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In the course of this book I have pointed to three themes which continue through all of Israel's history, the questions: what it is to be a person, what community is, and what is the rule of God. All that we have seen so far is only the beginning of answers, but that beginning has shown how closely interrelated these three questions are. God's rule over us is established in our concrete experience of being persons and a community. That rule is his personal relationship with his people, which is the basis of their personal reality and common identity. The rule of God is the first thing for us to understand if we are to understand ourselves and our solidarity in community.

God is, and can only be, our "Lord". If we know him at all, we know him as one who is greater than ourselves, whom we must respect with that deep reverence which the Bible calls the "fear of Yahweh" or the "fear of God". To meet him is to discover our dependence on him, as the Habiru did beside the Sea of Reeds. We cannot treat him as less than ourselves, as inferior or subject to us, to be exploited by us, for that is to court disaster, as the foolish priests of Shiloh found. Nor can we treat him as an equal or ally, retaining our independent initiative, as Saul tried to do. If we are not to be broken, we, like David, have to recognise him as our master. He is our maker, not just in some original physical sense, but in the sense that he is now creating us, making us who we are through our relationship with him. That is how deeply we depend on him, and that is why it is so dangerous to set ourselves against the reality he is.

The relationship between God and his people is the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It is not just the natural relationship between creator and creatures, but a challenging, personal relationship which was freely initiated by God within history. It began when he stooped to appear within his creation, to take a role among his creatures and identify himself as a particular one of their gods. Yahweh, who spoke to Israel as their warrior god, is God initiating his personal historical relationship with his people.

That relationship is not just a doctrine to be asserted, but something God is doing in history, to be seen and experienced. In revealing himself as Israel's warrior god, their leader and ruler, he was not giving us theological information, but painstakingly and effectively creating what he described. The stories of the Old Testament are not just allegories, symbolic descriptions of the rule of God and his relationship with us. They are the actual beginning, in history, of a personal relationship that has a beginning and a history.

His rule is not the naked assertion of a Creator's power over the universe, nor is it a legal or moral code. It is a personal relationship offered to and worked out with a people who had little morality and less theology, a benefit given on God's initiative and received by trusting followers, a project entered upon by him and his people together. It is not primarily his sovereignty over all creation, but his rule over a chosen people. It is not measured by the extent of his power, but by the acceptance of his love. The people who

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recognised and accepted his rule, however imperfectly, were the beginning of something different from all the rest of creation.

The whole Bible is concerned with his continuing creation of them, in which he reaffirms their identity as a community under his rule. Their relationship always remains a matter of dialogue and trust, an encounter in which he stands somewhere between crushing inflexibility and total, meaningless accommodation. For he is neither a tyrant nor a puppet. His plans for his people go forward through their own experience of searching and finding, question and answer, problem and solution, in which he is always in dialogue with them. But they are his plans, and they do go forward. He never gives up his ambition of making them his own community.

We for our part cannot afford to cut ourselves off from any of that experience, for even its most primitive beginnings are a vital part of the dialogue, which still goes on. If we try to tune in on it at some later (more edifying) stage and ignore the beginning, we will suffer all the disadvantages of those who join in a discussion without knowing what has been said already. To understand the sovereign rule of God and to share the freedom of his people, we have to be involved with the earliest Israelites, for their history is still part of us, and we are still ruled, built and liberated by continuing in their dialogue with Yahweh.

That is why Scripture is so important. It can be baffling, because it is a record of the whole process, of their questions, suppositions and attempts, as well as God's answers and teachings. It is an account of their blunders and disobedience as well as God's instructions and his mercy. It is not all edifying, but to understand the relationship, we need to know both sides. To recognise the rule of God, we have to recognise, with sympathy, even the shortcomings of those he ruled. We have to let their whole history, even its sordid side, inform us, direct us, bind us and liberate us.

