

11 The Golden Kingdom

If the reign of David was Yahweh's victory for Israel, the reign of his son, Solomon, was the triumphant celebration of that victory. Israel had indeed arrived. She was not only like the nations, but like the greatest of nations. Through the long reign of David, she had attained security, and when Solomon ascended the throne, there were no longer rivals within her borders to challenge her possession of the land, or, from without, enemies strong enough to threaten her.

He came to that throne in a way that was usual in large kingdoms.¹ His aged father, for obvious and politic reasons, put off the naming of a successor till he was on his very deathbed. Then the favoured son was not the eldest, but one who owed his good fortune to the fact that his mother was still David's favourite wife. It was Bathsheba who pulled the strings, manoeuvred for advantage in the final crucial days and persuaded David at last to declare his successor. Her son Solomon was named king.

There were the usual upheavals as old powers fell with the death of the old king, and the new ruler installed those friends most faithful to himself. There was a general to be murdered and a priest to be deposed, an old curse to be avenged, which David had been too scrupulous to avenge himself, but not too forgiving to bequeath to his son. Joab, Abiathar, Shimei: famous and infamous names of the reign of David came each to his own end, and Solomon was soon established as the undisputed and popular successor of his father.

Old ascendants fall into oblivion and new stars arise. It was a bloody transition, the harsh realities of power breaking men like matchsticks and casting aside ruthlessly those who had failed to serve the winning side. Yet it was a very modest bloodbath compared with some later successions in the history of Israel, or with the earlier rise of Abimelech. It was mild compared with the vicious feuding of tribal wars or the savage attrition that preceded David's accession. The monarchy was vindicated by the remarkably peaceful and clean transition from David to Solomon, without loss to Israel. There was no opportunity for old enemies to attack them or to sow discord within their ranks, and it must have seemed that at last a way had been found to provide Israel with permanent, stable government. They seemed to move forward into a new age, unshaken, secure and confident in Yahweh and his chosen king.

Yet for all that, there is a poignant loss of innocence in the story of Solomon's accession. The machinations, the quick, ruthless assertion of authority and power, however necessary for the nation, are sadly different from the spontaneity of the old days. That was a different age, when in the moment of national crisis people rose up chosen by Yahweh to lead Israel. True, they succeeded in rallying only a few clans or tribes at a

¹ See IK 1 – 2

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time, and then only briefly - they had none of the universal and permanent success of the kings - but they had innocence, or freshness, a wild, fierce touch of the untamed, unconfined and appallingly beautiful and powerful spirit of Yahweh. Under Solomon, that something seemed to have gone, and Israel had indeed become like other nations. She was strong and independent under her king; and, as with other nations, power was no longer the direct endowment of Yahweh's spirit, but the object of politics.

In the accession and reign of Solomon we can see more clearly than ever why the record is in two minds about the whole idea of the monarchy. Comparing the intrigues that troubled the peace of David's last days and the unsavoury ambitions of David's court, with the charismatic rise of the heroes, it is clear that Israel had drifted from its direct and spontaneous relationship with Yahweh. Something in their love had gone cold. Yet comparing the chaos, the fragility, the quick collapse into tribal warfare that divided and nearly destroyed the old Israel, with the strength and permanence, the peace and reliability of the kingdom, one feels that this is what Yahweh had always wanted for his people. The rule of Yahweh has been realised in the only terms that Israel would allow. The kingdom is the achievement of Yahweh, his triumph, as well as his concession to a weak and short-sighted people.

