

## 6 The Tribes at War

"No man is an island." Every family, community, nation is evidence of this. But it is one of our errors to believe that the individual can be thought of alone, even if they cannot quite stand alone. We think of the community as external to personal identity, a necessary aid or unavoidable hindrance to personal fulfilment. We talk so easily about the individual in themselves, that we forget there is really no such thing. The individual without their community, their personal ties and relationships, is nothing. Even the recluse in his backwoods cabin surrounds himself with animals to treat as people, or else he starts to talk to his plants, or even his furniture. We have to relate to others as part of a community, in order to be real ourselves.

If you are trying to decide which is more important, the individual or the community, you have already misunderstood the matter. The individual's importance is in the context of their community; the community's importance is with reference to the individuals who make it. People see themselves mostly, if not entirely, in terms of their relationships, or their place in a community, and how they see themselves is vital for what they will achieve and become. That is why Yahweh founded his community as a people knowing themselves in their relationship with him.

It should follow from this that any individual Israelite would seek to discover (to affirm or fulfil) themselves as one of Yahweh's people, in the community of all Yahweh's people. They would have their family, and the family its clan, and the clan its tribe, and the tribe the whole community of Israel, all Yahweh's people. At no level should there be any self-assertion, or self-definition, against the rest of that community, for this would bring in a false and destructive, an isolated and divisive view of self. Egoism and narrow tribal pride run counter to Yahweh's purpose and the full, free identity of his people.

Samson was the nearest thing to an individualist that we will meet in this early part of the Bible, and yet he was heavily dependent on his community. The drive within him for revenge was itself an admission of his close involvement even with his Philistine enemies. His life was so intertwined with theirs that he could not remain calmly indifferent to them, but was driven to bitter hatred by their treatment of him. He was so dependent on his community that when it betrayed or tricked him he had to lash out savagely in bitter retaliation.

His was a mixed Israelite-Philistine community (as witness his marriage and his practice of whoring in Philistine towns) and his egoistic passion for revenge proved fatal to that community. In this case, the community destroyed was not Yahweh's, but a hostile alternative to it: a combination of dominant urban Philistines with subservient Israelite peasants. It was Yahweh's purpose, served by Samson's revenge, to break up this imbalance and restore independence to Israel. "All this came from Yahweh, who was seeking an occasion for quarrelling with the Philistines; since at this time the Philistines had Israel under their power"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jud 14:4

## The Warrior God

In this chapter, however, we shall see how the destructive power of human ego led to another and terrible conclusion: the dismembering of Israel. The Book of Joshua ended with the consolidation of the nation in the great covenant at Shechem, but Judges ends with a more sombre prospect: the possible end of Israel, brought home to them by the destruction of an Israelite tribe. The message is, as we have seen already, that even Yahweh's community can tear itself to pieces.

They were a varied lot to begin with, roughly twelve tribes, but only roughly, for they are listed differently in different accounts. One tribe, Dan, lived in two separate territories, and others, Simeon and Reuben, were absorbed into their neighbours before they made any mark on history. People like the Kenites and the Gileadites were included, but with varying claims to legitimacy in Israel - a source of conflict, as we have seen. The huge tribe of Joseph was divided into Ephraim and Manasseh, and the Levites, though counted as a tribe, had not one territory but various towns scattered through the country, and were more like a caste with their common rights and common profession as priests.

Out of this variety, the differences of status, size and tradition, there might have grown a community that was healthy and diverse, if each group had identified itself, first and foremost, as people of Yahweh. Then they would have learnt to reconcile differences under him. But their different backgrounds and interests continued to be a focus and excuse for rivalry, ambition, selfishness and vengeance, so that the most divisive forces arising from human ego continued to split the nation into warring factions. "Israel" remained a fiction, while Judah, Benjamin, Gilead or Ephraim were realities. The local clan or tribe was real, but the assembly and covenant of Shechem was only an ideal. In Judges, Joshua's ideal picture of one united people driving out their enemies and settling in the land their god has won for them sinks behind the reality of savage hill tribes jostling for advantage among themselves, quarrelling over their commitments and shedding one another's blood in civil war.

