

## 7 The Priest, the Prophet and the King

Yahweh's sovereign relationship with Israel is his love - not in some soft, emasculated sense of love, but because his rule began with agreement and promise, with commitments that were personal and binding, with trust and loyalty. Yahweh was the warrior-leader of trusting followers, the giver of victory, land and security, their provider and defender. He raised up and empowered the heroes who led them in times of crisis. He was the one to whom they turned, sometimes belatedly, in times of danger. And he was the one they failed when they refused to be united as one covenant people.

The first Book of Samuel tells of Israel's search for a new heart - a new ideal or way of becoming one people under Yahweh - but it begins in continuity with Judges, in a state of chaos and great peril, and its opening chapters focus on the shrine of Shiloh as Israel's rallying point.

The shrines of Yahweh were important places for the gathering of his community, where they found or reaffirmed their unity under him. Gideon's first act in rallying his people was to destroy his family's Canaanite shrine and erect one to Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> Jephthah and Gilead were reconciled before Yahweh's shrine at Mizpah.<sup>2</sup> At Mizpah, too, the tribes declared war on Benjamin, "gathered together as one man in the presence of Yahweh."<sup>3</sup> It was at the shrine of Shiloh and during Yahweh's festival there, that a way was made for the survivors of Benjamin to come back into Israel.<sup>4</sup> And of course there was also Shechem, the holy place where all the tribes assembled and affirmed their unity as Yahweh's people.<sup>5</sup> The shrines or places of worship were vital to them. They were the visible, tangible evidence of their relationship with Yahweh, not only places of God, but signs of their own identity.

When we come, then, to the end of Judges and move on to the first Book of Samuel, it is not surprising that our attention is turned to the shrine of Shiloh. The Book of Samuel is the story of Israel's recovery and unification as the people of Yahweh, and the shrine at which it opens might have become, with its history and its respected priesthood, a focus for the unity of all Israel. At Shiloh was kept the ark of Yahweh, a sacred casket which the Israelites had carried on their wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai. It represented the presence of Yahweh among them, but it was not an idol. It was the mere threshold of his throne and the place where his presence came to bear, but even as such it was most sacred, and its presence in Shiloh made the shrine a centre of worship for all the tribes.

The priests who tended it inherited their office, and Eli, the priest in charge at this time, expected to hand on his high position to his sons and their descendants after them. Indeed, he had already delegated to his two sons, but being a weak man, he had no control over them, and they freely abused their power. We are told that they would interrupt the sacrifices to claim a better and larger share of the meat than the priest was entitled to.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Jud. 6:25-32 <sup>2</sup>Jud. 11:11 <sup>3</sup>Jud. 20:1 <sup>4</sup>Jud. 21:19ff <sup>5</sup>Jos. 24 <sup>6</sup>I Sam 2:12-17

## The Warrior God

Turning worship into a corrupt racket, and showing more concern for priestly profit than for the rights of the people or of Yahweh, they were "cashing in" on him and exploiting him for their own ends.

A dangerous thing to do - for in all their relationship, as we have seen, Yahweh never offered himself as an object to be exploited. It is fundamental to Israel's experience of Yahweh, that he is in charge. Although he rules by agreement, by their accepting his offer of leadership, it is his authority and leadership they accept. He is in no way their tool. Having accepted him, they have accepted that they belong to him, not the other way round. He has not been accepted as their servant, but as their master. He has not been tamed, and his presence among them may yet have unexpected consequences. Eli and his sons presided over a degenerate religion, and their God was about to take them unawares.

Eli had a servant, a young boy named Samuel, who lived in the shrine learning to assist the priest, and to him Yahweh now revealed his intentions.

Eli was lying down in his room. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying in the sanctuary of Yahweh, where the ark of God was, when Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" He answered, "Here I am." Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, since you called me." Eli said, "I did not call. Go back and lie down." So he went and lay down. Once again, Yahweh called, "Samuel! Samuel!" Again Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, since you called me." He replied, "I did not call you, my son; go back and lie down." Samuel had as yet no knowledge of Yahweh, but Yahweh called him a third time, and this time when he went to Eli, Eli understood that Yahweh was calling the boy. He said to Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if someone calls, say, 'Speak, Yahweh, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Yahweh then came and stood by, calling as he had done before, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel answered, "Speak, Yahweh, your servant is listening." Then Yahweh said to him, "I am about to do such a thing in Israel as will make the ears of all who hear it ring. You are to tell Eli that I condemn his House forever because he has known what his sons were doing, and has not corrected them. Therefore neither sacrifice nor offering shall ever expiate the guilt of the House of Eli."