And truly, it was a magnificent achievement. Early in his reign, Solomon married a daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, marking a great rise in fortune. Egypt had been a kingdom when Israel did not exist, when the Israelites' ancestors had been wandering herdsmen. Though there had been dynastic changes, the Pharaohs of Egypt went back beyond all memory, but the throne of Solomon in Jerusalem had only been set up by his father. Solomon's grandfather had been no more than a Judahite herdsman, and his father had begun life as a shepherd. His people had come only one generation from the chaos of tribalism, the wild men from the wilderness whose ancestors had destroyed the civilisation of Canaan and dragged the country back into a dark age. Yet suddenly - so suddenly that the transition would have taken place within living memory, the kingdom of Israel had arisen from the tribes. The defeated and nearly eliminated Israelites had turned to overthrow their enemies and establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with, a kingdom whose ruler might receive the daughter of Pharaoh in marriage. If we knew more history, we might think we could see how it all came about, but no one in the days of Samuel, or even Saul, could have imagined it. No wonder that David was held to be the beloved of Yahweh; no wonder that under him, and under Solomon his son, the Israelites felt that the power of their god had triumphed and vindicated the ancient trust of Israel.

To thousands of common people the monarchy meant peace, security from foreign raiders, and order within the nation. Ordinary folk could go about their lives working and prospering, confident at last that in any trouble they could be sure of protection from the king's army, that in any grievance they could come, however weak and friendless, to his court for justice.

The new king seems to have inherited his father's appreciation of fairness, and the unprecedented security of his kingdom meant that at last the royal attention could be devoted to the people's need for good, reliable government. No longer would they have to go in fear of jealousies and recriminations, of tribal rivalries, of plundering and the sudden collapse of government. Under the king's peace and the king's justice everyone stood to benefit, and an Israelite was secure anywhere within the king's dominion.

It is not surprising that the old tribal identities, already weakening under Saul and David, rapidly lost most of their importance. They had been superseded by the kingdom. Solomon reorganised Israel into new districts, giving each its officials to represent the king's authority, which resided, of course, in the capital, Jerusalem. It was a more uniform, more efficient system than the old, sometimes divisive leadership of tribal elders. It ensured that the king's law was observed equally all over Israel and hastened the end of tribal distinctions. Already only the division between south and north, basically between Judah and the rest, still seemed to matter. The old happy variety and the old unhappy rivalries had been swallowed up in the powerful unity of the kingdom.

And in spite of losing their old local leaders, ordinary citizens found that, with peace, they received justice. The ancient cry of the poor and weak for good order and civil protection was heard, it seems, as never before, and Solomon's judgement became proverbial: fair, clear, quick and effective. The ideal of justice among all peoples everywhere is realised in the famous story of the two prostitutes who came before Solomon in dispute over a child. They were not well connected, being without husbands, family or other influence. They were of the lower orders of society, not even prosperous enough in prostitution to have independent rooms. (They can't have been as beautiful as they are often depicted.) Yet Solomon took the trouble to hear their case, and, as the story tells us, saw at once the way to the truth:

"Bring me a sword," said the king: and a sword was brought into the king's presence. "Cut the living child into two," the king said "and give half to one, half to the other." At this, the woman who was the child's mother cried out to the king: "If it please you, my lord, let them give her the child; only do not think of killing it!" But the other said, "He should belong to neither of us. Cut him up." Then the king gave his decision. "Give the child to the first woman, and do not kill him. She is his mother."
(IK 3:24-28)

It is eminently satisfying justice: justice that is done speedily and seen to be done. That is why it makes such a good and well-remembered story: it is everyone's dream of justice. There is no slow, harrowing deliberation; no ramification of courts, lawyers and fees; no weak, indecisive compromise; but the personal, immediate, unquestioned authority of the king exercised and vindicated at once, by its evident fairness and firmness. It is the kind of justice we all implicitly commend when we grumble at legal delays, and the impotence of courts that are bound up with too much legislation, at the unfairness of decisions that owe more to a lawyer's cleverness than to an honest person's clear sense of justice. It is a

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justice to be dreamed of - an ideal - and when Israelites later dreamed of such perfect justice, they thought back to the golden age of King Solomon.

Of course, we need not suppose that authority in Solomon's time was always so impeccably just and satisfying; but the point is that under Solomon, in the kingdom's greatest age, the Israelites experienced order, good government and justice as they had not known them before. Whatever his limitations, they could not but remember Solomon as the wise judge, the ideal ruler, the reconciler and settler of his people's grievances.