Their history, if we belong to God, is our history, in which we discover the roots of our real, common identity. Unlike the bulk of developed Western society, which dismisses history as an irrelevant past, swept aside by technological change and a moral revolution, we will understand that our meaning is in our history, and that without such meaning we disintegrate. And unlike Marxist society which claims to find in history an impersonal process shaping all society according to inevitable laws, we will recognise in our history a personal and liberating relationship that is more fundamental and more decisive than any laws. In Scripture we discover the personal God who acts in history to reveal and commit himself. Meeting him and understanding him does not provide us with a manual for present behaviour or a blueprint for the future, but it does provide us with reason to trust him; and if we do, we will find that he himself tells us who we are and what we are about.

The rule of God, being a personal relationship, leads into the unknown. It is not a contract specifying all the details of completion, but calls for unlimited and dangerous commitment to a trusted leader. As a relationship of love, of deep personal loyalty, it involves the surrender of self to a God who loves, and who in loving judges his people, declares who they are and lays bare the truth about them. It is our acceptance of a real

God, who will not hesitate to expose the contradictions between our narrow self-image and his will for us; who will show us that although we are woefully inadequate to the challenge, we are his people.

We do not initiate the encounter with him, and we cannot say in advance where it will take us. The relationship into which he draws us is our identity and our liberty, but it has to begin with trust, which alone can endure the reality of God. For both our identity and our liberty lie in a personal, communal relationship with God who is real beyond all our control. To meet him is an open-ended experience, an adventure whose future course is unknown. It is the ultimate encounter with reality: our exposure to the personal reality of God himself.

Trust, or faith, is the first real contact with God and the beginning of our response to him. It is not just a matter of believing in doctrines or in past events, but of accepting God himself at work in the baffling present and into the uncertain future. It is not just an idea in the head, a conviction to be held by the intellect and defended by argument. Nor is it just an emotional experience remembered and looked back to as a moment of conversion. It was and will always be a commitment that exposes itself in present action, expressing itself in hands and feet, doing now what God directs and walking into the forbidding future with confidence in him. This was the trust of the Habiru that brought them to the Sea of Reeds, and of the Israelites in the wilderness. This was the faith in which they accepted Yahweh as their god and received his covenant of commitment to them.

Such trust was kept alive from generation to generation as an involvement handed down in ritual and story, but it was not just nostalgic conservatism. It was an active, vigorous confidence facing the future. Real trust can never be believing in God and then trying to stabilise the community at what God has already achieved. Real believers are very different from those pious reactionaries who try to keep the work of God ticking over as it is. The real and original faith does not try to control God and keep him within its competence, but is open to a God with a will and a way of his own, trusting him even when the past begins to crumble and he is heard to speak of dangerous new beginnings.

But neither are believers like simple marxists claiming to know the revolutionary course of the future. They trust God who has promised to give them their future. They believe that God who spoke to the Habiru as Yahweh, and to David their descendant, is still committed to his people. Without pretending to know laws of history which unfold an inevitable future, and without claiming to have discovered rules by which God works, they nonetheless go forward the way he directs them, because they know and trust his promises. With all due respect to Marx, the future is unknown, but it is in God's hands.

Trust is not directed to a remote Deity in another world. It is an immediate and practical thing, directed towards a God who has got himself involved in our doings. It was trust in Yahweh for freedom, food, land and security, not, in the first place, for some metaphysical or "other worldly" reward. It began without any idea of survival after death. It was for Yahweh's intervention in this world on Israel's behalf - and God's subsequent

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action vindicated that trust. So we do wrong to imagine that the faith God inspires is only, or in the first place, directed to another world, and that its vindication is not within this world. According to Israel's first experience, both the hope and the fulfilment, trust and vindication, involved the work of God in this world.

But it was also a communal trust, and hope, and God's understanding was not with isolated individuals, but with the whole community. No one individual necessarily lived to see his hopes realised. The frightened slaves crouching at the shore of the Sea of Reeds lived to see the morning, and the death of their enemies - but that was only the start. Almost none of them lived to see the land they hoped for, and none of them lived to be secure in it. It was many generations before the promises of Yahweh were fulfilled, and whether it was his slowness or their reluctance that delayed fulfilment, only their descendants entered into the security for which they had trusted him. That was the triumph of David and the privilege of Solomon's reign: to be the fulfilment, at last, of Israel's hopes, Yahweh's vindication of their ancestral faith.

