

3 A Word of Explanation

The history of Israel attends to three basic questions: what it is to be a person; what community is; and what is the rule of God. I hope that our brief look at the story so far has begun to show how closely interrelated those questions are. Israel's original story, as re-enacted at Shechem, laid down a framework in which people could become a community and so survive as persons. The "cement" and guarantee of their community was their relationship with Yahweh, who had given them freedom and land. His rule was the foundation of the community, and so the very matrix of personal identity. The rule of God, the community and personal identity were all established in the same loving act of God, which prompted a response of trust (in the exodus) and an expression of committed love (in the Shechem covenant).

The relationship between God and God's people was personal, but that is to say it was not private. It is a misconception of ours, part of the collapse of community in our society, to think of "personal" as meaning private and individual. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel, from the escape across the Sea of Reeds to the great covenant of Shechem, was a personal relationship shared by the whole community, within which every Israelite would find their own personal identity.

Identity is established not in isolation but in relationship with others. Israel learnt to identify herself as the people Yahweh had saved from Egypt. Godself stooped to be identified not by his remoteness from all creation, but by his involvement within it as the rescuer and defender of Israel. Yahweh and Israel, God and his people, are committed to one another in their very identity; and because that commitment begins with God's love, enabling a response of trust and love on his people's part, their identity is not swamped but rather created and reaffirmed by his. Real personal identity is established in freedom, but that freedom is not mere disengagement or independence from others. It is not freedom from, but freedom for personal relationships, the opportunity to trust, to love and to commit yourself. Ultimately, it is a secure relationship with God, as one of God's community.

Freedom begins with the freedom of God: God's independence of any need or force, of any higher law or authority. In his rescue of Israel, Yahweh was completely independent. His action was not arranged by anyone else or prescribed by any rules. It was his own free initiative that answered Israel's need. Israel, trapped between the lake and the Egyptian army, had to trust him, for the only claim or "pull" that they had on him was their very lack of pull, their complete helplessness. Because his act was supremely free, it was a total commitment. He would not change his mind with new circumstances, because no circumstances had compelled him to be involved. His commitment would not be repealed with a change of laws, for it was not dictated by law. He would not be looking for a way out of it, because he was not forced into it. God's absolute freedom means the ability to commit Godself absolutely.

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Thus God's complete freedom is the one guarantee his people have. And it becomes the basis of their own freedom: he delivers them from slavery and goes on to give them land, which means room to be an independent community. Yet to give land is also to rule. In Israel's understanding, the one who gives land, through victory, has the authority to rule. The sovereign rule of God, far from threatening or confining the freedom of God's people, underpins and guarantees it. The rule of God is the giving of freedom.

In the same way, it is the freedom of the community that creates the freedom of individuals. In the crises of exodus and conquest there was no question of individuals "doing their own thing" to assert and fulfil their own personality. They survived if their community survived, otherwise they perished. Yet when the community did survive, and succeeded in conquering a space to live in, the individual too found their place, their family's place in its tribal territory, within the land that became home to the whole people.¹ From exodus, conquest and settlement came security and belonging, the ground of individual freedom. To be a person, to be someone, is to belong in the community, whose liberty is not in competition with the individual's, but corresponds to it.

Thus, the freedom of God as ruler, the freedom of the community and the freedom of individuals are not separate, competing freedoms, but the one freedom of all to relate, to be committed and to identify with one another. It is basic to being a person and to being a community and it is basic to the rule of God.

Corresponding to the question of freedom is the question of power. If freedom has been an important theme of the story so far, power is very much the theme of the next few chapters. Our society regards power as the essence of personal fulfilment. To be someone, you have to achieve power. For most, it is spending power in the form of cash or regular income, but for some it is the power of command in business, the armed forces or politics. Community is seen as a compromise between individuals or rival groups competing for power, and God's rule is admitted, if at all, only as a moral check on some of the clumsier forms of power-abuse.

Perhaps the most challenging assertion of Israel's story is that, from the beginning, power and authority are not goals. Israel is not led by any ambitious dictator, (just as the conquest is not the building of an empire but the seizing of land for Israel's immediate need).² Power is defined as the giving of freedom, for, from the outset, power and authority are Yahweh's who has it and is not striving to increase it. He exercises it by

¹ That is why the Book of Joshua (Ch. 13-21) and other books of the Bible spend so much time over long lists of names, of places, tribes and clans; these are what remain of numerous and detailed family memories, giving each one their place in a complex and secure community.