All Israel came to hear of the king's judgement, and held the king in awe,
recognising that he possessed divine wisdom for justice. (IK 3:28)

Internationally, Solomon followed up an alliance his father had established with Hiram, the Phoenician king of Tyre. It was a most useful contact, putting him in touch with economic and construction skills that Israel lacked. As his father had done before him, he acquired from the Phoenicians wood for building (juniper and the famous cedar of Lebanon) and craftsmen to direct the work. And, unlike David, Solomon felt free to go ahead with the most ambitious project of all: a temple of Yahweh, to rival the temples of neighbouring nations, a fit place for Yahweh their god to dwell in.

Till then, Yahweh had lived in a tent, a home for a god who was always on the move, for the warrior leader of nomadic tribesmen, who was ready to move in a moment, folding up his house and going ahead of his people. But Yahweh's people were no longer such. Even if their grandparents had been, the grandchildren were different: a civilised kingdom with a great capital city to prove it. It was time for Yahweh to be enthroned as ruler of a settled people, who, under his leadership, had arrived at their goal.

So Solomon built the temple: a temple that was to be the glory of Jerusalem as long as kings ruled there. He conscripted thousands from throughout the kingdom to ferry materials, quarry stone, cut and build under the direction of skilled craftsmen. They raised a magnificent building, its fitted stone walls panelled with carved and ornamental cedar wood, and its inmost room or "Holy of Holies" plated in gold. There the ark of Yahweh was to be housed, guarded by two magnificent monsters in olive wood, the cherubim. These great and fabulous creatures with the strength of bulls and the wisdom of kings, with huge and powerful wings spread out as if hiding the holiest place, were plated with gold and stood as if at the threshold of the throne of God: mighty creatures to symbolise the awful power of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

From Tyre there came craftsmen skilled in the civilised arts of metalwork which the wild Israelites had not been able or allowed to develop. To furnish the temple, the crude hangings and instruments of the wilderness were replaced by mighty yet delicate works in bronze and gold, described with obvious admiration by the biblical writer. Drawing on the court historians of the time, he tells of great bronze pillars, their capitals ornamented with pomegranates and filigree; a reservoir, or "Sea", of cast bronze decorated with bronze gourds and held on the backs of twelve bronze oxen to store the water for temple

ceremonies. There were bronze stands and basins, adorned with the figures of lions, bulls, cherubs, scrolls and wheels; and all the utensils of worship worked by Tyrian experts in bronze and gold.¹

For size and power, beauty and skill, nothing like the temple had been seen in Israel in the two and a half centuries since they came from the wilderness. It took seven years to build, and had no rival, unless it was the palace of Solomon himself or the house of Pharaoh's daughter, his queen.

When the temple was at last completed and properly furnished, the ark of Yahweh was transferred from its simple home in the citadel of Mount Zion to the temple's Holiest Place. This was a very different occasion from the procession of David's day: no wild tribesmen dancing their frenzied warrior dances before the ark. Solomon, the civilised emperor of a triumphant nation would never disgrace himself by whirling half naked before the presence of Yahweh: already the worship of his father must have seemed excessive and barbarous. His would be grander, more solemn, more expensive and far more impressive. He ascended with the elders of Israel and representatives of the people, and the priests took up the ark with its tent and the sacred vessels. For the last time, Yahweh would travel as a nomad does, and then his tent would be folded up forever. In the presence of the ark, King Solomon and the great assembly of Israelites sacrificed huge numbers of sheep and oxen, marking the occasion as a truly great one, and extravagantly propitiating the awful power of God. So the priests brought the ark of Yahweh to the Holy Place in the centre of the temple, under the outstretched wings of the cherubim.

There were no accidents, no signs of God's displeasure, and the writer records that when the priests came out of the sanctuary, a cloud "filled the temple of Yahweh, and because of the cloud, the priests could no longer perform their duties: the glory of Yahweh filled Yahweh's temple."²

I know that this glory of Yahweh is often thought to be the dark cloud of mystery and awe that envelops and hides the glory of God, but I am inclined to think of it (and sometimes the Bible does so too) as a cloud of brightness, a dazzling light that hides and yet reveals the glory of God.