In establishing his community, Yahweh did not abrogate people or overrule human nature. The Israelites could only become the kind of community their own character - their hearts - would allow. God did not impose his ideal upon them from outside, but had to work on their hearts, their inner image and conviction, which would shape what Israel was to be, even when God himself did the shaping. His desire was to make them one people and rule them as their one God, but the Book of Judges is the story of Israel's failure to become that people.

It is important not to shortcut Judges here. We are used to moralists blaming all a nation's ills on neglect of God; and the book's editor (the "Deuteronomist" who added notes to link it with his own religious history of Israel) did take this line. But the stories that make up the bulk of Judges have a more complex and rounded view. They identify Israel's basic trouble as the divisive pride and rivalry of Israelites among themselves, within their clans and tribes, which constitutes rejection of Yahweh, since it was his whole purpose to make them one people.

Whether we think of the gang of slaves escaping from Egypt or the muster of the tribes at Shechem, Yahweh's agreement was with one people. By dividing themselves they reject his covenant, as much as when they transfer their allegiance to other gods. A superficial knowledge of the Old Testament gives the impression that it blames all Israel's failure simply on idolatry, the worship of other gods than Yahweh; but it is just as much concerned with the failure of Yahweh's "loyal" worshippers to be one people, and so to keep his covenant as a united community. The stories in Judges, and particularly the one with which it ends, tell of divisions and destructive conflicts between Israelite factions who are all still worshipping Yahweh.

In this respect, the Book of Judges is a pertinent criticism of ourselves as a people who have come through centuries of "Christian" culture. The tribalism that bedevilled Israel in Deborah's crisis, the hostility that Gideon had to smooth over, the power struggles around Abimelech and the disastrous clash of Ephraim with Gilead, as well as the war against Benjamin, to which we will come later in this chapter, all have their parallels in our history. Looking back, it is clear that European Christians have failed as dismally as the ancient Israelites did, to become a community of God's people. The nation-state as it now is in Europe and the Americas, and in Africa and parts of Asia, is the product of Christendom and the fundamental failure of generations of Christians to become one people.

Like that of the tribes, our loyalty, said to be for God, is rather "for God and country" - but with our country first. We reject the covenant of God so completely that we "justify" wars among ourselves, and encourage belligerent patriotism till it is considered a Christian virtue. Ultimately, we claim the right to arm ourselves with weapons "of mass destruction" designed to annihilate millions of fellow Christians at a blow.

Over the last few centuries, the spread of Christianity throughout the world in too close connection with imperial and national interests, and the collapse of Europe into internecine war have exposed the weakness of Christians: their failure to retain any effective idea of the sovereignty or the people of God this side of the grave. It has left an unreal, unconvincing residue of doctrines and loyalties that do not even look like a special kind of life for a God-chosen community. Even dedicated Christians have learnt to identify the will of God with narrow and egoistic national interests. As an American T.V. evangelist recently urged his audience, "Get into politics and insist that politicians and law-makers stand up for God's values, for the principles in this book (holding up a Bible), and then America will always be the greatest nation on earth!"

And then there are our divided churches. Even within one nation, we fail to be one Christian people, but in every city, town or village we have rival churches or congregations. If the acrimony has given way to a certain tolerance and friendliness, it is still uncommitted politeness rather than the love or sharing that would make us members of one Christian community. Our divisions deny the offer of God to make us his people. We resist the commitment of his covenant, which we try to re-shape as an individual,

## The Warrior God

private and other-worldly arrangement between "the soul and its maker", not an agreement between God and his one people.

Without a real community as evidence of God's offer - the only result worth showing - we have nothing to say to the world when it asks us about him. We don't have to worry about appearing exclusive, since we have nothing left for the world to feel excluded from. We can mutter something about God's goodness, and his good intentions for us. We can talk vaguely of his "love", but cannot show that committed community which was from the beginning the goal of his love. We who have failed so dismally to keep the covenant should find the history of Israel's failure sadly familiar.