Then Samuel lay still until morning, when he opened the doors of Yahweh's temple. He was afraid to tell the vision to Eli, but Eli called to him and said, "What message did he give you? Do not keep back anything of what he said to you." So Samuel told him everything, keeping back nothing from him. Eli said, "He is Yahweh; let him do what he thinks good." (I Sam 3:12-18)

Yahweh rebuked his official representatives through a mere trainee assistant, because he is free to choose whom he will and do as he will. As sovereign over his people, he remains free, not directed or controlled by them, and the initiative stays with him, as one whose strength and resources come from no one else, who makes his own commitments, out of love. Eli himself recognises this, and accepts that Yahweh has spoken through

Samuel. He and his sons have played with fire, and he is not surprised to hear of his punishment. Though too old and too weak in nature to influence his sons or to take away their authority, he is wise enough to recognise that Yahweh's warning will prove true.

Playing with fire is a dangerous thing, and the story that follows shows it doubly dangerous: fatal to the sons of Eli who thought they could profit from the priesthood and damn the consequences: and fatal to some of the Israelites who now fell into the same mistake of treating Yahweh as if he were an object to be fetched and carried about as they chose.

It was a hard time to be learning dangerous lessons. If the tribes of Israel needed any outside force to complete their destruction, they had it then in the Philistines, the enemy of Samson's time, who had grown into one of the region's big powers. They were, through their trading contacts and their local monopoly of iron smelting,<sup>1</sup> a civilisation far ahead of the Israelite tribes, and from their cities on the coastal plain they were extending their domination inland, over the hill country of the Israelites.

After one inconclusive battle, in which they had been worsted by the Philistines, the Israelite troops thought they would boost their morale and guarantee victory by bringing away from Shiloh the ark of Yahweh Sabaoth, their Lord of Armies. Eli's two sons came with it, and its arrival in the Israelite camp was greeted with a mighty shout, for the army were confident that when the ark went into battle with them, victory was a forgone conclusion. It was a rash assumption that Yahweh was in their power, to use like a super-weapon, and showed little understanding of their true relationship with him.

The Philistines joined battle and Israel was defeated, each man fleeing to his home. The slaughter was great indeed, and thirty thousand Israelites fell. The ark of God was captured too, and the two sons of Eli were killed. (I Sam 4:10-11)

The young priestlings who had so enjoyed their privileged guardianship of the ark, found themselves, in the end, taken with it to their death; and the Israelite army that had presumed on its "possession" of Yahweh, was destroyed.

The capture of Israel's ark was a great triumph for the Philistines, representing the defeat of Israel and of Israel's god. But keeping it was no triumph. When they left the ark overnight in the temple of Dagon, their idol was found in the morning prostrate before it, with head and hands broken off. What is more, plague struck the city, and no other Philistine city would take the ark off their hands. In the end, they were glad to put it on a

---

<sup>1</sup> The element of technological superiority as an instrument of domination is another uncomfortable parallel with the relationship between the rich "North" (USA and Europe) and rebellious sections (usually called "terrorists") of the third world population; as it is with the relationship between modern Israel and the Palestinians.

## The Warrior God

cart pulled by two heifers, which they left to find their own way up the hill road back to Israelite territory.<sup>1</sup>

The heifers came to Beth-Shemesh, an Israelite town, where the ark was received gladly by all but the one clan of Jeconiah (presumably a family that preferred some other god to Yahweh). When some disaster subsequently fell upon this clan, the people of Beth-Shemesh were filled with horror at the power and danger of Yahweh's presence:

The men of Beth-Shemesh then said, "Who can stand his ground before Yahweh, this holy God; to whom shall we let him go, away from us?" So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-Jearim, saying, "The Philistines have sent back the ark of Yahweh: come down and take it up to your town."

(I Sam 6:20-21)

It is a splendid piece of irony. The people of Kiriath-Jearim were not originally Israelites at all, but Gibeonites - the people from the borders of Judah and Benjamin who had tricked their way into an alliance with Israel, and so had escaped the massacres of Joshua's invasion.<sup>2</sup> Now the Israelites were so afraid of their own god that they preferred to pass him on into the "safe" keeping of allied foreigners. It reminds me of those cartoon scenes, where the characters have a lighted stick of dynamite, which they pass frantically from one to another until it goes off!