I do not know if you have ever seen the glory of a white mist filled with sunlight. The gentle grey of an English fog, soft and soothing like a sad-sweet song, is very different from the brilliant mists I have seen on a spring morning in Guildford, in Western Australia. There, close to the river after a cold, clear night, the air is filled with a vapour so dense you could almost feel it resisting, yet the morning sun is so strong that the mist surrounds you with a dazzling white brilliance that can only be described as overpowering glory: the scattering of sunlight as bright as noon through millions of glistening droplets, a breathtaking promise of victory and daylight triumphant.

¹ IK 7:40-51 ² IK 8:10-11

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Because I have known such mists, filled with the warbling of invisible magpies and pregnant with the certain assurance of a warm, clear day to come, there is meaning for me in the picture of a cloud that hides and yet reveals the glory of God. You can say, "If this is the hiding of God's glory, what must his glory be?" But you can also say that the glory, greatness and reality of God are so far beyond our senses that they must be darkness to us - a darkness which, if we are to recognise it for more than the empty darkness of nothing, must be "hidden" by a brilliant light that marks it as God's darkness, his glory. I can imagine some such manifestation bringing home to those Israelites a sense of the glory of God: victorious, brilliant and breathtaking, but still hidden.

The more visible glory of God - his tangible achievement - was the temple itself and the new city of Jerusalem. The old Jebusite fortress town on Mount Zion had been nothing to Israel when David took it. It was only a feather in the new king's cap, but, as we have seen, it was his, and that made all the difference. It was in a strategic position, commanding trade routes and, if prepared and fortified, defensible against a large army. Being neutral as regards tribal territory, it had been a suitable centre for the king's court and government, and the reign of David, with the victories of Joab, had made it the capital of a small empire.

Solomon had set out to rebuild Jerusalem as a mighty and beautiful city, the centre of all Israelite life. Its walls were extended and rough hill tops were levelled to make way for growth. Israel under Solomon was becoming the wonder of its world, and Jerusalem, the ancient fortress of Mount Zion, was made the crown of Israel. And the glory of Jerusalem was Yahweh himself in his holy temple.

Yahweh has chosen Zion, desiring this to be his home,
"Here will I stay forever, this is the home I have chosen."
(Ps 132:13-14)

Yahweh loves his city, founded on the holy mountain;
he prefers the gates of Zion to any town of Jacob. (Ps 87:1-2)

Yahweh is great and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God,
the holy mountain, beautiful where it rises,
joy of the whole world;

Mount of Zion, deep heart of the North,
city of the Great King;
here among her palaces,
God proved to be her fortress. (Ps 48:1-2)

Solomon's success ensured that for future generations the king and the temple, and the city of them both, would be at the centre of national aspirations. They would be celebrated again and again in song and prayer and prophecy.

Yahweh, the king rejoices in your power.
For you have met him with choicest blessings,
put a crown of pure gold on his head...
The king puts his trust in Yahweh,
by the grace of the Most High he reigns unshaken. (Ps 21:1,3,7)

Another psalm honours the king as victor, ruler on Mount Zion, and priest of Yahweh:

Yahweh's oracle to you, My Lord, "Sit at my right hand
and I will make your enemies a footstool for you."
Yahweh will force all your enemies
under the sway of your sceptre in Zion.
Yahweh has sworn an oath which he will never retract,
"You are a priest forever of the order of Melchisedech." (Ps 110:1-4)

And in future generations Israelites would look on Yahweh's temple as their home,
gathering there like birds that have found their nesting place:

How I love your palace, Yahweh Sabaoth!
How my soul yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts!
The sparrow has found its home at last,
the swallow a nest for its young,
your altars, Yahweh Sabaoth,
my king and my God. (Ps 84:1-3)