The story of the war against Benjamin<sup>1</sup> is about the bonds and duties that make a community, and the relationship that should exist between the members of Yahweh's community. It begins with a small family reconciliation which, significantly, links three tribes: Ephraim, Levi and Judah. It shows the flouting of the most fundamental rules of brotherhood by a degenerate urban mob, and ends with the destruction of the community in outright civil war. Moving between folklore and history, it draws a convincing picture of its own barbaric times, with a rough and primitive, but valid understanding of Yahweh and his community.

A Levite in Ephraim had a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. (A "concubine" was more than a mistress - a kind of second class wife.) She left him after a row and went back to her father's house. After some months, her husband set out to visit her, to persuade her to come back. He was well received by his father-in-law, who came out joyfully to meet him and welcomed him most hospitably. The man spent three days at his wife's house, royally entertained, and when the couple, reconciled, prepared to leave on the fourth day, the father pressed his son-in-law to stay a little longer, to eat and drink before the journey. It was a kind of elaborate "one for the road", a ritual of hospitality such as we still associate with people of the Middle East. They ended up staying yet another night, and on the fifth day as they again prepared to leave, the same pressing courtesy again persuaded the Levite to delay, to eat and drink, until once again the day was well advanced, and his indefatigable host was urging him to spend another night under his roof.

After the row which had sent his daughter back to him, you might have expected a certain coolness from the father-in-law, an estrangement or at least an irritation. But he knows how to smooth over a family quarrel: friendliness, a welcome, generous hospitality and a real delight in his son-in-law's company. These ensure a complete reconciliation. When the Levite insists on leaving, late on the fifth day, they part friends and all looks well for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Jud 19 – 21

Having started late, with his servant, his concubine and two donkeys, the Levite got to Jerusalem in the late afternoon. His servant was all for turning into the city, which at that time was not inhabited by Israelites, but still held out as a Jebusite stronghold. The Levite,

however, preferred to trust himself to his own people. "We will not enter a town of foreigners, of people who are not Israelites; we will go on to Gibeah instead."

Now Gibeah was a town in Benjamin, and they reached it just in time, as the sun was setting. No traveller in those times would have been safe by night outside a fortified town, unless he had the resources to set up an armed camp himself. The sacred duties of hospitality, for an Israelite town, included the very real and necessary one of protection. Unless Israelite could turn to Israelite for protection, wherever he was, a man's whole world would be limited to his own village or town, shut and defended against every stranger.

Entering the town, the Levite sat himself down in the public square. It was the usual way of asking for friendly hospitality, and the inhabitants, if they were true Israelites, should have offered him a place to sleep and to bed down his animals. But no one did so. Night had already fallen when an old man who was not a Benjaminite, but an Ephraimite, and so himself an outsider in that town, found them still waiting in the square. He took them in and generously saw to food for the donkeys, a contrast to their surly reception from the Benjaminite citizens.

But worse was to follow. A gang of perverted louts, with no thought at all for the claims of hospitality and the stranger's Israelite kinship, set out to assert themselves over him in an act of homosexual rape. They besieged the house where he had been given shelter and demanded he be handed over for them to amuse themselves with him.

Disgusting as this crime was, the worst of it was not just their sexual perversion, but their flagrant abuse of the unprotected stranger. Instead of rallying to the defence of a fellow Israelite, they were taking advantage of his weakness among them, far from the support of his immediate kin. Any form of exploitation would have been a grave crime, and the element of sexual perversion only emphasises how degenerate the town can be, that loses its sense of wider kinship and turns into a monster preying on the defenceless for its own satisfaction. Men who could forget the claims of Israelite brotherhood would be capable of anything.

Exploitation and the sexual degeneracy of city life was, of course, a theme of Israelite folklore<sup>1</sup> - but folklore does not mean falsehood. This particular piece is certainly true to human psychology and probably true to history, as an accurate picture of egoism and self-

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<sup>1</sup> cf. the story of Sodom, Gen 18 - 19, Ezk 16:49f.

## The Warrior God

assertion, its arrogance and its effect on the community. The episode of the Gibeah mob shows us the crude will to dominate in three of its commonest forms: as the exploitation of strangers, as the gang instinct, and as sexual aggression, at each of which we should look more closely.