The lesson of Israel's first encounters with God, the word of Yahweh from the exodus to the reign of Solomon, is that trust in God is, in the first instance, for his action with us in this world and the life we now know. It is that such trust will be vindicated, and that those who put their hopes in him will not have misplaced them; but those hopes are to be held for their community and its descendants. There is no room here for self-centered, individualistic ambitions, but for shared hopes, or hopes-in-solidarity. God's response may last over generations. The first part of Israel's story tells you to trust God. It gives you no assurance that you will live to see your trust vindicated, but it promises you that it will be vindicated, even in this world.

It is the kind of faith called for in a revolution, in taking up the cause of the hopelessly weak against the secure and strong. It is much more than the easy "faith" of those who can see that they belong to a powerful and obviously winning organisation, for it is the paradoxical faith of those who believe in the eventual triumph of the weak. That is why, in spite of my statement that believers do not know any "laws" of God's involvement in the world, they will typically exercise their faith in him by their support for the weak. They are confident that God will free the oppressed, feed the hungry, provide for the landless and insecure, rescue the weak from the power of the strong.

With this kind of faith, you will not be afraid to find yourself committed to the oppressed, the hungry, the weak or landless, for it was to such that God first showed himself - and the mad hopes of such people were the starting point for the relationship of trust which he created between himself and humankind. He began with the Habiru. He showed himself first as the supporter of a defenceless people, and the befriender of deprived and landless tribes. From the beginning it was his promise that the powerless would inherit the land.

The total, permanent relationship into which trust enters is love. It did not begin with us, but with God, with Yahweh's love for a gang of slaves who were running away from Egypt, when he sided with them at the Sea of Reeds. It was Yahweh providing for them

in the desert, promising to give them land, and inspiring them as they struggled to take it and hold it for their own. Love was Yahweh binding them to one another as his people, to become a true people under his rule. It was God supporting and saving Israel, however poorly they understood him, fulfilling his promise to them and remaining with them as their leader.

Love is putting an absolute value on someone else, which commits you to them permanently. It is not a matter of feelings that come and go blindly, nor of rules and constraints, but of value given and received, of open eyes and lasting commitment. This was the kind of commitment that the Israelites found in Yahweh their god. In rescuing them he placed a value on them, identifying them as his people. Having rescued them, he could not just leave them, and it seemed that, no matter how often they forgot him, he was always ready to take up their cause again. On his side, the relationship could not be broken. On their side, the return for such love was not just a matter of meeting obligations, but of yielding to that tremendous commitment of God and allowing him jealously to protect and prosper them, and to shape their future himself, out of his commitment to them.

To accept that someone loves you is to accept a fact that changes your very self. Love makes you someone, and changes the someone you are. A baby that is loved grows up a beloved person and knows who he is. A child who is loved is able to build her self-image, her character, her own identity, in security and confidence, because she starts from the assurance that she is someone and does matter. The person who is valued values himself, and so grows and becomes in an even deeper sense a real person. The man or woman who accepts the love of another becomes a new person. Henceforth they cannot give a full account of themselves without including, in some words or other, that they are loved, and who loves them. If you are accepted, wanted, followed, believed in, asked for in marriage, trusted, honoured with another's commitment, it adds a new and deep dimension to your real self. If the one who accepts, loves and asks for you is God, you can never be the same again.

By accepting the commitment or love of Yahweh, Israel became a people, with an identity and a true self beyond any self-image they had had before. When Israel accepted the love of God, she accepted as fact something more basic to her true self than any other fact, of history, ancestry, power or possession. She accepted that she was loved by Yahweh, as his chosen people. The paradox of love, especially of the love of God, is that, being in another, it is yet the most real and important thing about oneself. The most important fact about Israel, the truest self that Israel will ever find, is not something in the Israelites themselves, but something in God: that he loves them. It is such love that gives and affirms your real identity, and the sovereignty of love is not that it overpowers your self, but that it gives you your real self.

