fighting leader who would always win the day for them, and before whom their enemies' gods were powerless.

As we have only the sketchiest records of the Israelite invasion, and some archaeological evidence of fortified towns suddenly burnt or destroyed, we cannot tell exactly when, or by what stages, it happened. We do not know how long it took, nor how many different tribes were involved, nor how far it was a united attack, or haphazard land grabbing by groups that were variously related to one another. What we do have, are some of the Israelites' own accounts, in the books we call "Joshua" and "Judges", and these accounts vary greatly in the details, because of their differing points of view.

In this chapter, I am interested both in the history of what happened, so far as it is known, and in the way Israel remembered it, drawing lessons from the experience. The Book of Judges comes closer to giving us events as they happened, whereas the Book of Joshua looks back on those events more in the light of later experience, recording them in the style of a later age, with its own interests.

The Book of Judges (which I would prefer to call the Book of Heroes, since its leading characters are quite unlike judges in our society) tells of separate but related tribes struggling over a very long time to take and keep territory in the land of Canaan. The tribes of Judah and Simeon, with the Kenites as allies, establish themselves in the south. North of them, the Benjaminites win control of some territory, but cannot take its main city, Jerusalem. Joseph - Manasseh and Ephraim - takes the country around Bethel and, with Zebulun and others, captures the hill country to the north. But there are many towns that hold out against them, and they do not manage at all so well on the lowland plains, where horses and chariots can be deployed against them.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, Israelites and Canaanites live in the same land together, sometimes in alliance, sometimes under one ruler, sometimes in hostility, sometimes with the latter reduced to menial status. For generations the Israelites remain separate tribes, sometimes cut off from one another by Canaanite territory, sometimes uniting against a common enemy, sometimes meeting in savage conflict and intertribal war. In short, their conquest of Canaan is slow, uneven and interspersed with their own internal squabbles.

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<sup>1</sup>Jud 1

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The Book of Joshua paints a much simpler and bloodier picture, presenting the issues in stark black and white for an age that had a simple lesson to learn from them. Not to put too fine a point on it, parts of Joshua read like a glorification of genocide not easily surpassed. In Chapters 6 to 11, we read of all Israel, united under Joshua, marching triumphantly against the Canaanites. As one city after another falls to them, men, women, children, and sometimes all living things are slaughtered. The major towns of northern and southern Canaan are listed in chapters 10 to 11, and of each the same story is told: the town attacked and taken, their leader, or "king", executed, and the whole population slaughtered.

The spoils and the cattle the Israelites took for themselves, but they struck all the human beings with the edge of the sword, and wiped them all out; they did not leave one living soul. (Jos 11:14)

Resistance is desperate and hopeless. Five local chiefs who form an alliance in defence of their territory are defeated, captured and executed:

When the kings had been brought to him, Joshua assembled all the men of Israel and said to their officers: "Come forward and put your feet on the necks of these kings." They did so, and Joshua went on: "Do not be afraid. Be resolute, for this is how Yahweh shall deal with all the enemies you fight." Then Joshua struck and killed them. (Jos 10:24-26)

Either way, this is a story of bloodshed and conquest in which the Israelites, even when they are following Yahweh, are no fledgling saints. We would describe them as aggressive, intolerant and brutal. So much so that, to some sensitive consciences, it is difficult to see God in these stories at all. They question whether Yahweh, the warrior god of these savage fighters, can in any sense be God, and try to distinguish the god of the Old Testament from the God we know and worship.

Two things have to be kept in mind. One is that in all his dealings with people God has to begin with raw and savage material. Goodness is not a prerequisite for the favour of God, but its result. The second is that such "goodness" as removes us from the level of these barbarians is very much a matter of order, respectability and civilisation masking and repressing the same savage instincts. We have seen in this century, and we still see, the old savagery rearing its head among us. In our own society the vicious self-interest of ancient Israel lives on - and it is good to know that God meets it and deals with it.