² Whatever we think of the Israelites' behaviour, there is a significant difference between a wandering, landless group seizing land to live in, and powerful established nations seeking extended colonies or what they class as "lebensraum".

giving freedom to his people, enabling their commitment of trust and love. Power is not the goal of human effort but a gift given by God. The goal of human effort is to realise the opportunities which that gift creates.

We will see in the next few chapters that the rival concept of power as force conquering subjects, a means of coercing the community and realising private ambitions, had as strong a pull on the Israelites as it has on us. It is not easy to keep God's vision of rule, community and personal fulfilment together and to recognise competition and ambition for the destructive forces they are.

That is why the books of Joshua and Judges insist, each in its own way, that all power is Yahweh's. Not to suggest that he compels the community to obey him, but to show that power is never in question - it is not the object of the exercise, for it is already established, in Yahweh's hands. Judges shows the leaders of Israel receiving power as a gift from Yahweh, and exercising authority because of that gift. Power is not the leader's object, but the gift with which he begins, the breath or spirit of Yahweh which makes him Israel's champion. His career is one of service to the community, first as warrior leader, then as "judge" or settler of disputes, in both of which roles he liberates his people, freeing them from outside threat and internal divisions. The Book of Joshua shows the same conviction, and Joshua is never represented as a man striving for power but as one who has his authority from the outset, who believes in Yahweh's power and trusts him. Joshua is no dictator but a leader like Yahweh, and a saviour to his people.

When power is understood as the gift of God who alone has power, it is no longer a thing to be striven or competed for. It is something received, to be used in the service of God's people, as a gift to them. To struggle for power or to grab at it is to admit that you do not have God's power; and whatever you pretend, such struggle is opposed to the authority of God, to his rule and his community.

It is a sobering thought that many of our most prized values - power, ambition, competition - do not rate at all in God's view of community building or personal fulfilment. Rather, God has set us the pattern for all personal development, for relationships, community, authority and rule, basing these on his power, which is a gift creating freedom and giving identity through trust and loyalty. That is the theme of this book, and, I believe, the basic theme of scripture.

God's power is always revealed in the community God creates. To understand it, we have to understand what that community is. It is impossible for an individual alone to experience the rule of God, for the personal relationship which God establishes is never a private one. The trust which accepts him and the love to which it leads cannot be lived out in the secluded corners of an individual heart, but only come to life as a community which has staked everything on him. That is why the fierce, tribal "Song of Deborah" is a revelation, for all its crudities, of the sovereign rule of God, and why the covenant of Shechem, affirming the rule of Yahweh, also affirms the community of Israel. It is why

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the "blessings" in Deuteronomy, the idealised picture of the tribes of Israel, is a description of the rule of God, and a basis for the identity of every Israelite.

When we speak of community, we mean, in the first place, people who share an experience. A busload of individuals, all studiously ignoring one another as they are transported towards their separate destinations, is not a community. But they suddenly become a number of voluble, chatty pairs if the bus has a near-miss accident or passes a spectacular demonstration. The shared experience has to be talked about - it puts them in communication and links them in a brief sense of community. People who have been in the services, especially if they have seen action together, find that their common experience gives them a real sense of belonging together. Those who want to hand on the sense of community in clubs and schools and universities do not lecture new members on togetherness but put them through a vivid and shared experience of initiation. Conversely, where neighbours no longer share any experience apart from that of living in the same street, community dies and all you have left is contiguous individuals. For a community to remain a community, people must go on sharing and reliving significant experiences.

The best means of keeping alive a shared experience, and therefore community itself, are story and ritual. These do not merely hand on the facts, but continue the experience. To share in a ritual or listen to a story is not just to observe but to enter an experience. In ritual we re-enact it; in story – whether telling or listening - we remember and relive it.