That is why the proud and frantic underpinning of self in egoism, domination, lust, vengeance and violence is so tragically futile and self-destructive; for it is illusory. To be self-asserting is to deny that your true identity is given by another's love. That is why

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Abimelech's scheming and arrogance could only end in destruction, and Samson's vengeance could only end in tragedy. That is why the aggressive self-assertion of Ephraim led only to their slaughter in a strange country, and the bullying lust of Gibeah destroyed Benjamin and broke the brotherhood of tribes. That too is why, in the day of Midian and the day of the Ammonites, disintegration and disaster followed on their turning to alternative gods, for they had turned from their best selves - they were out of their right mind - when they ditched Yahweh.

To be loved involves you in deep commitments, not because it imposes upon you some extraneous demand for duty or gratitude, something foreign to yourself and restricting to your development, but because it puts before you opportunities and possibilities that could never have arisen from yourself. It puts at the very heart of your identity a new, all-embracing and all-changing fact: that you are loved. God's love gives you the freedom of a limitless new identity in which he becomes as much a part of your self - as real, close or personal - and more so, than any precious part of your own natural "self". When loved by God, it becomes as dangerous and destructive to deny him, and more so, than to repress any other deep and vital drive of your personality.

The rule of God, which is love, is not restricting. It does not limit our freedom but creates it. It frees us from the narrow limits of defensive and aggressive self as surely as the brave and capable desert chief liberates his followers from the confines of fear and from their restriction to the least productive land. The rule of God does not repress our identity, but is God himself giving rise to our new, liberated identity. To reject it is to reject our real selves and our widest freedom.

But this is no sanction for the foolish and arrogant illusions of individualism. We are not talking of isolated arrangements between God and individual souls, but of a relationship between God and his people, as one community. God's rule is not for the private advancement of individuals, to make them independent of others, but for all his people, emphasising rather than diminishing their mutual dependence. The freedom we discover is freedom together, freedom in solidarity.

Yet here too, the meaning of love is that the individual committed to their community is not submerged but reaffirmed, given meaning and value by the community. Hospitality and mutual protection are of the first importance; reconciliation in families, clans and tribes is a prize to be worked for; and the worst crimes are those that betray fellowship, break pledges and exploit the vulnerable. The individual and the community, far from being in competition, are intimately linked and interdependent.

That is the meaning of freedom - not just release from restrictions, but freedom to be something, to become someone, with others. True freedom is the freedom to accept others and to relate to them, to become with them a community of persons. It is freedom to exist for others and to be real for them, to commit yourself and so to have meaning, to "count" among others as they "count" with you. This is the personal freedom, inseparable from community, which is given by the rule of God.

It arises from the freedom of God himself, who has no needs and acts under no compulsion, so that his commitment is total and totally personal. He will no more go back on it than he will cease to be himself. When he saved the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds, it was his own choice to do so, and throughout the history of their relationship the initiative will always be his. He is under no obligation and is therefore able to commit himself freely and irrevocably.

His people can never be independent of him, and he will never be dependent on them, but that totally unequal relationship, far from condemning them to help-less uncertainty, establishes beyond all doubt their security and identity: they are his people. They are what they are, ultimately, not because of themselves or their achievements, nor through the accidents of history, nor by some compelling law, but by God's own free, sovereign, irreversible choice of them. So, at Shechem, Joshua looked for a free and self-committing response to him. The rule of God is to be nothing less than the sharing of his own freedom with his people. It is the gift of an identity, a meaning and value, that nothing can take away, because nothing but God's free choice has given it. They can accept or reject the relationship, but if they accept it, it is given by God, and that is unshakeable security, the beginning of all freedom.

To be free is to be able to commit yourself, and to commit yourself is to go forward into new freedom. Only commitment freely entered into gives you the freedom to grow as a person, relating to others in a community and to God as ruler and giver of freedom. So personal identity, community and the rule of God, are linked together in freedom and commitment. They are not rival ideals but one interrelated whole.

To be a person is to be-for-others within your community, living as one for whom reliable mutual commitment opens up whole new dimensions of life. Without that commitment, you are trapped in the impossible contradictions of self-seeking, doomed to destruction or frustration, restricted to a self that is self-contained, where there is no scope, no opening, no real freedom. To be a person at all is to accept the commitment of belonging in a community and under the rule of God.