When we read of genocide in the Book of Joshua, we must not conclude that, whatever God demands of us now, at that time genocide was God's will and therefore all right. For that way we would have a changing God, and God does not change. Nor can we say that the slaughter of rivals is all right if it is at God's command - that way we would have an immoral God, and God is good. Rather, we must see genocide as part of the vicious character of the times - a viciousness in which the Israelites shared, and within which God was working out his relationship with them. Even God does not begin by simply

removing the viciousness, before those who are vicious have any kind of personal relationship with him.

He dealt with them by meeting their real needs, even if they strove to meet their needs through bloody victory over their opponents. For they needed land of their own, and had found little to support them in the country south of Canaan. To the east they had come up against strong kingdoms and other nomadic peoples as determined and pressing as themselves. But Canaan they looked upon as their own rightful prize, a land roomy enough for their several tribes and clans, and rich enough to attract them fiercely from the harsh wilderness lives they had been leading.

Their aim was simple: to dislodge the Canaanites and make room for themselves in fair sized and secure territories. It was quite unlike the kind of conquest that builds up powerful empires. They were not attempting to bring subjects under their rule, but something at once more excusable, more desperate and bloodier. Needing room to live, they were prepared to kill the Canaanites for their land. Land, or territory, is the basic need of animals and people, since from the land come food, water and places to rest and live, to bear and bring up children. Without land to call their own, a people must either die or consent to be sucked in and exploited by the more powerful and fortunate who do have it. The Israelites did not wish to die, and they had only recently escaped from the other alternative. Therefore they determined to take the land of Canaan for their own. Savage though this conquest was, at least it was from need. They must have land or perish. It was not greed or ambition that drove them, but sheer need, and confidence that their god Yahweh would make them secure possessors of the land they fought for.

So here again, as in the stories of the Exodus, we find God meeting a people on terms they can understand. Not expounding laws of morality or decent civilisation, or attempting to teach advanced ideas, but simply meeting their felt needs and inviting them to trust him for their victories. It is a level at which God must again and again meet us, as we get stuck far short of his plans for us, and have to trust him to get us on any further. Once we accept that it is God (and not just some primitive idea of a god) who called on Israel to trust him, we have accepted that such trust is basic - as we saw in the previous chapter - and comes before all goodness, morality, theology, in our relationship with him. It is an encouraging view: for it means that wherever we find ourselves or our society, at whatever advanced or depraved state of morality, we can begin again by trusting him, for he is inviting such trust and meeting us where we are. We don't have to advance to find God: he shows himself to us (through whatever limited or distorted vision) in order to advance us.

It is also a challenging view. If we accept the Israelites' basic right to land, and that God himself supported this right, even when bloodshed and conquest was the only way they could assert it, we ought to accord the same right and privilege to other peoples, in our own day. In our developed industrial society we do not feel the need of land as something personal and immediate. It has long been sufficient that the nation as a whole is independent and has access, through allies or colonies, to sufficient food-producing land.

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But in many places, that need is still vitally immediate, so that a family deprived of its own land can only die or be reduced to virtual slavery. Such is the case with the camps of dispossessed Palestinians on the borders of modern day Israel, with the peasants of Central and South America, with the blacks of South Africa<sup>1</sup> and the aborigines of Australia. This is not the place to develop a whole theology of liberation, but implicit in the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan is one of the basic principles of such a theology: God's support for the landless poor in their deprivation, even for those who know no other way but to fight. When we of the rich West discuss the plight of peasants in El Salvador, or the activities of the P.L.O., we can waste a lot of time on pointless argument about names. We debate whether a group involved in anti-government activity are terrorists, bandits, liberators, outlaws, resistance fighters, refugees. (One side reports a cruel massacre of refugees, and the other a successful action against outlaw military bases.) The fact is, that the distinctions are irrelevant. When people are deprived of a livelihood within the law's protection, they must survive outside the law and there is no longer a valid distinction between refugee and bandit. Such a conviction lies entrenched in English folklore as the Robin Hood tradition, and it should decide our international attitudes: the landless or deprived poor have the right to our help, whether they passively languish, or resist by force of arms. Our help should reflect the intervention of the God in whom we believe, and is prior to any preaching of morality or prudence.