These may look like superstitious tales, but if we just dismiss them as such, we miss their real point: that God is by no means a tame beast, or a power to be exploited. The story began with Yahweh's priests at Shiloh enjoying and profiting from the privilege of guarding the ark, treating it as an asset to cash in on. Then we saw the Israelites treating it like a piece of artillery - their ace card - and the Philistines holding it like a captured mascot. But it was death to the foolish priests, and disaster to both Israelites and Philistines in turn. In the end, we see Philistines and Israelites alike eager to put the ark at a safe distance: chastened and respectful at last, and a little more aware of what it is to be near the throne of Yahweh, to be in charge of even the sign of his presence.

Yahweh's people need some visible symbol, but the first few chapters of Samuel have shown us just how dangerous that visibility can be, tempting them to take God for granted and flirt with disaster. God is always much more than a shrine, for shrines are manageable, and he is not. He is never so much on our side that we can manipulate him. However much he is with us, we are under his power, not vice versa. It is the beginning of wisdom when those who have been befriended, rescued and led by God come to recognise that having him on their side is no matter for complacency. You cannot presume that, because you have his support, he will always see things your way and cooperate with you. In taking sides, he does not lose his independence, but exercises his freedom and takes authority over people, especially over those whose side he has taken.

---

<sup>1</sup> I Sam 5-6    <sup>2</sup> Jos 9:14-18

The love of Yahweh is something to be respected, and even feared, having all kinds of unpredictable consequences. Only a fool expects the friendship of God to be a matter for easy self-congratulation. (And sometimes we would do better to recognise that those who fight shy of his friendship are showing a certain natural wisdom and prudence!) "God is with us!" is not necessarily a boast. In the mouth of the wise, it may be a cry of fear. God's support is not really like having a better gun or faster plane than your enemy. It is more like having a primed and triggered time bomb on your side.

The Israelites, torn by their inter-tribal wars and outmatched by the Philistines, desperately needed to regroup around some sign or place of Yahweh. But if we thought that the priesthood might help them, that with their expertise in ritual and religious tradition, the priests would know how to bring the people together, that idea is scotched by Eli and his sons. The priests had reduced their relationship with Yahweh to a matter of ceremonies and mere things - and from there it was an easy step to exploiting it. They were in no position to meet God in a personal encounter such as Israel had originally experienced, or to receive the power of his spirit as the heros had done.

It is the perennial weakness of an institutional priesthood. The very fact that they are so "competent" to deal with God makes them, often, incompetent. For it is the nature of God that no one can be competent to deal with him, and however carefully the priest modifies his claim to professional expertise, there will always be the danger of his appearing to be, and thinking he is, competent. Only the inadequate, who know they are such, can meet God on God's terms. For it was an inadequate gang of runaways who first encountered him as Yahweh, rescuer of the inadequate.

This is sometimes taken as a reason for rejecting the whole idea of a professional ministry or priesthood. But that is going further than the present insight warrants: it is no ground for doing away with professionals, but a warning not to expect that they will be the point of real and decisive contact with God. Prelates, priests and qualified ministers may well have their place as leaders in ritual and guides to tradition, as teachers and explainers, but the indications are that this rather counts against them leading God's people forward in that decisive faith which is trust into an unknown and dangerous future.

When the young Samuel grew up, he became a leader like the heros of old, but with a difference:

Yahweh was with him and let no word of his fall to the ground. All Israel from Dan to Beersheba came to know that Samuel was accredited as a prophet of Yahweh. Yahweh continued to appear in Shiloh, for he revealed himself to Samuel, and the word of Samuel went out to all Israel. (I Sam 3:19 - 4:1)

Samuel is remembered as the last of the "judges " or heros, and the first of the prophets - men who, like the heros, are chosen by Yahweh, but with a different mission. They, like the heros, will have Yahweh's spirit, but the power of his spirit will be less and less in the strength of their arms, and more and more in the conviction of their speaking. Samuel

## The Warrior God

comes at the start of this new line, and, like the heros, he will still wield a sword, but even more than he himself understands, this role will be taken from him and his successors, leaving them free to be a voice rather than a strong arm for Yahweh. From Samuel on, prophets would speak powerfully with the authority of Yahweh, but in his day too, a king would replace the heros as Israel's leader in battle and military defender.