In any secure or well-defined institution, the stranger or outsider is vulnerable. Those who are in the circle, the old hands who know their way around, can easily assert themselves and boost their own sense of superiority by taking advantage of the awkward newcomer. So sophomores delight in the institutional tormenting of freshmen; initiations in colleges and clubs establish a satisfying hierarchy; bullies love to tease the child who is new to a school or neighbourhood. For it enhances your own sense of superiority to be one of the group that is "in" and already accepted, swaggering or smirking at the stranger's discomfort. It is an easy way of boosting your own ego.

Secondly, there is something in numbers that makes a club or a mob much more powerful than an equal number of separate individuals. In a gang, each member is enhanced by belonging, and even if there are dominant leaders, it is worth while submitting for the greater power and importance that even the least member enjoys. Boys revel in forming gangs; girls love to form close circles from which they see others excluded. It is no accident that "You'll never walk alone" has become a popular song for British football crowds. Neighbourhood gangs in some depressed urban areas give an ugly boost to pride and ego by the acts of violence they can perpetrate against the unprotected.

I am aware how close I come, at this point, to decrying what I approved in earlier chapters. There I stressed how like a gang the earliest Israelites were, and how like a gang leader was Yahweh, their warrior god. But it is not the gang instinct itself that is so destructive. Where weak individuals gang together to survive, as Israel did, and as some inner city gangs might do, the power of unity is discovered, and that was the power which Yahweh fostered in his people from the beginning. But it can be perverted. The desire to dominate can easily take over from the need to survive, with the gang deliberately seeking out the weak in order to revel in its own power.

It often happens where youngsters are desperate from boredom or frustration, that a little gang will roam the streets with the aim of "doing in" an imagined enemy. It is a kind of thuggery, but robbing is not the important part of it. There is no pride in a fair fight, but a more realistic pride in corporate strength. In callous celebration of such strength, each member rejoicing in a power he could not enjoy alone, the gang will frighten, rough up or assault defenceless individuals. As a way in which even the weak can be strong and dominating, it is more attractive than the shallow pride and self-congratulation of individual heroics.

Thirdly, this same desire to dominate shows itself in our sex life. It is a great misunderstanding of sex to think that its whole attraction is physical pleasure. Even in sexual self-indulgence far more than physical pleasure is sought and achieved. Perhaps the most important of all is reassurance, an assertion and release of ego in my power over

another. (I am, of course, describing sex without reference to love.) One reason why getting pleasure out of another person is so attractive, is that I enjoy the power of taking that pleasure. I possess the other person by possessing his or her body to use it for my own pleasure. My own reality and power, my secure place in the universe of people, is reaffirmed by my power of using another, and this reassurance through domination is even more important than the physical pleasure which is the ostensible goal of my sexual activity.

And the psychological twist by which, for some, the deep satisfaction of sex is the pleasure of being dominated, is not the opposite of the desire to dominate, but its counterpart. At its root lies the same desire to matter, to count, to be important, to feel my reality and importance physically demonstrated. The fact that someone else who is strong, big, dominating, turns his attention to me and "gets his kicks" from dominating me, in its own way gives me a certain "power", and again puts me at the centre of a little universe of persons, where I know I count, and have it proven to me by the very touch of one who gets his pleasure from me.

So there are these three manifestations of egoism brought together in the story of Gibeah: exploitation of the weak, gang pride and sexual domination. It is the art of folklore to represent in a succinct and vivid way a wide range of experience and insight. Here it is insight into the human desire to dominate and the means by which we satisfy that desire, assuring ourselves of our own reality, that we count, and that the world answers to our needs.

The Gibeah mob demanded that the stranger be handed over to them for their lust, for a celebration of their own dominance; but at this point the story takes what is for us an even more shocking turn:

The Levite's host went out to face the crowd and tried to dissuade them. "My brothers, I implore you, do not commit this crime. This man has become my guest; do not commit such an infamy. I will give you my daughter who is a virgin. Possess her and do what you please with her, but do not commit such an infamy against this man."

The men would not listen to him, so the Levite brought out his concubine and gave her to them. They had intercourse with her and outraged her all night.

