

4 Warlords and Masters

Since God himself had created Israel, we might expect that the new nation would inevitably be successful. If anyone can found a viable nation, surely God can, and as the provider of the land on which they lived, the one upon whom they relied for all they had, he had surely the means of building them into a strong and lasting community, a people worthy of his effort and attention.

But it was not so. In the next few chapters, which deal with the Book of Judges, we must face the fact that Israel was not a success, but a sad failure. The editor of Judges comments occasionally on this failure and refers it to their neglect of Yahweh and his commands, or to their lack of a king¹ - but the main tendency of the original stories is to read the failure of Israel in the depth of their own human viciousness. It is the human heart that tears their community apart, and the Israelites failed Yahweh not just by their neglect of religious duties, but through that wilful, foolish, destructive self-assertion that we would call pride or ego, the arrogance of individuals and of groups who tried to dominate in their community, and to be its centre in place of Yahweh.

In the wilderness Yahweh had offered himself as the one who would shape them into a community, with a land of their own. But once within the land, they not only found other gods to offer their loyalty to, but other drives and lusts within themselves, that fought against the will of Yahweh and threatened the whole community with disintegration. The sovereign work of God, to rule by agreement and commitment, by trust and love, was undermined and frustrated by an aggressive and selfish people. Beneath the idyllic description of the tribes that we read in the "Blessings of Moses", and behind the ideals and promises sworn at Shechem, there is a darker, sadder reality: an Israel where Yahweh seems not to be sovereign, but the arrogance of man rules, and tears the community to pieces as fast as it begins to cohere.

Gideon, the hero of Israel's war against Midian, left a large family of sons when he died, and, as he had enjoyed considerable influence, it is not surprising that there was a struggle to fill the power vacuum. At first, his surviving sons shared authority over the clans that had followed him; but one of them, Abimelech, was a ruthless and ambitious man, determined to rule alone. Though a minor member of the family, he had useful connections on his mother's side, and these, men of influence in Shechem and its region, were persuaded to support him. They raised a force which murdered Gideon's other sons, then gathered the local clan leaders, and declared Abimelech king in Shechem.²

To the one survivor of the assassination is attributed a famous and ancient satire on the folly of domination and arrogance, the pride that makes one man attempt to overshadow others, and the very foolish weakness that makes some men, like the leaders of Shechem, think they will find security and strength under the domination of such a leader.

¹ Jud 8:33; 18:1. ² See Jud 9.

The Warrior God

One day the trees went out
to anoint a king to rule over them.

They said to the Olive tree, "Be our king."
The Olive tree answered them,
"Must I forgo my oil
which gives honour to gods and men,
to stand swaying above the trees?"

They received a similar answer from the fig tree and the vine, both useful and productive plants with better things to do. So they resorted to the useless and noxious thorn bush:

Then all the trees said to the thorn bush,
"Come now, you be our king!"
And the thorn bush answered the trees,
"If you really want to make me your king,
then come and shelter in my shade.
If not, fire will come from the thorn bush
and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

(Jud 9:7-15)

The desire of one man to stand proudly above others, issuing orders, and the small person's willingness to buy security by submitting to domination, are both foreign to the tradition of Israel. Having escaped from slavery, it is not for them to seek it out again by making the arrogant their rulers. A nation of free and self-reliant clans linked by tribal ties and kinship, they should not surrender their real strength in each other for the showy muscle of an ambitious and domineering boss. Rule by domination, the rule of the aggressive, forceful or competitive, runs counter to the community proposed by Yahweh, in which he rules by love and trust. The arrogant proposed a vision of power and security which was centered on their own forceful leadership, but in every case, as we shall see, they succeeded only in dividing and destroying.

Human ego or pride, the desire to dominate, is in us all, driving us in our relationships and shaping the communities in which we live together. Since Marx, we have emphasised the domination of classes, and the struggle of classes against domination. But pride and domination show themselves in classes only because they are in the hearts of individual people. The desire to dominate, and the resistance to domination and even the desire to be dominated, established themselves, if not sooner, as soon as each one learnt to relate to others within their family, creche or kindergarten. Wherever a child finds or seeks its security with others, patterns of dominating behaviour appear, and the desire to exercise control over others. Wherever and however people form communities, the same desires assert themselves, clamouring for power to shape and direct the communities that are formed. In the twentieth century, we have seen socialist and Marxist forms of domination emerging as powerful and oppressive as any capitalist regime.