These songs belong to the future, but their beginning is in the achievements of Solomon. David and David's son had given Israel a new heart, and who could now deny the success of the monarchy, or that through the monarchy the will of Yahweh was at last achieved: security, prosperity, and even greatness for his people? Who now would have listened to the voices of warning? Old men like Samuel who had seen only danger in the monarchy must have been blinded by their ancient prejudices, failing to see the way of the future. In jealously guarding the old ways of their tribal society, surely they had failed to understand the power of Yahweh, which, far from being eclipsed, had been vindicated in the mighty achievements of Israel's kings? What Israel had failed to achieve for itself, through its elders, clans and tribes, the monarchy had achieved beyond the most ambitious expectations. Surely it had been, all along, Yahweh's chosen way? People whose childhood memories went back to the days of Saul and the slow, failing struggle against the Philistines, lived to see the glories of Solomon and the greatness of an empire that drew the attention of the world. They could not fail to appreciate the great progress that strong monarchy had accomplished.

Israel, at the crossroads of the trading world, could now take full advantage of its position to build a thriving economy. With the help again of experts from Tyre, Solomon established his own fleet on the Red Sea, trading along the coasts of Arabia and Africa, down towards the Indian Ocean. It brought gold from the east, cargoes of rare wood, and

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precious stones flowing into Jerusalem. A second fleet, trading in the Mediterranean together with the ships of Tyre returned from its journeys every three years with "gold and silver, ivory, apes and baboons."¹ The king whose grandfathers had farmed or herded sheep now traded in luxuries from across the known world. He even became middle man for the trade in chariots from Egypt and horses from the north, equipping at the same time a formidable army of his own.

At the beginning of Saul's reign, two generations before, there had not been a single smith in the whole land of Israel because the Philistines had prevented it, to stop them forging iron weapons. Israelites had to go down to the Philistines to sharpen their iron tools, and pay the price set there. So it was that when Saul raised the revolt, no one in the whole army, except for Saul and Jonathan, had a sword. (I Sam 13:19-22) But of Solomon it could be boasted:

He built up a force of 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses; these he stationed in the chariot towns and in Jerusalem itself. (IK 10:26)

But perhaps the proudest boast of Solomon's historians, the unforgettable event of his reign, was the royal visit of the Queen of Sheba. It was, like Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, the unmistakable recognition of the world, that, among its great kingdoms, Israel had arrived.

The fame of Solomon having reached the Queen of Sheba, she came to consult him, bringing immense riches to Jerusalem with her: camels laden with spices, great quantities of gold, and precious stones. When she saw all the wisdom of Solomon, the palace he had built, the food at his table, the accommodation of his officials, the organisation and livery of his staff and servants, and the sacrifices he offered in the temple of Yahweh, it left her breathless. She said to the king, "What I heard in my own country about you and your wisdom was true! Until I came and saw it with my own eyes, I could not believe it, but clearly they told me less than half: your wisdom and prosperity surpasses the report I have heard. I envy your wives and servants who always wait on you and hear your wisdom. Blessed be Yahweh your God who has granted you his favour and set you on the throne of Israel!"

(IK 10:1-9)

Less than a hundred years before, foreigners would not have bothered about the Israelite tribes, except as a possible object of plunder. Now they were the admiration of rumour everywhere, a legend of new-found prosperity:

Twenty five tons of gold a year came to Solomon, not counting the taxes on trade and tribute from vassal kings and governors. He adorned his Hall of the Forest of Lebanon with hundreds of shields of beaten gold, and an ivory throne

¹ IK 10:22

plated with gold. The throne had bulls' heads at the back of it with lions beside the arms and twelve lions flanking its steps. No throne like this was ever made in any other kingdom.

All King Solomon's drinking vessels, and the furnishings of his hall, were of gold. Silver was thought little of in his time. For riches and for wisdom he outdid all the kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience of him to hear the wisdom God had implanted in his heart, and each would bring his own present: gold and silver vessels, robes, armour, spices, horses and mules; and this went on year after year.

(IK 10:14-25)

The people who had followed Yahweh into the wilderness, dreaming of a land that flowed with milk and honey, the simple riches of a good rustic life, now found the wealth of nations pouring into their kingdom. Surely everything that generations of ordinary folk had longed for was now accomplished: peace, security, law and order, freedom to live and enjoy their lives, to work and play and prosper, and bring up their children, happy in the present and secure for the future.