Israel's monarchy was to prove the most controversial of institutions. Throughout its history there would be royalists and anti-royalists, those who saw it as God's design for Israel, and those who saw it as a snare leading Israel away from her true faith. The same historian who commented on the anarchic times of the "judges", that this was when "there was no king in Israel"<sup>1</sup> (implying that the monarchy brought order and religious purity to Israel) was also moved to criticise almost every king of Israel's history, for failing to lead the nation in complete loyalty to Yahweh, or for positively "leading Israel into sin".<sup>2</sup> The Bible gives us two views on the monarchy, both of which must be reckoned with, and each of which is represented in the different accounts of its origin.

According to one, favouring the monarchy, Samuel's successor as hero-leader of the Israelites was Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, who was made king by Yahweh.<sup>3</sup>

Saul, out searching for some of his father's donkeys that had strayed, came to the town where Samuel was seer, and went to him to consult his god. It was a festival day and he met Samuel coming out of the town to lead a communion sacrifice on the nearby hill top. Now Yahweh had given Samuel a revelation the day before, saying, "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from Benjamin. You are to anoint him as prince over my people Israel, and he will save them from the power of the Philistines; for I have seen the distress of my people, and their crying has come to me."<sup>4</sup> So Samuel led Saul to the place of honour at the feast, where he was served the best food.

The following day, as he left the town to return home, Samuel took a phial of oil and anointed him in Yahweh's name, to be king: "You are the man who must rule Yahweh's people, who must save them from the power of the enemies surrounding them."<sup>5</sup> Then Saul went on his way, and as he neared his home he was given confirmation of his appointment. He met a band of roving prophets or dervishes, enthusiasts whose singing and dancing whipped up a feeling of ecstasy, and got them "carried away". The spirit of God then "seized upon him, and he got carried away among them".<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after this, an Israelite town, Jabesh, was beseiged by the Ammonites, whose chief offered the townspeople cruel terms of surrender. They were all to have their right eyes put out and become subjects of the Ammonites. The effect on Saul, when he heard of it, was something like that of Yahweh's spirit on Samson. "The spirit of Yahweh seized on Saul, and his fury was stirred to fierce flame. He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in

<sup>1</sup> Jud 17:6; 21:5. <sup>2</sup> IK 15:26 <sup>3</sup> See I Sam 9:1 - 10:16; 11. <sup>4</sup> I Sam 9:15-16

<sup>5</sup> I Sam 10:1 <sup>6</sup> I Sam 10:10

pieces, which he sent by messengers throughout the territory of Israel, with these words: 'If anyone will not march with Saul, this shall be done with his oxen.' At this, a dread of Yahweh fell on the people, and they marched out as one man."<sup>1</sup>

Saul inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ammonites and rescued the town of Jabesh. His success convinced the Israelites that he was the man to rule them, and they took him off in triumph to Gilgal, where, before the shrine of Yahweh, he was publicly acclaimed as king.<sup>2</sup> Saul was the first king of the Israelites, and according to this account, he was chosen, anointed and recognised just as Yahweh wanted him to be. It was Yahweh's will that Israel should be ruled by a king.

But there is another view: for Yahweh alone is ruler of Israel, and any claim to be king of his people must surely usurp his position. There were those who saw in the choice of a monarchy Israel's rejection of Yahweh's rule, and their account is as follows.<sup>3</sup>

When Samuel grew old, the elders of Israel came to him at Ramah and said, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways. Give us a king to rule over us, like the other nations." It displeased Samuel that they should ask for a king, so he prayed to Yahweh. But Yahweh said to him, "Obey the voice of the people, for it is not you they have rejected; they have rejected me from ruling over them."<sup>4</sup>

So Samuel gave way. He warned the Israelites of the demands a king would make on them: of taxation and conscription. He warned them that they would rue the day they had asked for a king, but they refused to listen to him. They said, "No, we want a king, so that we in our turn can be like the other nations; our king shall rule us and be our leader and fight our battles."<sup>5</sup> So Samuel called a rally of the tribes at Mizpah, where, by the casting of lots, clan, family and finally the man himself was chosen. Saul was Yahweh's choice, and the people acclaimed him, shouting, "Long live the king."<sup>6</sup>

The Israelites, realising their weakness and the strength of monarchic societies among their neighbours, had decided to get themselves a king "like the other nations". They were ready to forget their unique position as Yahweh's people. Having failed for so many generations to unite under him, they were now ready to copy the ways of their enemies. They wanted a strong, central government, like the monarchies that had made their neighbours so successful.