For taking land, and keeping it, there must be unity, loyalty and leadership. The desert chief enforcing his claim to a range of pastures and scattered wells knows his need of family and kinsmen to share and support it. If a lone man holds the land, you have only to kill him, and it is yours. But if he has kin, he will die defending his land and one of his family will inherit it, with equal determination to keep and hand on his property. The wandering aborigine, whose traditional rights at the desert water holes are handed on through stories, knows that his story is the story of his tribe and that his identity and security are within the tribe. The strength of a person is not themselves alone, but their family, their kin and their tribe. The greater the number that can act as one, the greater the strength of that people.

For Israel, it was Yahweh himself whose leadership created their unity. To the Habiru slaves who escaped from Egypt there had been added people like the Kenites who picked up with them in the wilderness, and kindred tribes whom they met near Canaan, or found already settled among the Canaanites. There was no ready-made unity, and the single nation had yet to be created. That it was Yahweh who created the nation and made them secure is the point of both Joshua and Judges, but again the two books make their point in quite different ways.

Judges tells of a lesson learnt slowly over many generations, of loyalty to Yahweh painfully hammered out through many bitter experiences. We read of disunity among the tribes, of rivalry, quarrelling and war. Only Yahweh is able to raise up leaders who unite the divided Israelites and reconcile their petty but destructive differences. Without him,

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<sup>1</sup> This was written in the early 1980s.

they remain divided and squabbling, and for generations at the mercy of the nations with whom they are still in competition. When they turn to him, they are given leaders, unity, victory and security: as is the case in the story of Deborah.

This story tells of a decisive Israelite victory over Jabin, a well armed and powerful Canaanite king, who was strong enough for a time to hold local Israelites in subjection. Two tribes of Israel were most involved, Zebulun and Naphtali, who were roused by the prophetess Deborah and led into battle by the warrior Barak. As at the Sea of Reeds, it was the intervention of Yahweh that gave victory to the Israelites, for Jabin's great advantage was overcome by a surprise attack in force from the mountains, and a flood of the River Kishon, which cut off or destroyed his chariot force.<sup>1</sup>

The Israelite song of victory that follows this triumph is a cry of exultation in their all powerful warrior god; but it bewails the disunity of the tribes, and considers it a work of Yahweh that even a few of them had rallied to the fight:

That warriors in Israel unbound their hair,  
that the people came forward with a will,  
for this bless Yahweh!  
Listen you kings! Give ear you princes!  
From me, from me comes a song for Yahweh.  
I will glorify Yahweh, God of Israel.

Yahweh, when you set out from Sinai,  
as you trod the land of Edom,  
earth shook, the heavens quaked,  
the clouds dissolved into water.  
The mountains melted before Yahweh,  
before Yahweh, the God of Israel. (Jud 5:2-5)

The song goes on to speak of Deborah, who rose up as a mother in Israel, when no one else was prepared to unite and lead the people, and it speaks of a great rallying of men from many tribes:

Ephraim's princes are in the valley.  
Your brother Benjamin joins your ranks.  
From Machir captains have come down;  
from Zebulun those with the staff of office.  
The princes of Issachar are with Deborah;  
Naphtali in the vale with Barak. (Jud 5:14-15)

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<sup>1</sup> Jud 4-5.