Israel lived in security, each man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba, throughout the lifetime of Solomon. They were like the sand by the sea for number; they ate and drank and lived happily. (IK 4:20 and 5:5)

So was the reign of Solomon praised by historians, and their testimony, attributing to the king himself the character of his age, is that the arts of peace then flourished as a new and memorable experience. Men had leisure to put up their swords and think, to write, to read, to talk, to grow old, and to gather some little wisdom.

Yahweh gave Solomon immense wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sea shore. His wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. He composed three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs. He could talk about plants from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing on the wall, and he could talk of animals and birds and reptiles and fish. Men from all nations came to hear Solomon's wisdom and brought him gifts from the kings of the world. (IK 5:9-14)

Perhaps the greatest witness to the golden age of Solomon and the triumph of Israel's monarchy is the enthusiasm enshrined, as we have already seen, in the songs of later generations, celebrating the king as the ideal ruler of Israel:

God, give your own justice to the king;
your own righteousness to the royal son,
so that he may rule your people rightly
and your poor with justice.

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Like sun and moon he will endure,
age after age,
welcome as rain that falls on the pasture,
and showers to the thirsty soil.

In his days virtue will flourish,
a universal peace till the moon is no more;
his empire shall stretch from sea to sea,
from the River to the ends of the earth.

The kings of Tarshish and the islands will pay him tribute.
The kings of Sheba and Seva will offer gifts;
all kings will do him homage,
all nations become his servants.

He will free the poor man who calls to him
and those who need help;
he will have pity on the poor and feeble,
and save the lives of those in need.

Grain everywhere in the country,
even on the mountain tops,
abundant as Lebanon its harvest,
luxuriant as common grass!

Blessed be his name forever,
enduring as long as the sun!
May every race in the world be blessed in him,
and all the nations call him blessed!

Blessed be Yahweh the God of Israel,
who alone performs these marvels!
Blessed forever be his glorious name,
may the whole world be filled with his glory!

(Psalm 72)

And finally, there is the tribute of the prophet Isaiah, welcoming, in his own day, an heir to the throne of David and Solomon:

For a child is born for us, a son given to us
and dominion is laid on his shoulders;
and this is the name they give him:
Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God,
Everlasting-Father, Prince-of-Peace.
Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end
for the throne of David and for his royal power,

which he establishes and makes secure in justice and integrity.
From this time onwards and forever,
the jealous love of Yahweh Sabaoth will do this. (Is 9:5-7)

The enthusiasm of Solomon's historians and of later poets is a celebration of that authority and discipline which had ushered in an age of peace and security. We who have lived through a generation of rebellion, when authority was rejected as oppressive, restricting, a block to freedom, find it hard to accept the eulogies as genuine. Yet they are genuine; even if, at the same time, they are marked by exaggeration and flattery. The distance between chaos and order was short enough for Solomon's subjects to remember what they had escaped, and what they had gained. For those who knew the disorder of civil strife, the chaos of conflicting self-interest and the narrow confines of tribalism, strong authority and the discipline it imposed was a mighty liberation. For the common people it meant freedom from fear, uncertainty and confinement, a secure basis on which to plan and to work and to prosper.

We have taught ourselves to accept authority only grudgingly. We hanker after anarchy, spontaneity, individualism, and even if we accept the necessity of some authority and order, we accept it as a limitation, a check on our freedom and self-expression. Government, order and authority are tolerated as a kind of compromise - necessary restrictions which unfortunately limit the scope of personal, individual freedom. Because we have lost the sense of community, and because we are too remote from a real experience of anarchy, we fail to realise the freedom of order and how the authority which establishes order liberates.