And that is what Yahweh gave them. His way of ruling is not to impose his own perfect solutions on a people unwilling to accept them, but, taking account of their limitations, to modify, concede, and wait - giving them not his best, but the best they are able to accept. Having begun his rule with their assent, he does not lord it over them, but continues to rule through their co-operation. His rule is no triumphalistic tour de force, or

---

<sup>1</sup> I Sam 11:6-7 <sup>2</sup> 11:15 <sup>3</sup>See I Sam 8; 10:17ff; 12 <sup>4</sup> I Sam 8:1-7 <sup>5</sup> 8:19-20 <sup>6</sup>10:24

## The Warrior God

perfectionist's dream but a personal relationship that is growing slowly, at the pace of the weaker party. He has chosen to rule over Israel, and the Israelites do not yet fully accept it.

Therefore even the rule of Yahweh is imperfect. He is working to establish it in an imperfect world, and if we ask why he does not simply put it right, the answer is that his own people are part of its imperfection: they are the ones who are stubbornly resistant to his will, and if he were to do away with all imperfections, he would have to do away with them.

God is not interested in sovereignty for the sake of it: establishing his order just to see his power triumph. He does not need to boost or safeguard his ego by overcoming all resistance and showing he can get his way against all opposition. He is interested in sovereignty only for the sake of his subjects. His rule is his gift to them, not a prop or protection for himself. It only makes sense for their sake. With him, there is none of that fearful and desperate clinging to authority that cannot afford to yield. Rather, he shows the real strength of unshakeable authority, that it can yield for the sake of his subjects when they are unable to take in all his will at once.

He does not wish to destroy his people, or to destroy their free and trusting adherence to him. Although he is the god who was fatal to Eli's sons, to the Philistines and to the clan of Jeconiah, he does not always meet opposition with the inflexibility of an irresistible force. Sometimes he is yielding, making his way delicately through the tangle of his people's opposing desires. He wants and intends to correct them, but not to destroy them, and he knows how much room he has to manoeuvre between the two operations. He is a dangerous god, but he himself knows it and manages carefully.

After all, it is his will that the warring tribes of Israel should be united. Yahweh wanted his people to enjoy their independence, with the spontaneity of his direct rule raising leaders wherever they were needed, but he does not want them to remain divided into warring factions. His people have to meet the world without going under, as divided tribes do when they fail to unite against organised nations. Now if a monarchy will really achieve that unity, the monarchy will be good for Israel. If it is the only thing that will bring the Israelites together, from Judah to Naphtali, then it is the best thing for them. Though it represents a failure in Israel, a judgement upon an unworthy people, God will not let it be a permanent scar and disgrace. If the monarchy proves worthy of the hopes put into it, he will use it to carry forward his plans for Israel and make it indeed a blessing and a crown of glory to his people.

The rule of Yahweh is more like a dialogue than a proclamation. He speaks to his people and listens to them. He works for understanding and is willing to concede when necessary, to wait for their trust and to take the longer way round, leading more slowly but bringing them with him. So, from the hostile view that the monarchy was a concession to a rebellious Israel, we come through the patient love of Yahweh back to the other view, that the monarchy was indeed his will and his gift to his people. Both views,

rightly preserved by the Bible's historian, are reconciled as we come to understand his way of ruling and his relationship with his people.

When God concedes, it is no grudging concession. He does not come along dragging his feet and protesting, as if we have been able to force him. His response is enthusiastic and encouraging, a response of love that is eager to make even concessions a rich channel of blessing. Israel sinned in asking for a king, but God will now intervene for her through her kings. Although they will be a burden and a curse, a source of oppression and temptation, they will also be the instruments of Yahweh's rule, bringing good government, strength, security, and prosperity - a blessing to Israel.

There would always be the two views, and both would be right. Proud clan leaders, prophets and traditionalists opposed the institution of the monarchy, convinced that they were on Yahweh's side. History would prove them right. Enthusiastic reformers saw it as the great way forward, and the mass of ordinary people, no longer secure in the old tribal structures, found confidence and strength in the glamour of the monarchy. They felt that Yahweh was on their side, and history was to prove them right.

If I look for the same lesson in my own life, I find that God, in his rule over me, shows the same accommodating power, which we can call his mercy. It is not just the forgiveness of specific offences, but his willingness to go on with me, working at our relationship even when I am pulling against him.