So the Israelites shared their experience not only in the sense that it happened to them as a community, but also in the sense that they afterwards remembered it, went over it and celebrated it together. Their ritual worship gave succeeding generations not just ideas but an experience of their history under Yahweh's rule. Their stories preserved the great events in such a way that the experience was explained, amplified, refined and handed on without ceasing to be experience. This process started immediately with the women dancing a triumph on the shore of the Sea of Reeds:

"Sing of Yahweh; he has covered himself in glory,
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

and was continued in the covenants of Shechem, generations later:

"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."
(Jos. 24:16-17)

As I have suggested, the story of the escape from Egypt was probably the basis on which other tribes were invited to join in the experience of the escapees and, like the Kenites, become one community with them. That experience, recounted later in story and ritual, was one with which others could identify, accepting it for their own as they were drawn into community with the "Israelites". Certain experiences make or constitute Israel, and if

the community is to survive and grow, those experiences have to be preserved and passed on.

The same process can be seen in the history of the United States. Among its most formative experiences were those of the "pilgrim fathers", of pioneering and of the War of Independence. Those experiences are still kept alive in rituals (Thanksgiving Day and July 4th) and in story. Immigrants, even if their ancestors crossed the Atlantic long after the Mayflower's landing or the War of Independence, adopt the story and the rituals as their own, identifying with the experience and so becoming Americans. At the same time, some immigrant groups have also preserved their own sense of community within the total American community; like the Irish Catholics, for whom stories of British oppression and the ritual celebration of St. Patrick's Day keep alive the reality of Irish community. And American Blacks, searching for their identity, have also turned to story to recreate and relive what they can see as their own experience. The "Roots" saga was one very popular exercise of story-telling.

In Britain, a rapidly changing society alienates younger generations from older experience. Community is in decay. Yet even here, the British sense of community comes from experience shared or handed down. That is why we keep harking back to the Second World War. Books and films and television keep alive the last occasion on which Britain felt and acted as a community, and even a generation whose parents never knew the war eagerly relives its experiences: violence, endurance, heroism, and escape. For good or ill, the Blitz, the Battle of Britain, the Dam Busters and the Colditz Story have become the British experience.

Such sharing and reliving of experience is not an extra activity in which communities indulge, but something essential to them. Communities that lose their taste for ritual and forget how to tell stories, begin to die as communities, however assiduously they strive to pass on their character and ideals thru their laws or thru academic education. However valid these may be, they fail to grip and to hold, because they fail to share experience. They are something less than story and ritual, and they are not enuf for the survival of a community.

Both ritual and story have the nature of a dialogue rather than a performance. Precisely because they share experience, they cannot be appreciated by passive spectators. Though there be a leader of the dance and a teller of the story, both the leading and the telling only make sense to those who actively join in. Miriam leads, but all the women take up her refrain. Joshua reminds the clans of what Yahweh has done, but they tell the story in response: "He brought our ancestors out of Egypt and preserved us all along the way we travelled." Until you have shared them as dialogue, you cannot understand the stories and rituals of Israel, and to share them in this way is to become involved and committed. The ritual and the story telling of Shechem was not just a tableau, but a dialogue leading into commitment. The revelation of God in the story of Israel will only be understood by those who let themselves be drawn into that story as active participants.

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The expression of personal commitment in which clans or tribes form a community is what the Bible calls a "covenant". It is both worship (acknowledging Yahweh's authority) and law (the binding commitment of the community). Without it, there is no Israel, no people, no permanent sharing of experience, no personal relationship with Yahweh, no community under his rule. The covenant commitment is a declaration of identity, of enduring personal reality that outlasts fluctuating circumstances and narrow self-interest. It is the full expression of freedom: the freedom to be personal, to be community, to be self-committed, to be subject to God who rules in the giving of freedom.

The stories and rituals of Israel do not exist for their own sake, to be assessed or admired in some detached way as works of art. Nor are they theses or oracles which merely communicate information. They share and pass on experience, in order to renew commitment. Like the rule of God himself, they exist to involve, in a lasting personal relationship, and to engage them on any other terms is to mistake and distort them. Both ritual and story are understood only as you face up to the commitment they demand: the covenant and the sovereign rule of God.