The traits of pride and egoism are written big in tales of kings, warfare, empire and big business. We think of them as masculine, because physically and economically men do dominate our society, and where domination is on a large and exciting scale, it is usually in the hands of men. This is the kind of domination that makes for heady drama of the “Dallas” kind. It is the kind of domination that knows no limits, that is always spurred on by ambition to acquire more, control more, conquer more. It is the domineering will of a Napoleon or Cesare Borgia, of a big-time gangster or a property magnate, of a business tycoon or a president-maker.

But the desire and need to dominate is very common, and not always so ambitious. There is a form of the vice more easily associated with women (maybe because social pressures have forbidden them the more ambitious spheres). This kind is more ready to accept its limitations, to narrow its horizons to the small world that it can control. It is much less likely to reach out and conquer the world at large, but shuts out that world, cutting itself off defensively and concentrating on its own small circle of family, friends or parish. There is the mother who controls by manipulation and emotional pressure the lives of her family; the forceful woman who dominates her club, parish or favourite charity; and the cautious local churchman who jealously organises to his own satisfaction every detail of congregational life. Talking is sometimes its major weapon, for by holding the flow of conversation and blocking or ignoring other people's participation you control a little empire of your own. I have known helpless old ladies who, from their sick-beds, completely dominate all comers with no other weapon than speech, forcing all attention to themselves, commanding everything within their horizons to centre on them and remain enthralled with their concerns. It is an oppressive regime, even when you know you can make an excuse and escape from it, but for a husband or wife, or immediate family, who cannot escape, it can be intolerable.

Domination can easily be disguised as humble service and dedication to others. We all know of the wife or mother who slaves for her family, and never stops telling them so, making the whole household revolve around the fact that she is utterly indispensable to them. And in the church there is always the dreadfully busy minister or evangelist, heavily committed and so booked up that nothing and no one can break into the little world, securely controlled, that he has organised for himself. There are those bishops who do not tire of telling us how untiringly they work for the benefit of their flock, how its safety and security are their whole concern, when in fact their whole concern is to keep it the kind and size of flock they can safely and securely control.

There could be many more examples, but let these few suffice. The point is that domination is not always the dramatic and glamorous vice we see on television or in big power politics. It is often a petty, parochial and homely vice. Either way the object is the same: whether conquering the world at large, or limiting it to the circle I am able to dominate, I seek to make my world centre on me, on my ego and needs, and even on my need to serve. The difference between imperial tyrants or dictators, for all their hideous outrages, and a nagging mother or a manipulating old lady, is a difference of imagination,

The Warrior God

ambition and opportunity, not of the basic desire to dominate and to be at the centre of things.

(I hope it is not necessary to apologise for the apparently sexist language of my examples. I believe that in this matter of domination we do adopt cliché, sexist roles, because they offer us the better chance of asserting ourselves. Accepting a convenient role is an easier way of putting myself in charge of my chosen sphere than running counter to social pressure. It is part of the wrongness of ego or pride that it confines people to ready-made sexist performances.)

We should not suppose, however, that the right alternative to egoistic domination by the powerful is rule by the weak. In practice, vice is not the opposite of virtue, but a distortion of it. The kind of rule that was traditional in Israel, and which Yahweh himself encouraged, was rule by the strong, but by strong men who knew their dependence on him and on their weaker adherents. Israel's strength in the wilderness had been the unity of kinsfolk bound together by hardship and danger, in which the one who ruled had to be the most effective leader, tried and proven through frequent crises. It was a rough, tribal society, in which the strong ruled and the weak had to ally themselves to a strong leader. But it was one in which the strong man had strong ties with his dependants and in which it was obvious that he himself drew strength from their support. The desert chief defending his well or oasis, knows that his hand is strengthened by every single kinsman who lines up beside him to confront his rivals.