To be a person is to be consistent in your personal relationships; and to be inconsistent, to contradict yourself by wavering and changing, is to fritter away your personality, fragmenting your identity and fatally denying your own reality. Without consistency, personal reality and personal relationships dissolve and the bonds that make for community disintegrate. To accept the rule of God is to let your life be shaped consistently, accepting from God identity, responsibility, freedom and solidarity. God's rule is not an extra to personal existence but that which makes it real and personal, the guarantee of its freedom and authenticity.

That is where ethics begin. In the community God rules, morality is the work of love as deep, strong commitment: the commitment of Yahweh to his people, of members in one family or clan, of wife and husband, of the unconditional giver, of warriors who fight

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together, trusting one another with their lives. It is freedom for true personal relationships in which you are able to declare yourself and to be yourself without evasion, honestly acknowledging your involvement with others. The pseudo-freedom of power, to indulge your own passions, to remove rivals and destroy opposing demands; and the negative freedom of permissiveness, to go your own way and do your own thing, to break bonds as it suits you: these are self-destructive in the end, and in the process they destroy all community. But the integrity which Yahweh gives fulfils the individual and binds them to their community. Uriah the Hittite stood to his commitment not as an irksome duty, but as the very expression of his identity, as a matter of pride and consistent loyalty. Freedom to be himself was the ability to be loyal to his comrades.

That kind of integrity establishes the real person, and makes an integral whole of the individual and the community, the person and the people. It liberates them from the destructive contradictions of selfishness, pride and arrogance and creates in them the freedom of friends who can face God without evasion or disguise. Integrity, which is often called "righteousness" in English translations of the Bible, is the character of God himself, which he seeks to reflect in his people, bringing about in them a wholeness that is free from contradictions and conflicts. It is the "health" of human personality: whole individuals in a whole community. From the time of the judges, the hero leaders in the tribal federation, to that of the kings who ruled all Israel with Yahweh's authority, God was striving to establish that kind of community with integrity.

Eli's sons, who exploited the shrine of Shiloh, corrupted the very symbol of Israel's commitment to Yahweh, and so undermined the community on which they preyed. They and the Israelites with them, relying on a depersonalised god, were drawn into destruction. The attempt to use Yahweh through the ark, without real and personal commitment, ended in disaster. Again, Saul was destroyed by the burden of rule because he could not commit himself to Yahweh. However he justified it, he wanted to remain his own man, in control of his own course, while he ruled as Yahweh's appointed king. It was a contradiction which broke his relationship with God, undid his commitment to his followers and eventually undermined his own personality.

Integrity is essential, to personality, to community and to the rule of God. It is crudely anticipated by the human desire for revenge, which, as we saw, is the desire to see wrong put right, the injured self reasserted, evil brought back to the evil doer and the balance of justice restored. Though a perverted and tragic passion, vengeance is a passion for right: a desperate clutching at wholeness and a pull back towards the integrity of God. It is a primitive cry for rightness when this is not just an abstract value but a bitterly felt need.

That is why the temptation to revenge plays a crucial part in the story of David. He rightly recognised it as a call upon the integrity of God, and by surrendering vengeance to the rule of Yahweh, he surrendered his own self's deep need for reassurance, the very condition of his self-respect and standing among his people. He knew that his deeper need was for a whole relationship with Yahweh, and that the fullness of his personality depended not on his own ability to settle scores but on the integrity of God. So, trust in

Yahweh gave his character and life an integrity that reflected Yahweh's own. His cautious rise to power did in time build up the community, because it was founded on a committed relationship between himself and Yahweh: Yahweh's loyalty to him and his dedication to Yahweh.

The integrity, the freedom and wholeness, of his community is Yahweh's first concern. He rescued Israel from Egypt to make them a real and free people. He restored justice by bringing retribution on the arrogance of warlords. He inspired the patient labour of those who worked to repair the broken family and the broken community. He gave leaders, heroes and kings to a people who were shattered by anarchy. He brought about a final, if tragic, wholeness even in Samson; and he gave David a purpose and integrity beyond himself, the gifts he needed to rule a disorientated people.