It is something deeper than a question of morality. Even when I am living an honest and moral life, I still struggle against him. In wanting a king, the Israelites did not break some general moral law "Thou shalt not have a king", or "All kings are evil", but they ran counter to Yahweh's specific will for them. Many of the decisions in my life, especially the most far-reaching, do not involve a moral issue: what career to follow, what job, training or study to undertake, whether to marry and whom, where to live, what kind of house to buy or rent. Rarely is morality as such involved, yet in each case I can decide in accordance with God's will, and I can go against it. He is my sovereign lord, yet it is quite possible, even likely, that in many of these decisions I will follow what is basically my will, not his. I will go the way of Israel. And in his mercy, God will not abandon me because of it. If at every decision of my life, he confronted me with his will as a final and irresistible demand, he would destroy my freedom, and destroy me. If, whenever I chose to reject him, as Jeconiah did, or seize hold of him in my own wilful fashion, as the Israelite army did, he simply resisted me, I would be destroyed as they were - there is no way I could win, or even survive the contest.

But if he has pity on me, sees that I will follow my own decisions, will take steps to secure my own future, and satisfy my own desires; then, very often, he will not oppose me outright, but will concede what I have chosen, not as his perfect way for me, but as the good I am able to receive, for all its drawbacks and dangers. And if it is possible, he will make what I have chosen into something good, to praise and thank him for.

## The Warrior God

Of course, there is danger in this. If he does not resist me, I am in danger from the foolishness of my own choices. What I have chosen in fear or arrogance - in my self-reliance - and required God to concede, will not be entirely to my benefit, and it may turn out to my harm. If, so as not to destroy me utterly, God does not correct me at once, there is the danger that I will take him for granted as Eli's sons did, and never accept his correction until my foolishness destroys me. God himself is treading a delicate path in his dealing with me, but if I am aware of it, and humbled by it, I can rejoice that it is he who is treading the path.

Other lessons are learnt when we apply these stories to our community: firstly, that the rule of God does involve what we call "secular" government. He creates his people's government, and there is no neat distinction between sacred and secular, with the sovereignty of God safely pushed off into some other-worldly realm, or some dimension of private morality. It is not a question of identifying God simplistically with one system - democracy or monarchy, left or right - for we have seen that, even in the small community of ancient Israel, his will was complex to the point of paradox. But he is involved, and true believers will always look to him as the one who shapes their community.

In our time, the normal form of community throughout the Christian (or ex-Christian) world is the nation state - and so sacred an institution has it become that some see it as next to ultimate in God's will, denouncing efforts to build an international community and extolling national patriotism as loyalty to God himself. In the previous chapter, I spoke of the nation-state as Christendom's failure, and now I am in a position to say more about the Bible's challenge to it.

The typical nation-state (originally European, but spread by colonialism throughout the world) is today under a double tension. On the one hand, there are determined efforts to create international communities, not all of which are succeeding. The Russians made one super-nation of the old empire of the Czars, and imposed a tightly knit alliance upon the nations of Eastern Europe, but now it has all fallen apart. The European nations are outgrowing old national rivalries in the now triumphantly expanding European Community. The economic power and self-interest of the United States has created strong though sometimes invisible ties with all the nations of South America and a North American free trade area. In the Middle East, co-operation in OPEC transformed the power of oil-producing nations, but deeper Arab or Islamic unity has not followed. Increasingly, the rules of the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation override the sovereignty of nation states. And somehow, struggling hamstrung thru it all, is the United Nations Organisation attempting to knit, if not the sovereign states themselves, at least some of their international actions into a coherent pattern of agreement and legality.

On the other hand, there are pressures for local autonomy, resisting and sometimes breaking up the power of the nation-states. In Sudan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines there are long-running wars over regional claims demands for independence.

In Britain we have both the bloody and bitter strife of Northern Ireland, and the thoroly constitutional and gentlemanly devolution to a separate Scottish parliament; while the government or management of London has been a stumbling block (with Ken Livingstone somehow always there in the middle of it) to successive national governments of either party. The Spanish regions have successfully established their autonomy within the nation, but dissatisfied Basque separatists still fight. In Australia, the states struggle against the powers of Canberra; in the Middle East Kurds fight for independence from Iraq, and we have seen the Lebanon come to the point of disintegration as its own careful balance broke down; in China the Peking government strives to promote and yet control local autonomy. In the U.S. there is a complex constitutional and legal balance between federal, state and local authorities, the tensions in which are kept creative by vigorous political activity and a consensus of respect for the legal process.