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But there are reproaches for the tribes that did not respond:

Where the streams of Reuben are  
men hold their long debate.  
Why did you linger among the sheepfolds  
listening to pipes amid the flocks?  
Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan.  
Why is Dan in the ships of strangers?  
Asher kept by the sea coast,  
dwelling at ease within his harbours. (Jud 5:15-17)

In the end the glory of victory is Yahweh's. Though the Israelites have their visionaries and their military leaders, Yahweh is behind these, and their success is to rally the people to Yahweh, the real giver of victories. The final boast, typical of victory songs, is of Yahweh's vindication:

So perish all your enemies, Yahweh!  
And let those who love you be like the sun  
when he arises in all his strength. (Jud 5:31)

Another story that is typical of Israel's experience over this period is that of the hero Gideon. In his time, the Israelites had become established in their own areas of Canaan. Although the conquest was not complete, they were now settled, growing crops and raising flocks, living in their own homes, farms, and even towns. With the passing of time, they had adopted a Canaanite way of life, and with the passing of war, their warrior god now seemed irrelevant, until, in one of history's ironies, they fell prey to the same kind of attack as had begun their own invasion of Canaan. A new wave of marauders was sweeping in from the desert: the Midianites, who had tamed and harnessed the camel to their great advantage.

The Israelites did what displeases Yahweh: Yahweh gave them over for seven years into the hands of Midian, and Midian bore down heavily on Israel. To escape from Midian the Israelites used the mountain clefts and the caves and shelters. Whenever Israel sowed seed, Midian would march up with Amalek and the sons of the East, encamp on their territory and destroy the produce as far as Gaza. They left Israel nothing to live on, not a sheep or ox or donkey, for they came up as thick as locusts with their own cattle and tents. They and their camels were past counting. They overran and pillaged the country. Thus Midian brought Israel to great distress, and the Israelites cried to Yahweh. (Jud 6:1-6)

To return, for a moment, to an earlier digression, if God is indeed the supporter of the landless poor, we might expect him now to transfer his favour to the Midianites. It was fortunate indeed for Israel that the newcomers had no such agreement with him! He has already taken sides - with Israel, and his commitment is historic and permanent - a point we shall return to in the next chapter. By giving Israel the land, he has confirmed, not

removed, their dependence on him, and he does not enter a commitment only to back out after a change of circumstances. Any further revelation of his love, to the Midianites or to any other people, can only be in the context of his real and permanent commitment to Israel. If this is ever denied, what will be the value of any later commitment he makes?<sup>1</sup>

As soon as the Israelites turned again to Yahweh, he was ready to rescue them. He chose them a leader, Gideon, who began by breaking with the Canaanite Baal that his family had been worshipping:

That night, Yahweh said to Gideon, "Take your father's fattened calf, and pull down the altar of Baal belonging to your father and cut down the sacred post at the side of it. Then, on the top of this bluff, build an altar to Yahweh your God. Then take the fattened calf and burn it as a holocaust on the wood of the sacred post you have cut down." Then Gideon chose ten of his servants, and did as Yahweh had ordered him. But since he stood too much in fear of his family and the townspeople to do this by day, he did it by night. (Jud 6:25-27)

When the townspeople discovered what Gideon had done, they demanded that he be put to death for the insult to Baal, but Joash, his father, took his side. He challenged the clan to let Baal fight his own battles. If he is any sort of a god, he can deal with Gideon himself. He won them over, and so began a timely return to their ancestral god, Yahweh, whose importance they once again began to realise, if only because their enemies were now mustering for an all-out attack:

Then all Midian and the sons of the East joined forces, crossed the Jordan and encamped in the plain of Jezreel. And the spirit of Yahweh came on Gideon; he sounded the horn and his clan rallied behind him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh and Manasseh too rallied behind him; he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, and they too marched out to meet him. (Jud 6:33-35)

Assured of Yahweh's support, Gideon led this great army of warriors out against the Midianites and their allies. But Yahweh wanted his people to know how victories are really won:

He said to Gideon, "There are too many people with you for me to put Midian into their power; Israel might claim the credit for themselves. Therefore, make this proclamation now to the people: "Let anyone who is frightened go home."  
Twenty two thousand men went home, and ten thousand were left. (Jud 7:2-3)

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<sup>1</sup> This basic fact of God's commitment has troublesome consequences, right up to the problem of modern day Israel, where the permanence of God's promise to the Israelites seems to be in direct conflict with his typical support for the landless refugee - the Palestinians. It is a paradox not to be resolved except in the Cross of Christ, which is God's challenge to modern Israel and a revelation of his ways that this book can only begin to foreshadow.