But Abimelech's rule over Shechem was something different: a form of domination drawing on the model of the old Canaanite cities, and extending over a wider domain, so that the leader's dependence on his less significant followers was easily forgotten. For Abimelech, the cunning manipulation of family ties, and aggression against his rivals within, took the place of any real benefits or victories he ought to have gained for his people, to establish his right to rule.

In a close-knit family group struggling for survival in the desert and against many foes, strength of muscle and of personality do indeed play their part, but the benefits are real and immediate and obvious, and every member is strengthened as they strengthen the leader. In a larger, settled society, an incipient nation or empire, domination becomes a goal in itself, vaunted as the right to rule, and boasted of as a mighty benefit to its objects, but easily divorced from any real service to them, and ignorant of its dependence on them. The family or clan unit was ruled by strength, but with real love and commitment; in the larger society, domination rules without love, which disappears or remains only as a cynically cultivated fiction.

The ancient Israelites did not consider or value the individual on his own - such an idea is illusory, and they knew it. The real human person is the person within their circle of family, friends or community. In many of the books of ancient Israel the "individual" is a man with his father's family, with his wives and his children and his children's families.

The individual is nothing without his clan. It is their commitment to him and his to them that makes him who and what he is. He lives in that commitment, which is called "love".

If we bear this in mind, we can understand the precious traditions at stake in the reshaping of Israel as the conquest of Canaan was gradually completed. More and more, the Israelite families, clans and tribes sought greater strength and security through greater unity. Their need was to stand united against common enemies, to hold the land they had taken, and to achieve greater prosperity by co-operation and good government. The danger was that in the search for effective and strong government, not love and commitment but arrogance would be rewarded, that the power to dominate would become the goal. If the Israelites did not know how to love one another, if they could not extend their deep family commitment to all their fellow Israelites, who were all Yahweh's people, they would easily be seduced by the self-confidence and assurances of arrogant leaders. The mere ability to stand swaying above one's fellows would pass for strength and leadership.

It is a universal problem: those who neglect cooperation, self-sacrifice and committed love are ripe prey for dictators. A people who put all store by their own narrow interests, their own small group or tribe, trade union, business or club, are soon conquered and gathered into a dictator's net. The more vehemently and exclusively we focus on the interests of our own faction, the more easily we fall victim to an overbearing power that takes everything from us. Those who do not understand love as self-sacrificing commitment to others are easily fooled. They think themselves wise and able to judge real quality, strength and truth, but they end up valuing a man as he projects himself, and are easy prey for advertisers and politicians. Above all, they are carried away by the glamour, the noise, the acclaim and self-assurance of a dominating leadership. In politics, they fall prey to popular dictatorships, to demagogues. In religion, they form sects around the most showy and intransigent of prophets. Because they do not understand love, which is commitment centered outside themselves, their weaknesses, fears and desires can be manipulated to steer them into the safety of a slave state.

From the very beginning Israel had been founded and built upon love, not domination. Yahweh came not as a power enforcing obedience, but as a generous protector inviting trust and offering his own permanent commitment. "I will be your God and you shall be my people." Pride and dominating ambition have no place in Yahweh's plan, but are a disorder, a corruption in the human heart, creating a disastrous imbalance that Yahweh himself will have to put right. So it comes about in the story of Abimelech.

The arrogance and scheming of Abimelech's party continued after his success, only now as treachery within the new kingdom:

God sent a spirit of discord between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, who rebelled against him. (Jud. 9:23)

The Warrior God

In revenge, Abimelech destroyed Shechem, slaughtered the population and burnt alive those who sought refuge in the temple. But he did not live long to enjoy his triumph. While laying siege to the town of Thebez, he was killed ignominiously, when a stone thrown by a woman hit him on the head.

Thus God made the evil recoil on Abimelech that he had done to his father in murdering his brothers, as God made all the wickedness of the people of Shechem recoil on their own heads too. (Jud. 9:56-7)

Pride and ambition, driving us to control and dominate, bring all kinds of evil upon society. There is a chain reaction that goes rolling around the community doing more and more harm, until it is turned back where it began, to fall upon those who started it. The end of evil is when evil doers are made to suffer an evil fate: and it is for Yahweh, as sovereign of his people, to bring this about.