This does not mean that they convey no objective history. It is precisely real history, history as it has been experienced, which challenges us in the lore of Israel. The experience we share has its roots in events which happened; the commitment to which we are drawn is real and has been brought about in others before us. The rule of God is no myth but a real intervention in events which are, because of his rule, supremely important. They are a history which involves and challenges because God himself is involved personally in it. It is not a catalogue of detached facts, but history as remembered, celebrated, shared and passed on, a history of God's community.

In this history, God was dealing with Israel, shaping them and talking to them as he did so. It was like a sculptor making a live statue, and explaining to it as he went, what he was doing - only think of a group sculpture, not an individual figure. They listened (sometimes) and they heard (some of it). They were not theologians or philosophers speculating into the darkenss, but believers acknowledging the voice that spoke to them in so much of their experience as the voice of their God forming them into his people.

God's rule is always a matter of communication. In time, the stories, rituals and laws of Israel, by which her past was preserved and handed on, came to be written down and were gradually collected into the books we know as the Old Testament. The writing, collecting and preserving of scriptures was also part of Israel's experience, her growing sense of identity and her deepening commitment to Yahweh, and therefore in these developments too God was acting, speaking, and building his community.

So the Old Testament is the word of God not as if that "word" was spoken in dictation to be written down and read by later generations, but as God's personal communication with the Israelites through their experience and all that followed from it. The books of scripture are not the original works of individual authors inspired by a heavenly voice. But they are God's word no less, for his voice speaks in the original experience, in the

sharing and handing on, and in the writing down and fixing. At each stage, God is at work making it God's personal communication with his community and the exercise of his rule over them, giving them identity and meaning.

We cannot appreciate God's word in scripture if we treat it as a written document outside of any context. We must understand what goes before it: the community under God's rule, history, and the reliving of experience, the sharing of ritual and story, dialogue and the people's commitment. Only when we so understand it does scripture become for us the word of God in dialogue with us, the word of our ruler declaring to us, too, our identity as his people.

So the story-telling of Israel is God's story-telling, by which he preserves and builds his community. The rituals of Israel are her steps in a dance that is always led by Yahweh. Because they are her steps and her story-telling, they are shot through with blunders, flaws and half-truths, but because God is in the dance and in the story, we can always hear, through the shortcomings, the truth revealed by God. Thus we come to terms with the crucial and often baffling paradox that scripture is clearly subject to every kind of historical, moral and logical judgement by which we assess any written record, and yet retains the authority to challenge and to guide, to correct and overrule us as God's word.

To understand scripture we must understand the community to whom it was first an experience; we must understand how they shared and recorded their experience; and we ourselves must enter into the experience, becoming, with them, subject to God as our ruler. I do not mean, of course, that we must all become historical and exegetical experts in order to profit from scripture, but that we as a community sharing an experience must be able to make those assessments. There must be some among us who are able to contribute an understanding of scripture's background: teachers and writers who put it in its setting so that it becomes an experience we share with Israel. And the end result must be a community subject to God. It is no more possible now than it was originally, for individuals to experience the rule of God alone, and scripture is a sure guide only as it is a shared guide, received in commitment and a shared experience of God's personal, self-communicating rule.

So understood, scripture is a key to our relationship with God. It describes who God is and who we are and where we belong. It opens up to us our personality, our identity, our community, in God's love. It presents us in the first place with Israel, but eventually with ourselves and our solidarity under the rule of God. We will find that, taking it seriously, we come to know God and recognise his ways, which commit us to radical and challenging decisions about our present society.

In dealing with the Old Testament I am therefore concerned with the past, with what happened and what was said; with its meaning and its interpretation, but also with its relevance to us, the guidance that comes from the past for issues that face us now. Scripture is not a manual for present-day practice, but when we read it as involved and committed participants, we discover God, and the principles that God has endorsed in his

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communication with Israel, God's priorities in dealing with the human condition. We look in the Old Testament not for rules or doctrines to apply automatically, but for a relationship: God's relationship with Israel and the Israelites' relationship with one another. For this is the relationship into which we too are drawn by our dialogue with God, and its history indicates for us the relationships that are right for our own community.