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Then, when they came to water on their march, the ten thousand were further sifted according to the way they drank, and Gideon was left with only three hundred to fight the Midianites, but he had Yahweh's promise "With the three hundred I will rescue you and put Midian into your power."

We cannot now tell what were all the causes of this remarkable sifting out. Possibly, it was in part the common story of a large, hot-headed and undisciplined force quickly losing its first enthusiasm and yielding to apathy and fear when they found themselves beyond their home bounds. Perhaps Gideon was an astute enough commander to know that such untried boys in battle would be more of a hindrance than a help. Perhaps, too, superstition and the judging of omens played their part, for Gideon was a great believer in "signs" from God.<sup>1</sup> The account has come to us in story form, greatly simplified and abbreviated, to make perfectly clear what was the point of the experience. It is not that God made warriors out of mystics and saints who somehow had a direct, uncluttered line of communication with him, such as we do not nowadays experience; but that, revealing himself as Yahweh, the Lord of Armies, God made contact with very ordinary, rough, warlike and superstitious warriors, and that his commitment to them was real, in spite of their faults, as they discovered for themselves when they trusted him.

Gideon and his small company sneaked up in the dark of night, in a manner that would have been impossible for an army of ten thousand, and spread themselves around the enemy camp. Using noise and torches to confuse them, and shouting their battle cry "For Yahweh and for Gideon!" as if each were calling to whole companies of men, they threw the Midianites into a panic and frantic flight. It was only after the camp was routed that the remainder of Gideon's forces returned to join in the pursuit, men from Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh. The Ephraimites, a little ruffled that they, as the largest tribe, had not been in from the start, came in to take control of the watering places and prevent the Midianites escaping.

Thus Midian was humbled before the Israelites. They did not lift up their heads again, and the land enjoyed rest for forty years, as long as Gideon lived.

(Jud 8:23)

The story of Gideon shows the kind of "nation" Israel was, and the kind of rule Yahweh exercised. We see families, clans, towns and tribes loosely interconnected, Israelites mixed with Canaanites and other foreigners. There is an easy exchange of customs, and of gods. But their life is precarious, for their crops are easy plunder and their property hard to defend. In those anarchic times, war was not the speciality of a trained army, but every man's private and common concern. Primitive order was often overthrown by violence, and law meant the stronger man's ability to represent his acts as some kind of stern justice. The chaos of crumbling empire and roving banditry that had opened the way for Israel's own invasion still continued, and the Israelites were no more secure than the people they had dispossessed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jud 6:36-40.

Unity in such times is a precious thing, and vital to the community is a leader who can bring loose factions together and bind them into a fighting force able to meet and defeat the common enemy. In such times a leader is recognised for personal qualities - people follow the one they know and trust. The leader's authority depends on the ability to win victories, to send intruders packing and to hand out plunder, captives or land to his followers. Loyalty is direct and personal, for one who, in his own right, has earned it.

There were such leaders among the Israelites, and they were always remembered as Yahweh's people. They were the heroes or "judges" who, like Deborah and Gideon, called the Israelites back to following Yahweh, and led them in the name of the warrior god. It was Yahweh's spirit that gave them their power and confidence. He was the one who proved his worth and reliability, giving victory and keeping the land for his followers.