Yahweh, as Israel's true ruler, opposes the overbearing self-assertion and domination that would make the Israelites slaves again. Sometimes, the evil is contained, and his acts of poetic justice soon bring the cycle to an end. But the lust for domination was endemic in Israel, and Yahweh did not always bring it to such a neat conclusion. Sometimes, as the next story shows, it cut a trail of destructive injury right thru the community before it had run its course.

There came a time when the tribes were under threat from the Philistines in the west and the Ammonites in the east. The crisis exposed a deep weakness in Israel: the near disappearance of their ancient faith in Yahweh, and their consequent disunity, as a people who could hardly be called his people any longer. The Ammonites were overrunning the tribal territories beyond the Jordan, and pushing across the river into Ephraim and Benjamin, and even Judah. It showed how desperately weak the Israelites were and how totally lacking in co-ordination and leadership. The people who had so forcefully overrun Canaan seemed to have disintegrated and were ready to fall, in their turn, to later and stronger invaders. They had lost their old fighting spirit in a long period of relative security. The warriors of Yahweh had settled down to a poor person's copy of the Canaanite civilisation they had overthrown. They had picked up the more fascinating of Canaanite practices, especially their religious rites, and now in their moment of crisis they found themselves estranged from their warrior god. Years of complacency and security had cut them off from the god who had always been their god of dangerous moments, and now, as they hastily thought of him again, they were conscience-stricken at their infidelity:

Then the Israelites cried to Yahweh: "We have sinned against you because we turned away from you to serve the Baals." And Yahweh said to the Israelites: "Did I not rescue you from the Egyptians, the Amorites and the Sidonians, from Amalek and Midian, when you cried out to me? But you have turned from me and served other gods; and so I shall rescue you no more. Go and cry to the gods you have chosen. Let them rescue you." The Israelites answered Yahweh, "We

have sinned. Do with us as you think fit; only do rescue us today." They got rid of the foreign gods that they had, and served Yahweh, and he could bear Israel's suffering no longer. (Jud. 10:6-16)

At first, this account of a dialogue between God and his people sounds very strange, and it is indeed a later addition - a stylised commentary on the story. But it is probably not far from Israel's actual experience, on more than one occasion. We are not to imagine some supernatural wonder, like a voice from heaven or a visible appearance of God. Phrases such as "Yahweh said" or "Yahweh replied" mean that prophets, priests, seers, teachers or elders, used to consulting Yahweh, gave this kind of message. It is not a miraculous voice from the clouds but a reading of the omens, or the opinion of Yahweh's recognised spokesmen. In other words, such dialogues with God are neither more nor less than believing communities experience in every age: not a special direct line to a visible and tangible God that was uniquely granted to the early Israelites, but simply the community recognising in its own way what God is saying.

In times of crisis communities do look back in remorse to their past ideals and to the god of their ancestors. They see their own weakness and vulnerability as proof of their decadence and a just punishment for the neglect of traditional values and loyalties. Repentance (if only shallow repentance) is their natural response. At this time, Israelite villages and clans who had shrugged their shoulders at reports of Philistine aggression "over the hill" or "down on the plain", suddenly found their own land swarming with bands of marauding Ammonites. As their crops and houses burned, as they buried their dead or recovered their wounded or mourned for friends and family taken as slaves; as they saw their flocks driven off by the Ammonites, they must have begun to ask and to argue what had gone wrong. And since the old ways had not entirely disappeared, there must have been devotees of Yahweh, Israelites who lived closer to the ways of the wilderness and remembered the warrior god, to give them an answer. Prophets, old people, die-hards and enthusiasts would find that their time had come, when they could say "I told you so", and their fellow Israelites would be in a mood to listen.

It is such an experience of anguish, questioning, regret, fear and response that is succinctly represented as Israel's dialogue with Yahweh. It is not hard to see that their suffering was indeed punishment for their desertion of Yahweh. It was the natural result of Israel's stagnation, as they lost their fighting adhesion to him, and with it their only common strength and character, leaving nothing to guarantee them greater success in holding Canaan than their predecessors had had.