However, there are two ways in which we have to understand what is shown us in the Bible. On the one hand God's relationship with Israel is the one unchanging relationship into which we have now entered, and it shows the same characteristics for us as for them. Trust and love play the same basic part, commitment and risk are as crucial, and we, like them, are "endangered" by it. On the other hand it is a relationship with a history (like a friendship progressing towards marriage). It begins somewhere, and it is going somewhere. Throughout its progress, each stage is different from the others, and earlier stages are superseded, not repeated. Thus God did not treat the Midianites as he had treated the Israelites; Israel today is not in the same position as Joshua's Israel, and we ourselves are not to go snatching land by slaughtering its owners. In the books of the Old Testament, we have recorded for us God's gradual revelation: the emphasis is on gradual, and in Judges and Joshua we have some of the earliest steps. We must learn to recognise what is a permanent quality of the relationship, and what is, however real, a passing phase of its development. To neglect the first is to lose touch with God; to cling to the second is to fail in faith, not trusting God enough to let the relationship grow.

That relationship now extends to us, not because there are parallels between the Israelites and us, but because of our continuity with them. We now share in the dialogue that God opened up with them, receiving as believers our identity and community from their God. He is still communicating, and still giving himself to us as our leader and ruler.

It is an explicit and special relationship. We do not worship a distant God who sets the universe going and then leaves it alone, or is too remote to make any difference to what goes on, too sublime to strike up a personal relationship with people in the world. The God we worship has intervened in his creation, taking sides in the events of history and involving himself in a particular way with a particular group. He has been selective and specific, committing himself in such a way that we can see him at work in what happens to Israel more clearly than we can recognise him in all the rest of creation.

To some extent, we do know God from the whole of creation. There, he is present everywhere. Everyone has the same opportunity of seeing and knowing him: but it's an opportunity that very few take. The very fact that God is so impartial, so equally active in everything, leads us to suppose that he isn't there at all, or that if he is, he doesn't make any difference. If we had only the acts of God as the Creator of the world to go by, we would not get to know him very well.

But by acting "in" creation, God makes it possible for us to identify him and relate to him. He comes down to our level and communicates with us, speaking as if he were in

creation, to us whose whole universe is creation. We cannot, and should not want to, remove him again by denying the experience of Israel. Many have argued for a God divorced from history, a safely remote God who does not interfere in the world. But a God who does not interfere does not intervene, does not communicate and does not strike up any personal relationship. For "interference" is only what we call an attempt to make personal contact, or a wish to be involved, when we mistrust or resent it. God has chosen to intervene and identify himself. He is not equally represented by any god or God people worship, for he has declared himself as Yahweh, the god of Israel. As Yahweh, he spoke to Israel, forming them through his personal communication with them, and we now are not just listening in on their conversation, but continuing the dialogue.¹

We are Israel's heirs, to whom the God of Israel still reveals himself, and he whom we recognise as God, is Yahweh the warrior god of Israel. In spite of their barbarism and their primitive intellectual level, we have here the basic revelation of God ruling over God's people - all the clearer for being expressed in so basic a setting. A more enlightened age and a more developed civilisation would have been subject to more sophisticated errors, in which it might have been less easy for us to discern the truth. In the story of Israel we have the beginning of our own story, where we can rediscover the roots of our own true community. If we come to it as more than observers, as a people involved in what we read, we may discover there our true freedom as persons: our community under the rule of God.

Of course there remains a gap - thousands of years of history - between ourselves and early Israel, and this book can only hint at the beginning of what God's rule and God's community is for us. But even the hint of a beginning can crack the hard cynicism of a society in which community is almost dead and the rule of God relegated to an illusory past or a fantasy future. Even the hint of a beginning will show the rule of God and the community God creates as something more real, more actual, more present and challenging than either our present complacency or our present despair can stand. I cannot stress too much how important I think these beginnings are, yet what a tiny and initial part of the whole story they must be. This book can only be my first contribution to a study of the Old and New Testament scriptures which will be a search for that spiritual and political community which supersedes all others, in which alone we can understand ourselves, as a community of persons under the rule of God.

¹ There is no point at which we can ditch Yahweh and take up with a more enlightened, less anthropomorphic God, without taking ourselves outside the whole Israelite, Jewish and Christian tradition. Even the belief that the God revealed by Jesus Christ might do away with any need for the God of Israel is illusory, for there is continuity between Yahweh the warrior god and God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ: he is the same One.