Where the Book of Judges spreads the story of the conquest over many generations, the Book of Joshua, somewhat in the style of a stage drama, condenses the whole experience into one generation, and instead of many leaders raised up from time to time by Yahweh, centres it all around the figure of Joshua, successor to Moses. The experience of successive generations in Judges is recognised in the successive battles of Joshua's forces: when they loyally obey Yahweh, they win; when they go against his will, they lose.

Jericho falls, its walls crumbling to the shouts of the Israelites; the town of Ai is taken and destroyed; the Gibeonites escape slaughter only by tricking the Israelites into a treaty; an alliance of five kings is overthrown, and, before the end of Joshua's life, the whole of Canaan, north and south, is in the hands of the Israelites.

But there have been setbacks. Yahweh had imposed a total ban on Jericho (that is the town and all its goods were to be completely destroyed) but one of the Israelites kept and hid some of the loot. Because of this disobedience, they are repulsed from the town of Ai, in their next battle, by a mere handful of defenders. When the reason is revealed to Joshua, the culprit is tracked down by lot, and, with his family, stoned to death,<sup>1</sup> after which Israel attacks again, successfully.

The relationship between Yahweh and his people is a commitment. It cannot be set aside for anyone's private gain or manipulated to suit the special standards of self-interest. Earlier in this chapter, I spoke of God "meeting a people on terms they can understand", but that does not mean their own terms, or terms they can set aside. His terms are dangerously consistent. They cannot accept him as their leader in battle and then make up their own mind what to do with the spoils. No chief would accept that, and neither does Yahweh. It is part of the integrity or "authenticity" he expects of them, that if they think of him and relate to him as a warrior leader, receiving from him a warrior's rewards, they must also obey him as such.

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<sup>5</sup> Jos Ch 7

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(This is a lesson we still have to learn. There are many who would use God for comfort or reassurance or emotional uplift, but are hostile to the idea that he should make any demands upon them. Or they limit his demands to something they consider "reasonable". They have no understanding of the loyalty required by Yahweh, the God of desperate people. Their religion is unreal and inauthentic, the worship of a comfortable god, who props and supports without ever existing as a challenge.)

When Yahweh intervenes on Israel's side, Israel finds itself involved in the will of Yahweh. Having stood with them and fought their battles, he is with them still as a threat and a danger if they turn against his will. He is not a tame god. They cannot lightly make and break contact with him, for to be in contact with him is to become deeply and personally involved, and personal relationships are not broken without somebody getting hurt. If the deep relationship between God and his people is going to be broken, it will cause deep and destructive pain. The cruel punishment inflicted on the offender at Ai is Israel's way of protecting itself against the consequences of breaking a serious and powerful personal agreement.

The Book of Joshua ends with the great assembly at Shechem - a key story for the whole of Joshua and Judges. Typically, it tells of a single great and decisive assembly, although there were probably many such gatherings throughout the period of the heros, reaffirming and clarifying Israel's commitment to Yahweh. Shechem, in one of the oldest Israelite regions of Canaan, became a shrine and focus of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, where divisions were healed and unity reaffirmed. There the tribes were taught that Yahweh was their common god, who had given them the land and gave them still their victories; that he was their rescuer and defender, their warrior champion as he had been long ago for the slaves who escaped from Egypt.

In this great assembly Israel is invited to enter a covenant with Yahweh: an agreement or treaty such as those by which clans and tribes would acknowledge a leader or king who had established his right to rule. Joshua explains the covenant offered by Yahweh and challenges Israel to accept the commitment. Behind this straightforward account, there was probably a more complicated process in which some tribes who had been involved with the runaways from Egypt and worshipped Yahweh reaffirmed their commitment to him and invited other tribes, with other ways and gods, to join them as Yahweh's people. Whatever the full facts were, the Book of Joshua goes to the heart of the matter:

Joshua said to them, "Yahweh the God of Israel says this: 'When you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, I put it, and other peoples, into your power. I gave you a land where you never toiled; you live in towns you never built; you eat now from vineyards and olive groves you never planted.'