(Jud 19:23-25)

If there is any page in the whole Bible where we can close the book in disgust and say, "This is not God speaking to me", then it is surely here. The behaviour, not only of the mob, but of the Levite and his protector is, to our way of thinking, so utterly depraved that we must surely lose all sympathy for any character in the story, except the poor girls who are bandied about as objects, and pushed forward to shield their menfolk in a way that would make anyone with a sense of chivalry angry with disgust. The old man's offer of his daughter we *might* just manage to see as a joint act of noble self-sacrifice - but the Levite's sending out his concubine has nothing to redeem it.

## The Warrior God

Yet, whether as folklore or as history, it is a picture of its times, and has to be understood. It is the most depraved story in the Bible, but it shows that, in the Bible, we see men not through rose-tinted and edifying lenses, but honestly and sordidly as they are. Here we are looking at an alien world, so male-orientated that a woman has no value except in relation to her man. If he is dishonoured or abused, she is destroyed with him. In this society, a woman is someone only as her father's daughter or her husband's wife, and she cannot remain all her life just her father's daughter (a point made by the initial reconciliation story). When she has become a woman, she cannot keep running back to the security of her girlhood, even though the world in which she has grown up is cruelly hard on women.

Thank God that is not our world, but thank God too, that he did and does speak in such a world, for we are not so far from it as we like to think. There are enough men today who play the double standard in their attitude to women - and enough onlookers who think it a good joke - to demand respect for their own wife, sister or daughter, while all other women are to be fair prey for their lust. We can be disgusted with the heroes of this story, but not self-righteously so. We dare not consider that their world is too far removed from civilised humanity for God to make an appearance in it: for it is too close to ours.

The Gibeah mob failed to assert itself upon the stranger, but made up for it through his woman, and in doing so set off a chain of reactions that led to the most disastrous of Israel's civil wars. When the Levite came out of the house next morning, expecting to collect his woman and at last get away from the dreadful place, he found her dead on the doorstep: he had badly underestimated their frustration and their fury. Laying her across his donkey, he returned home, where he cut the body up, limb from limb, and sent it in twelve pieces to the twelve tribes of Israel, with a demand for vengeance on Gibeah: "Has any man seen such a thing, from the day the Israelites came out of Egypt until this very day? Ponder on this, discuss it, and then give your verdict."<sup>1</sup>

His grim and dramatic gesture roused the tribes. At a full assembly, they agreed to punish Gibeah, but the tribe of Benjamin refused to hand the town over. Against the other tribes, they closed ranks; whatever they had sworn in their oaths at Shechem, they were no more willing to submit to a federal decision than the Ephraimites had been to accept the independent action of other tribes.

At the shrine of Mizpah, the assembly declared Benjamin cut off from the community of Israel. They bound themselves on oath never to give their daughters in marriage to a Benjaminite, thus relegating them to the status of foreigners. Then Benjamin itself, once a tribe of Israel, was subjected to the fury of a holy war, and the tribes swore vengeance not only on their enemy, but on any town in Israel that failed to join them in the attack. Once again, the federation had failed to hold Israel together, except in so far as it united all the other tribes against Benjamin.

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<sup>1</sup> Jud 19:30

In the first few skirmishes, the Benjaminites, holding out in the town of Gibeah itself, beat off their attackers, but Israel's fury was roused, and when they finally outwitted and broke the defenders of Gibeah, the massacre planned for the town was extended to the whole tribe. Their warriors were surrounded and slaughtered, only a few escaping to the wilderness, to hide out there alone and defeated, while the warriors of Israel rampaged through their towns, burning and destroying, putting to the sword every male Benjaminite they caught and (presumably) taking the worthwhile females for sale as slaves.

It was the bitter but inevitable result of the evil mixture that made up the Israelites: fear, pride, ego, vengeance, lust. This dark and savage people that Yahweh had befriended, the rough slaves he had rescued from Egypt, their wild kinsmen from the desert, and the Canaanite survivors among them - they were now tearing each other apart between their desire to dominate and their lust for vengeance. Divided one from another, they were turning the adventure of conquest into a cruel and bloody fratricide.