Authority and freedom do not have to be balanced off against each other, for they are not inherently in opposition. The harmony between them is not a compromise - or if it is, that is only when both of them are deficient. True authority, well-exercised, liberates its subjects from the restrictions of pseudo-freedom; the narrow confines into which mere self-interest and self-centered independence lures us. The scope that an individual or a tribe can carve out and maintain for itself is always less than that which a greater authority can give it. Freedoms for which it has to fight, limiting itself to them, can be taken for granted under a wider authority. Good strong government offers us far more freedom than selfish independence, by providing on a wider, fairer, surer scale the guarantees we need if we are to grow as persons and a community.

In the story of the Levite and his concubine we saw how freedom is destroyed by anarchy. Israelites who should have been free to travel among the towns of their people without fear and with every protection of hospitality, were preyed upon and destroyed. Benjamin's refusal to put the matter right under federal authority led to civil war, the destruction of Benjamin and the dismembering of Israel. Where authority failed to hold, and where order was overthrown, freedom and fulfilment were casualties.

I have seen it happening in Britain and Australia, and it is even more critical in America, that the collapse of respect for authority has brought an end to freedom. Many have lost

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the freedom to walk in public, and the night particularly has become a time of barricades, of locked doors and escorts. For the old, for children and for women, freedoms that we took for granted not long ago have gone, and for want of universally respected authority and order, the vulnerable are increasingly confined to their own narrow quarters, or to the supervision of the strong.

However, this is no simplistic apologia for authoritarianism. The breakdown of authority in a community is indeed a disaster - but it may well, and often does result from the abusive exercise of authority as overbearing power. Authority is not sacrosanct. It can be corrupted and earn its own downfall. The Ephraimites sought to impose their authority by arrogant force, and they were destroyed by Gilead. The sons of Eli warped and corrupted the authority of Shiloh's priesthood, bringing disaster on themselves and Israel. To claim that authority and order are necessary to freedom is not to say that any exercise of authority is justified. Authority can curtail freedom. It can oppress, and there comes a time, as we shall see, when even the most beneficial authority must be overthrown because it has become a tyranny. Freedom needs authority and order, but sometimes freedom must overthrow a particular authority and a particular imposition of order, because it is oppression.

The order and the authority that give freedom come as a gift from the hands of a saviour. Those who have known disorder and the rule of selfish individualism welcome authority as a release. Authority that is true to the pattern God gives it seeks to extend the freedom of all, and, from the beginning, it does not impose conformity but cultivates the assent of its subjects, as Yahweh originally won the trust of his people, and as David wooed the hearts of Israel. The condition of authority is the consent of the ruled, won by the giving of freedom. Though Solomon's was the golden age of the kingdom, his people never forgot that it was David who had founded the dynasty, had won the allegiance of Israel as Yahweh's servant and so had bequeathed to his heirs authority for the freedom of Israelites.

To rule as David did is to rule as saviour. Those who rule Yahweh's people, exercising authority in his name, should be freedom-bringers and saviours, as Yahweh was himself when he freed Israel from Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan. As their saviour in the days of the federation he had given them the heroes who rallied them and freed them from their enemies. Saul, then David, ruled Israel as saviour-kings who freed them from the domination of the Philistines. Authority, rule, order and salvation: as God's gift to his people, these are linked together. They mean freedom, scope, security, a sound basis on which the community can grow and individuals discover their liberty as persons. They are the gift of Yahweh who himself rules as saviour; who is Israel's saviour as her ruler.

It would be idyllic to finish on this happy note: the rule of Solomon crowning the long labours and loyal trust of David. But history is not so neat. Besides the ideal king of legend, there is another grim reality behind Solomon's power: the unacceptable face of authority. The Bible does not ignore it, but, as with the conquest and the story of David,

gives us both the ideal picture and the harsher realities on the other side of the story. Once again, the truth will be both together, and more.

To carry out his building projects, Solomon raised a levy of forced labour. Remnants of the Canaanite peoples still living among the Israelites, and then Israelites themselves, were conscripted for the temple, the palace, the city walls, the levelling of Jerusalem's hill tops and the fortifications of towns throughout the kingdom. Thousands were commandeered, taken from their homes and fields and sent in relays to work in Lebanon, cutting and carting timber, or in the mountains quarrying stone. It was not a popular measure, and Adoram, the official in charge of labour, was a hated man.