Yet we might ask whether there isn't a certain pique in Yahweh's reply which we don't want to attribute to God:

'You have turned from me and served other gods; so I shall rescue you no more. Go and cry to the gods you have chosen; let them rescue you.'

The Warrior God

I would say that even here it is God himself who speaks as Yahweh, and refuses his people's cry. Precisely because he is God, and not just another "god", he must somehow get through to them that his relationship is permanent and all-embracing. It may be all right for those who put their trust in the gods to change gods as occasions require; but those who have been invited and enabled to put their trust in Godself, those with whom God has sided, as was Israel's privilege, must learn that the relationship is unique and permanent and total. So the only "honest" answer God can give, the only one that would not deceive them and delude them into thinking that he was the same as any god or power in the service of men, to be taken up and put down as needed, was to refuse help until they acknowledged a greater commitment than their immediate need.

Those Israelites who had cherished the traditions of Yahweh worship realised this. The wilderness faith had survived not among the shallow and accommodating, but among those who realised its permanence and the serious consequences of Yahweh's love. They were not likely to give slick reassurances to the suddenly and conveniently repentant, but could only send them back to ponder their fickleness and the consequences of failure in their commitment to Yahweh.

The Israelites were now desperate, for the Ammonites, no longer merely raiding, were claiming large parts of their territory beyond the Jordan; and even if that concerned other tribes, it brought the enemy closer to all. They were ready to respond with something of the submission and commitment Yahweh was looking for:

"We have sinned; do with us as you think fit, only do rescue us today."

It is a minimal response, still mainly concerned about the present danger, but they have been prodded into one important concession: "Do with us as you think fit." They are now prepared to trust him as their punisher and believe themselves safer in his hands, even for fitting punishment, than if they are left to the Ammonites and the consequences of their own sin. They trust him to be more merciful, if he takes direct control of their punishment, than the events they have brought upon themselves.

They had broken their relationship with him, reducing it to one of exploitation by using Yahweh as long as he was useful, and turning to the Baals when it seemed as if they were more serviceable. If their "repentance" simply meant turning to Yahweh again to get off the hook, it would only reinforce that relationship of exploitation. They would still be trying to use him. That is why he does not accept them until they are ready to accept his punishment: he wants them to return to a new and deeper relationship of trust, and for now, that means the trust that it takes to accept punishment.

It is a weakness of our faith that we find it hard to accept the idea of God punishing. We prefer to think of God remaining inactive, at most "allowing" sin and foolishness to take its own course and reap its own consequences. This is because, if we think of punishment, we think of a bullying god, who hits out in blind fury at those who threaten him. But this is not the god of the Book of Judges. This is not Yahweh as he is portrayed

in the Old Testament - only as he is misremembered from selected and mis-selected parts of it. Punishment, dealt out and controlled by the hands of one who loves you, is far more merciful and far less destructive than the punishment that sin naturally brings upon itself. The Israelites now understood that their present punishment was a "natural consequence" of their desertion, and they asked Yahweh to come back, to punish them himself "as he saw fit", rather than leave them to their fate. Punishment which is simply the intrinsic evil of sin careering on to its own kind of destruction does nothing to heal or to restore our relationship with God, but if he himself steps in and takes an active part in it, punishment itself becomes a new meeting with him and a point of healing and reconstruction. It is in recognising this, that Israel's answer shows a real, if small, advance in trust and commitment.

If the concession on Israel's part is small, God's concession is great. "He could bear Israel's suffering no longer." Like a reconciled friend or lover or father, he is once more deeply, and emotionally, involved. It would be easy to pass the emotion over as part of Israel's primitive and anthropomorphic idea of God, but I hope we will not do so, having found so much that is sound in the rest of the dialogue. This Yahweh, who is moved by his people's suffering, who is once again fully involved with them, rushing back to them at the slightest sign of renewed trust, is God. A more sophisticated theology will tell us, correctly, that we cannot attribute emotions to God in the way that we attribute them to people; but it will have to make some sense of the emotions of God, for this is how he has revealed himself. Somehow, he suffers with his people, to whom he is bound by promise and trust, until he can bear their suffering no longer. Whatever our theology, it will be inadequate - and less satisfactory than that of the ancient Israelites - if it cannot recognise the suffering and emotional involvement of God.