Thus the Book of Judges brings to an end the story of Israel - not its only or final end, but a point at which, but for the commitment of Yahweh, they must have come to an end: the people of the escape from Egypt, the sworn brothers of the wilderness and of Shechem, disintegrating in the violence of their pride, selfishness and revenge. In the last few chapters of Judges, we see the greatest hopes of Israel dying. The final message seems to be that, in the end, the depraved human heart wins the battle, as it destroys unity, love, loyalty, peace and security and bathes in blood the land Yahweh has given them. It cannot be long before, tribe by tribe, they have wiped themselves from the face of the earth.

The only glimmer of hope is that, violent and suicidal though human passions are, destroying every communal bond, there does come a time when anger, vengeance, madness are exhausted. When blood has flowed and towns have fallen in flames, when rash oaths have bound the people to a course that no longer excites their fury, then at last there may be a return of pity, and regret for lost friendship, mourning for the community that has been torn apart.

As the shouting and the killing died down and the dust settled on the ashes of Benjamin's towns, the Israelites at last began to realise what had happened: the loss of one whole tribe from their community.

Now the Israelites were sorry for Benjamin their brother; "Today," they said, "one tribe has been cut off from Israel. What shall we do to find wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by Yahweh not to give them any of our own daughters in marriage?" (Jud 21:6-7)

Cut off by their brothers' oath from marriage within Israel, the surviving warriors of Benjamin must find foreign wives if they are to have descendants at all, and so will marry into foreign tribes and really cease to be a tribe of Israel. The Israelites, burdened with an

## The Warrior God

oath they regretted but could not break, then remembered the towns that had not come to the muster. They destroyed the town of Jabesh, as they had sworn, but they spared its unmarried women, whom they offered as wives to the Benjaminites, to restore the tribe as an integral part of Israel.

This whole story has been as much folklore as history, and so it should be. No doubt there was a lot more behind the war than the one incident to which it is attributed, but a full factual account is not what we want. The story highlights what is important within the events: the crumbling of Israel under the forces of egoism and vengeance, the bitter regret that comes perhaps too late, and the attempted restoration of the broken community.

A final touch of folklore gives another account of the restoration of Benjamin. In this version, the tribal elders secretly advised the Benjaminite survivors to wait in ambush at Shiloh, during the annual festival of Yahweh. At that time, the maidens of Shiloh came out of the town to dance in the fields, where the Benjaminites were able to seize a wife each. In this way, capturing wives as if in war, they freed the consciences of the girls' fathers, who could then allow them to have Benjaminite husbands without breaking their oath. (Perhaps, too, it was an attraction to be saved the expense of a dowry.) In any case, we are looking again at a totally male story, in which all issues and their resolution are seen only from a complacently male point of view.

If we find the elders' scruples over a rash oath a little ridiculous, we should compare them with some more modern hang-up: "principle" or "precedent" or "face". Perhaps then we would be more impressed with their attempt to find a way around difficulties and patch up the quarrel. For them, too, like the Levite's father-in-law, reconciliation was an art, and for us it is a desperately necessary art, which we are losing.

In too many Western countries, democracy has come to mean domination by the majority, and politics has become a battle to secure that majority. The aim of politicians, and even of governments, is not to unite through consensus but to divide and rule: to divide in such a way that you create for yourself a ruling majority. American political rhetoric (even in party primaries) is savagely divisive. The British two-party system - fiercely defended by the two parties - breeds a politics of confrontation. Leaders become trapped in their own rhetoric, afraid that they might betray themselves and lose credibility if they do not maintain a solid front of scorn and invective against their opponents.

In elections, victory goes to the most aggressively presented personalities; voters are invited to throw in their lot with the most successful bullies. The illusion is fostered and clung to that community is built on power and protected by belligerence. Then, projected onto the international scene, this becomes a policy of armed confrontation and nuclear deterrence, organising a world community on the basis of intimidation, and erecting its fragile "stability" on a balance of terror. What we are seeing now is a society increasingly dominated by fear - and struggling to answer its fear by identifying and dominating its

enemies, in a vicious circle where the threat of domination breeds fear breeds counter-threat breeds more fear.