Solomon's mighty achievements bore their own seeds of dissent and disloyalty. For Israel had become great as other nations were great, and her king could hold his head high in the company of the greatest; but Israel had also become weak as other nations are weak: under the domination of her king. One man now towered over the people, and, as the pessimists had foreseen, he was a burden on them.

Another weakness of the monarchy also became apparent. Almost the first duty of the king was to marry wives. Apart from increasing the certainty of an heir, the number of his wives reinforced his own ego and his image as a kind of superman. Both were important to his role as symbol of the nation's confidence. Moreover, the rank and connexions of his wives enhanced his influence with other rulers, so that foreign marriages were essential. Solomon had wives from the royal families of many nearby kingdoms, from Moab and Edom, from Ammon and Sidon, and the Hittites. These royal wives had royal prerogatives, which included palaces and apartments for themselves, their own servants, and shrines for their own gods. Political alliances and political marriages could not be undertaken without politic recognition of foreign gods, and the king became involved in their worship.

Moreover, as he grew older, his wives, or at least his favourite ones, had increasing influence over him, as is not uncommon with aging kings. (It had been the same with David.) To a man who outlives the vigour and ambition of youth, home comforts and homely pleasures become very important - even in a king's palace. Someone who knows your little ways and idiosyncracies, who will take from you even the bother of seeing that your servants do things the way you like them done, is able in her gentle way to rule you. Whether they won him over in genuine love and affection, or out of ambition for their own children, preparing a way for their succession, Solomon's wives more and more wrapped up his life in theirs, his needs subjecting him more and more to their influence. His heart was swayed, and he worshipped their gods, turning where they turned for help. He was no longer wholly Yahweh's man, as his father had been, but followed Astarte, Milcom, Chemosh. He did not repudiate Israel's god, but he was not, in the end, Yahweh's whole-hearted devotee.

His power had begun to be oppression. He had distanced himself both from the people David had won and now from the God who had taught David to rule. Under him, the

The Warrior God

community prospered and Israelites were free as never before to face the world; but he had forgotten the roots of his power and the object of his authority. His own officials now took from the Israelites the freedom they had been so long attaining, and the great projects of his reign, the glorification of Jerusalem and the building of an army, began to curtail the freedom of Israel, oppressing his own people and threatening the very reason for authority and order.

But for all our reservations, the triumph of Yahweh in the reign of Solomon appeared to be complete. The most extravagant hopes of those slaves who had trusted Yahweh by the Sea of Reeds had surely been more than fulfilled. They were now, three hundred years later, a secure nation, well provided for and at peace. They possessed the land they had fought for. Their warrior god had lifted them from the status of slaves and despised outlaws to that of a landed people, a nation in its own territory, with standing among the nations of the world.

It was the work of Yahweh's love, the revelation and beginning of his rule, that overturns our traditional ideas of the rule of God. For it was not by declaring himself creator and owner of all things, nor even as the controller of all history, that he did this - but as a god offering his leadership to a landless and friendless people. The rule of God is not an assertion, but an offer. That sovereignty which God is really concerned to establish is a sovereignty of generous, effective love, accepted in need, in a trusting personal relationship. Slowly and patiently he had built up this relationship as the foundation of his community, which had now become a kingdom, under a secure dynasty that would continue to govern it.

So the first part of Israel's history comes to an end in the golden age of Solomon: golden as a bright morning and spring flowers, or as autumn leaves and sunset; golden as the wisdom that flourished then in Israel's first age of peace; golden as fortune and legend, as the merchants' money and the idols in their foreign shrines, as the dowries and the rich apartments of Solomon's harem; golden as the hopes of youthful vigour, and as the memories of old age; golden as the mighty cherubs in the Holiest Place, and as the temple standing sunlit on the hill of Jerusalem. It was an age to be remembered as wise, civilised, rich and happy, a wonder rising from the wild roots of Israel, which Yahweh had planted and patiently nurtured in Canaan.