"So now, fear Yahweh and serve him perfectly and sincerely; put away the gods your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. But if you will not serve Yahweh, choose today whom you wish to serve, whether the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the

Canaanites in whose land you are now living. As for me and my House, we will serve Yahweh."

The people answered: "We have no intention of deserting Yahweh our God, who brought us and our ancestors out of Egypt, and preserved us all along the way we travelled. What is more, Yahweh drove all those people out who used to live in this land. We too will serve Yahweh, for he is our God."

Then Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve Yahweh, because he is a jealous God who will not forgive your transgressions. If you desert Yahweh to follow alien gods, he in turn will afflict and destroy you, after the goodness he has shown you." The people answered Joshua, "No, it is Yahweh we wish to serve." Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen Yahweh, to serve him." They answered, "We are witnesses." "Then cast away the alien gods among you and give your hearts to Yahweh the God of Israel." The people answered Joshua, "It is Yahweh our God we choose to serve; it is his voice that we will obey."

Then Joshua took a great stone and set it up there, under the oak in the sanctuary of Yahweh, and he said to all the people, "See! This stone shall be a witness against us because it has heard the words Yahweh has spoken to us: it shall be a witness against you in case you deny your God."

(Jos. 24:11-27)

In Chapter 1, I tried to explain what faith is. Here, in ceremonial dress, we have the meaning of love: conscious, permanent and dangerous commitment, to go through all that may come in unbreakable union. It is the result and fullest expression of trust, and can only find fulfilment where there is trust. It is the bond of warriors, of husband and wife, of parent and child, at its best and most enduring. It refuses to compromise or hedge its bets with promiscuous alternatives, just as Yahweh firmly committed himself to Israel, against her Egyptian and Canaanite enemies. So understood, there is no gap between trust and love, faith and works, belief and commitment.

The relationship between Israel and her God is one of implicit trust (faith) realised in an act of commitment (love). It is trust that is deep enough and open enough to declare and commit itself as love. It is love so committing that it is only possible for those who trust God implicitly. And in this relationship lies the sovereignty of God. For God to rule involves not power, but a personal bond between Godself and God's subjects, an explicit, public bond that also makes a community of those who accept God as ruler. Faith and love are two "moments" or dimensions of God's rule. In faith we trust God for our future and in love we remain loyal to God as God unfolds that future.

They are not lived out in the private corners of an individual heart but spring to life as a community that has staked everything on God. Out of commitment comes a shared identity, and against the background of the Shechem covenant, which made her a community under Yahweh's rule, we can discover who Israel is. The faith and the love given expression there are definitive not just of a number of individuals, but of a

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community, a people or a nation. Faith, love in relationship to God are not private, but communal.

In the Book of Deuteronomy<sup>1</sup> there is a poem described as Moses' last blessing. It comes from a later age, looking back and idealising the past, but it was the kind of inspired idealising that revealed something of the true Israel, as a free federation of kindred tribes, each with its own place and home, its own ways and character, and all united as the people of Yahweh, the warrior god. The poem speaks of the love between Yahweh and his people (called "Israel", "Jacob" or "Jeshurun") and his deep commitment, showing itself in his fierce defence of them and in the blessings he has shared out to them.

Yahweh came from Sinai.  
The assembly of Jacob comes into its inheritance;  
there was a king [Yahweh] in Jeshurun  
when the heads of the people foregathered,  
and the tribes of Jacob were all assembled.

Thus the poem describes the assembly of the tribes, under Yahweh their leader; and what follows is a description of the character and special blessings of each, beginning with the dwindling tribe of Reuben.

May Reuben live and not die,  
live, too, his small band of warriors!

Judah, in the south, is separated from the other tribes:

Listen, Yahweh, to the voice of Judah,  
and bring him back to his people.  
That his hands may defend his rights,  
come to his help against his foes.