In all of which we, as believers, have something to say. Our views will of course be complex, diverse and problematic, but behind them all should lie this principle from the Book of Samuel: that just as Yahweh favoured his people's ancient and traditional independence against the domination of kings, yet wanted them to be strongly united as one people, so too the will of God is to be sought both in local autonomy and in international unity. Far from being the God of the nation-state, as some would have it, he challenges the institution from both sides. He means his people to be free and involved members of a self-governing neighbourhood, and, at the same time, citizens of one world.

The same principle applies in church government. The divided Church today includes widely different forms of government: from the universal claims and structures of the Roman Catholic Church, through the national or cultural unities of the Orthodox and the Anglicans, to the complete local independence of Baptist and non-denominational congregations. As before, it is not my claim that we have here an instant solution to our disagreements, but we do have a basic principle to apply. When this tussle between local independence and total (or Catholic) unity first came to the crunch among the Israelites, God's will was found to be on both sides. Learning from Israel's history, we can conclude that God favours both local congregational independence, and universal unity. Merely to reflect as much of his will as is seen in his dealings with the earliest Israelites, the Church today would have to encompass, in one, the essence both of Roman Catholic universality and of Baptist local independence. So far are we from imagining, let alone achieving, the community God intends us to be!

Saul's first task as king of the Israelites was to lead them in rebellion against the Philistines,<sup>1</sup> who claimed to be their overlords. For a long time he waged a guerilla war, asserting, but never fully achieving, Israelite independence. He was moderately successful, but even after his best victories the general position was stalemate. He needed, and it seems that Samuel knew he needed, a more spectacular, morale-boosting success. Therefore, in Yahweh's name, the prophet declared a holy war against Israel's old enemy, the Amalekites,<sup>2</sup> and Saul successfully raided their territory, destroying one of

---

<sup>1</sup> See I Sam 13-14    <sup>2</sup> See I Sam 15

## The Warrior God

their towns, of which he slaughtered the population and captured the head man, Agag. He returned in triumph to his people with Agag in tow, and the best of the captured animals, destined for sacrifice to Yahweh at Gilgal.

But Samuel was far from pleased. In a private confrontation, he denounced Saul for disobedience to Yahweh. By the terms of holy war, everything belonging to the Amalekites was under the ban, and, as at Jericho, property should have been destroyed, and the population, from the chief to the least servant, slaughtered. No one, not even the animals, could be spared or kept. Saul protested that he had carried out the main command: he had attacked and destroyed the Amalekite town, and he was keeping the best of the animals only to make a sacrifice of them to Yahweh. But Samuel replied: "Is the pleasure of Yahweh in holocausts and sacrifices, or in obedience to his voice? Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice, submissiveness better than the fat of rams."<sup>1</sup>

It was the business of Yahweh's prophet - as it would be the task of future prophets - to rebuke and correct the king, even a king endowed with the spirit of Yahweh. For, as with Samson, the breath of God brings to light the evil in Saul, as well as his strength. Small things that would have gone unnoticed in the donkey-herd, were disastrous wrongs calling for condemnation in the king. Samuel condemned Saul's disobedience and declared him unfit to be the beginning of a permanent monarchy in Israel. Publicly, however, he continued to show him respect as the anointed king. Before the elders of the tribes of Israel the king and the prophet worshipped Yahweh together, and the day of their rupture ended with the disposal of Agag.

Then Samuel said, "Bring me Agag, king of the Amalekites," and Agag came to him reluctantly. Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be made childless among women." Then Samuel butchered Agag before Yahweh's shrine at Gilgal. (I Sam. 15:32f)

As I have said, kings and prophets in Israel would often clash. On this first occasion, it was the prophet who won, and Samuel had his way. However, we might well feel that Samuel was in the wrong. Can we really believe that with his bloody determination for total revenge he was speaking for God? We have to read the episode carefully and sympathetically, if we are to understand the point it makes, that Yahweh looks for obedience before all else and that Saul is in the wrong by acting on his own initiative instead of obeying him. By obedience, Saul could have been Yahweh's faithful servant; by making his own independent plans for control of the situation, he showed that he was, in the last analysis, his own man and not Yahweh's. As such, he was unfit to establish the dynasty that would continue to rule Yahweh's people.

Does this mean that God is immoral - that he expects obedience to immoral demands (the slaughter of prisoners) rather than moral or civilised behaviour? No, because civilised and

---

<sup>1</sup>I Sam. 15:19-22

moral behaviour was not in question. Neither Saul nor Samuel was recommending a higher morality than that of "holy war". Saul had ridden to victory on the popular fury that rises to such a war, and he had shown no compunction over the slaughter of Agag's people, felt to be Yahweh's enemies as surely as they were Israel's. The difference between Saul and Samuel was not that of good or bad morals, civilised or uncivilised behaviour, but the difference between independent action and consistent loyalty to Yahweh.