In the Ammonite invasion, Gilead, beyond the Jordan, was particularly vulnerable. The Gileadites were an odd group, in the territory of Manasseh but rather independent, and used to looking after their own affairs as a clan or tribe apart. There was at that time a bandit leader named Jephthah, an outcast driven from Gilead by his own clan because he was the son of a foreign harlot. Like the earliest Israelites themselves, he was an outlaw: a despised renegade outside all accepted and settled society, leading a gang that lived by robbery and theft. In their desperation, the elders of Gilead now turned to these men. (It would not be the last time that Israel's future lay in the hands of an outlaw, for these outlaws had a way of preserving the old, desperate and hardy traditions of the fighting Israelites who had first invaded Canaan.)

Jephthah met the elders of Gilead at Mizpah,¹ where, at the shrine of Yahweh, he was accepted as leader and took command of their resistance to the Ammonites. Although his understanding of Yahweh was primitive and misguided (he was later to offer him a human sacrifice) he at least understood the binding power of commitments and therefore the fundamental relationship of trust. He was, at his own savage and barbaric level, Yahweh's kind of man.

¹Jud 11

The Warrior God

This outlaw, the reject of a reject tribe, led his forces out against the Ammonites. He attempted first to negotiate with them, to persuade them that each people should stay put in the territory already allotted to it by its own god. But the Ammonites were in no mood for negotiations: they wanted the land and believed they could take it. In the battle that followed, however, Jephthah's men so decisively routed them that it brought an end to their raids on Israel.

The victors should have been hailed as saviours of all Israel - but far from it! They were at once criticised and attacked by the tribe of Ephraim¹ for acting out of turn. Ephraim, the largest of all the tribes, considered itself the natural leader of Israel, and was particularly sensitive to tribes beyond the Jordan acting independently. In all but the south of the country Ephraim was in fact the dominant tribe, and pride and jealousy now roused them against Gilead, as they had been provoked before by Gideon's success.² They scorned the Gileadites as not being a true tribe in Israel, and taunted them as misfits or even deserters in the heart of Manasseh.

Jephthah protested that he had asked for the Ephraimites' help, but had had to move alone when no help came. He also appealed to the undeniable fact of his victory as proof that Yahweh had supported him. But it was no use. Ephraim mobilised; a large army of warriors crossed the Jordan and marched against the Gileadites to put down the challenge to their supremacy.

The outcome, however, was another surprise. Jephthah's Gileadites routed their enemy and cut off the survivors from the fords of the Jordan, which they had to cross to get back home. Flushed with the success of two victories, and stung by the arrogance of Ephraim, the Gileadites were in no mood for mercy. Desperate Ephraimites, trying to mingle with the normal flow of travellers at the fords, were picked out by the Gileadites on guard there. These had been taunted with their anomalous position in Israel, and now they more than taunted Ephraim with its own little anomaly, a peculiarity of accent. They declared a password, "shibboleth", and as the Ephraimites pronounced it "sibboleth", they were easily noticed, seized and slaughtered. We are told that "thousands" perished attempting to return to their own side of the river.

The Book of Judges is often thought of as a strange and primitive collection of stories, but it is much more than that: it is a perceptive and sensitive account of the forces at work in people, driving them to destroy themselves, even in the community founded by God. It tells of Israel's struggle to become a community, as a record of the dark human heart which is the downfall of all communities, and the reason why even God must struggle "against the odds" to create God's people.

¹ Jud 12 ² Jud 8:1-3

Pride, rivalry, the rule of warlords and the desire for mastery - forces which make some empires strong by enslaving all to one will - can only destroy Israel. The things that are thought to be mighty in human ego are the weakness of Israel, dividing her people and driving them from the way that Yahweh has planned for them. They are illusions, shattering the whole relationship in which Israel becomes one people as God's people. Whether it is the warlords of Ephraim, asserting their right to dominate the other tribes, or a scheming Abimelech, ambitious to stand swaying above his countrymen as their master: all their show of power is exposed in these stories for the deceptive and destructive weakness it is.