Levi, the one rootless group that has no single territory in Israel, but more than any other tribe, preserves the traditions of worship and gives to the whole people religious leaders and teachers.

Grant to Levi your sacred instruments,  
your Thummim to the one you favoured.  
For they have kept your word,  
they hold firmly to your covenant.  
They teach your customs to Jacob,  
your law to Israel.  
They send incense rising to your nostrils,  
place the holocaust on your altar.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 33

Then there is Benjamin in the central hill country:

Beloved of Yahweh, he rests in safety.  
The Most High protects him day after day  
and dwells between his hillsides.

And Joseph, or the two great and related tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, anointed and strong for leadership:

His land is blessed by Yahweh.  
For him the best of heaven's dew  
and of the deep that lies below,  
the best of what the sun makes grow,  
of what springs with every month,  
the first-fruits of the ancient mountains,  
the best from the hills of old.  
May the hair grow thick on the head of Joseph,  
of the consecrated one among his brothers!  
First-born of the bull, his the glory.  
His horns are the wild ox's horns,  
with them he tosses the peoples  
to the very ends of the earth.  
Such are the myriads of Ephraim,  
such are the thousands of Manasseh.

Zebulun and Issachar, the traders, are next:

Prosper, Zebulun, in your voyages abroad,  
and you, Issachar, in your tents!  
On the mountain where the people came to pray  
they offer sacrifices for success,  
for they taste the riches of the seas,  
and the treasures hidden in the sands.

Then Gad, aggressive and fierce:

Blessed be he who gives Gad space enough!  
He lies there like a lioness;  
he has savaged arm and face and head.  
He took the first portion for himself;  
he saw that there a leader's share was kept for him.

and Dan:

Dan is a lion cub leaping from Bashan.

## The Warrior God

Naphtali is settled in the region of the Lake (of Galilee):

Naphtali, sated with favours,  
filled with the blessings of Yahweh:  
the lakeside is his domain.

And lastly, there is the tribe of Asher:

Most blessed of the sons may Asher be!  
Let him be privileged among his brothers  
and bathe his feet in oil!  
Be your bolts of iron and bronze  
and your security as lasting as your days!

To conclude, the poem returns to Yahweh, the God and champion of all the tribes:

There is none like the God of Jeshurun:  
he rides the skies to your rescue,  
rides the clouds in majesty.  
The God of old, he is your refuge,  
driving the enemy before you;  
it is he who cries "Destroy!"  
Israel rests in safety.  
The well spring of Jacob is chosen out  
for a land of corn and wine;  
there heaven itself rains down dew.  
Happy are you, O Israel!  
Who is like you, a victorious people?  
In Yahweh is the shield that protects you  
and the sword that leads to your triumph.

This god, Yahweh, had taken the side of runaway slaves against their masters. Asking only that they trust him, he had led them safely across the Sea of Reeds and into the desert, where he provided for them throughout a generation of wandering. He had established his rule over them not as an inescapable fact springing from the nature of things, but as a personal offer of service and help, only to be understood by such as needed help. Like the warrior leader of a small and desperate clan, he could only lead them to safety and prosperity if they trusted him enough to follow. Through those who did follow, he inspired the invaders of Canaan with a new confidence, and brought them together as one people, holders of the land and rich in the blessings of his love.

The bond between Israel and Yahweh is the personal bond between warriors and their leader, between the heads of grateful families and the chief who has won them the land in which they live. It is a bond of love, in the biblical sense of uncompromising loyalty and

trust, of deep, strong commitment, solidarity, sharing and belonging together. God (who must surely be supremely independent) chose to identify Godself with Israel, to describe Godself in terms of their needs, as their rescuer and provider, their warrior leader, the giver of land to a land-hungry people. And God's offer was not just a celestial bit of good luck that the Habiru happened to stumble upon, but the beginning of a promising, permanent and dangerous relationship, of a new identity as Israel, the people of Yahweh.