As an insecure man who needed to feel that he could direct and decide events, Saul wanted it both ways: the fury of a holy war with the unleashing of passions that only God can rule, and a conclusion decided by himself. But no one can control the bitterness and vengeance that erupt in a holy war. Reason is powerless against them and fear or constraint only repress them until they have pent up sufficient fury to break out in even greater violence. They are, as we have seen, passions that Yahweh has to control if Israel is to succeed and survive as a people. But it is Yahweh who must control them.

Leaders who try to "control" such passions put themselves in a sinister position, manipulating for calculated political ends a blood lust whose only redeeming feature is that it is simple, sincere and directed against a proven enemy. It is let loose in a time of bitter frustration, fear and anger, against enemies who have really harmed you, who threaten and attack you still, and may do you great harm in the future. (No doubt the Amalekites felt the same way about the Israelites.)

Out of this bloodlust Saul decided to wrest a particular advantage, calculated to demonstrate his control of the situation. We do not know what his motives were, but perhaps he hankered after the prestige of owning a captive king (rating the Amalekite leader as a "king"); or perhaps it was the hope of using Agag's influence and connections, maybe to get a ransom. Perhaps, worst of all, he was beginning to get that fellow-feeling that makes a king reluctant to execute a king, out of respect for his own class and position. Whatever it was, Saul was playing his own politics in the midst of a bloody and passionate war, fought under Yahweh's name.

Samuel opposed him, and rightly so. War that is genuine passion unleashed is bad enough, but war manipulated by calculating politicians is an abomination. (Not that cool, calculating politics are worse than war - they are vastly preferable to it - but politicians have no business using war to gain their ends. Their job is to prevent it.) War that is a genuine outburst of feeling, where those who are personally injured or threatened are the ones who take up the sword, has the one redeeming feature of releasing and possibly exhausting pent up passion. Only it cannot be stopped at will, by a king's (or a politician's) command. When kings and politicians learn to stop and start wars at a strategic point, they soon learn to keep them simmering as an instrument of policy.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Saul was

---

<sup>1</sup> Their own and other people's wars. Both the U.S.S.R. and modern Israel seem to have such an active interest in the war between Iran and Iraq.

## The Warrior God

no clever politician, but he was taking some first, probably clumsy, steps in that direction, and Samuel, bloodthirsty but straightforward, rightly resisted him.

The dispute between Samuel and Saul was not between passion and enlightenment, but was about control. If any voice in those times spoke up for enlightenment, it fell on deaf ears, and it was just as well for Israel that God also spoke through the voices of passion, which they were able to hear. Israel's ancient grudges and present frustrations were turned upon the Amalekites, as Samson's fury was once released against the Philistines, and God, whatever way of enlightenment he had yet to teach his people, would not have it based on repressed passion. The God who reveals himself as Yahweh is more at home with wild fury slaughtering and destroying than with anger bitterly suppressed and eating away a defeated people from within. Only, if he is to reveal himself in such a dangerous way, he insists that he alone will be the one to control and terminate their fury.

Saul's failure brings us back to the question, whether Yahweh's people could ever be ruled by a king, whether the spirit of Yahweh could be guaranteed to a lasting dynasty, and pass from father to son as charismatic power and authority. Could that touch in a human heart that made a hero be handed over to Israel to be regulated by family succession? The Israelites did not know what they were asking for when they asked for a king, and their king himself would have to learn through time and bitter experience. But the question of the monarchy, at its deepest level, is the question that overshadows the whole history of Israel, and ultimately will decide whether the rule that God himself has set his heart on can ever really be achieved. Will the gift of Yahweh's spirit, with its power to unite and inspire Israel, ever be confirmed and guaranteed to his people, in such a way as to be always with them?

For the time being, these remain unanswered questions, but two things are clear. One is that Saul will not be the founder of a dynasty. He remained king, with Samuel's tacit support, but the prophet was convinced that Yahweh had another man in mind, who would understand whole-hearted obedience, and that the kingship would pass to him. The other is that a new beginning has been made with Israel: in spite of her failure, there is a way forward. Although they do not yet realise it, the old confederation of tribes has had its day and its chance. Israel's story will no longer be the fortunes of kindred tribes bound together by covenant, but the history of her kings, and of the prophets who would check them.