Arms negotiations have hardened into unashamed bullying, because the American president needs to stand big in global politics. On two sides of the Atlantic President and Prime Minister present the issue as a confrontation: we negotiate only from a position of strength. Our enemies will despise us if we make concessions. We must outface and outstare them: the loser is the one who blinks.

The politics of confrontation that has overshadowed our world since 1945 has affected our way of thinking. We look for absolute hostilities - making it a positive virtue of citizenship to be able to identify our enemies and face them unflinching. The uncompromising hostility which we feel we ought to have shown to Hitler and the Nazi party, is now entrenched in taboos that straight-jacket our negotiators and demand of them more muscle than manoeuvre, as if they were all arm wrestlers.

A "tough" stand against communists, terrorists, trade unions - whoever is the most popularly perceived enemy, has become the prime political virtue, ousting the real skills of reconciliation and peacemaking. In recent years (and here I am updating my text from the 1980s) we have seen great changes in the world. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States without what every dominant power needs, a defining enemy, and there seemed to be a time when the Americans toyed with the idea of a non-confrontational world. But Hollywood needed villains, and Presidents still needed enemies, someone to show they could be tough against (while British Prime ministers trot behind them being loud and tough against the same enemies). Libya's Ghaddafi, the Ayatollah Khomeini, then their own best friend Saddam Hussein, and finally their former pupil Osama bin Laden and the elusive Al Quaida. It was only a matter of time before the "Evil Empire" got replaced by the "Axis of Evil", and the attack on New York gave the excuse. We are once again - only now without any sort of restraint - in the uncompromising politics of destructive revenge. Our leaders prove how fit they are to defend us by stamping on every real or imagined enemy: and if the enemy fits a stereotype, all the better.

Principles are important, and there ought to be things which we will not concede, but even in the fiercest divisions we should be able to hunt around for grounds of negotiation, to look for areas of reconciliation. To build God's community is to draw on the power of God to reconcile and restore. The elders of Israel, bending their ingenuity to find ways of re-including Benjamin in the assembly of Israel, were on the right track, however objectionable their ruses might be on other grounds. We need to take the Book of Judges, and especially its ending, seriously. However dubious the tale of Shiloh's maidens, its message is one we need to hear if we are not to perish in our own antagonisms. We have to remind ourselves that in the community God builds, reconciliation is one of the first of skills, and that reinforcing hostility can not be presented as a godly work.

The theme of reconciliation is recurrent in the Book of Judges. A family mending or a patch-up of the clan seems to be its favourite way of starting a story. There is Gideon's

## The Warrior God

father defusing a confrontation between his son and the rest of the clan, when Gideon has desecrated the local shrine; and the reconciliation between Jephthah and his clan before the former outlaw leads them into battle. There is the reconciliation, in a story I have not included here, between an Ephraimite and his mother whom he had robbed<sup>1</sup>, and there is the reconciliation between the Levite and his concubine. Finally, after all these beginnings, there is the closing tale of reconciliation with Benjamin.

Love and loyalty, unity and trust in families, clans and tribes is the main concern of the stories in the Book of Judges, and it is Israel's failure in this respect that makes her story a tragic one. Even Yahweh could not rule a people divided against itself. At war with one another and breaking faith with him, they are witness to the destructive forces which, in the human heart, are at war with all community and with the rule of God. Israel failed, not by a lapse of moral standards as we think of morality, nor by falling short of orthodoxy, nor even by their promiscuous worship of Canaanite and other gods - though this is getting nearer to the point. They failed even when they worshipped Yahweh, because they did not recognise that this made them one people.

It was not that they should have recognised some more civilised ideal such as the brotherhood of all men and the benefits of universal co-operation. (After all, what use is the concept of universal brotherhood until you have learnt not to fight and kill your brothers?) But they should have grasped at least that "self" interest meant the interests of all Yahweh's people, all who had accepted his covenant. Even more than their common origins in the wilderness, or their shared delight in plunder and their united desire for the good land of Canaan, their common identity as Yahweh's people should have held them together. But it did not, and because of this, even the power and the plans of Yahweh were being brought to nothing. They were destroying themselves, and his love given at the Sea of Reeds had been given in vain.

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<sup>1</sup> Jud 17:1-5