Even in his anger the Israelites discovered God's integrity. It was God reaching out to open up at all costs a way back into dialogue, recovering a relationship he prized too highly to let it go by default. It was not the defensive anger that springs from fear, nor the tyrannous rage of injured self-importance, but his serious concern when the integrity of his community was threatened, especially by their own inconstancy. It was his insistence on their wholeness: that it mattered to him.

To those who trust him, even the judgement and punishment of God prove to be his deep love and integrity, too real to bend to the fancies of his people and too loving just to let them go. In his mercy he refuses to leave them to the effects of their own guilt and offers them acceptable terms for expiation and peace. Judgement, as David found, is God's authority delivering his people from conflicts and contradictions within themselves. It sanctions morality not in the coercive way that many imagine, but by revealing what we actually are - even to our own way of thinking - and so subverting the double standards which divide and undermine us. Punishment at the hands of God is liberation from every other punishing power - especially from the demons of our own conscience and the remorseless logic of sin and consequence. It is his offer of a safe way back to wholeness - not his only, and perhaps not his best offer, but often the only one we can accept.

To accept the rule of God is to face reality. Only those who are able to do so can be real themselves, building real relationships that are free from make-believe. That is why the story of Samson is so important: it shows clearly that an encounter with God does not repress even the ugly truth, but brings to light and releases what is really within a person. God's integrity is such that his first effect on those he touches is to release, or expose, their true character. In a relationship with him there is no place left for hypocrisy, illusion, repression or cover-up. An encounter with him is always an encounter with sovereign reality.

The integrity of God underlines for us the reality of our relationship with him, that it is not something within our own feelings or our own will, but something rooted in him, real beyond our narrow limits, and therefore likely to resist and hurt us if we try to change it. The pain of collision frees us from illusions: from the illusion that we have as many gods

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as we can imagine, to take our choice according to our mood; and the illusion that God chooses us because we are deserving, or that he loves us because he finds us as innocent as we think we are; and from the illusion that he belongs to us, rather than we to him. The truth of God sets us free to be real, in a real relationship with him.

Illusions, though they make life easier for a time, stifle the growth of any personal relationship, and so they stifle even the sovereign love of God. The deadliest illusion, against which the Israelites were warned at Shechem, and which destroyed the priests of Shiloh, is the idea that God is a soft, tame god, pliant and plastic to take whatever shape suits our comfort, a background guarantee to be called upon and used as required. Such a god is no leader or ruler, but only a prop to our self-delusion, and Yahweh is no such prop. God's commitment is the gift of his real self, not the present of a toy or pretend god. If he consented to be of any kind or shape or name we fancied, he would only be an idol in our heads, and a work of our changing imagination. But because he is God, and loves as God, he resists our wilful remoulding, as a truth so solid that we will hurt ourselves against him sooner than change him.

If out of pity or contempt, you consent to act a false part in your relationship with others, if you pretend to be what they want you to be, and not what you are, then you are not giving yourself in love. You are withholding yourself. This is one reason why to love a person is sometimes to hurt them. When you love, you want to give your real self, and to someone who wants to live with an illusion of you, that can be very painful.

The rule of God is solidly real. It is not a romantic idea about which we are free to fantasise, but something larger, more real than ourselves, a relationship with someone who, though greatly beyond our understanding and our hopes, means to give us himself. If the truth is painful, it is no less a gift and no less the condition of freedom. By giving himself, God opens the way to great possibilities, but in doing so, he closes the door firmly and painfully on all those impossibilities which, in human fancy, masquerade as opportunities and power.

True power, breaking the fetters that crush and confine the human personality, comes not from ourselves but from God's sovereign rule. The true breakthrough, the great liberation, is when God makes personal contact with his people, breathing his own life's breath into them. It does not overpower them but brings to light all that they are, leading them from there to something new. The breath of Yahweh blew back the Sea of Reeds, opening the way into the wilderness, where Israel discovered her present weak and unreliable self, as well as her future with him. The breath or spirit of Yahweh breathed a new strength into Samson, to tear up city gates and pull down temples, to satisfy his own tragic lust for revenge, but also to liberate Israel. The breath of Yahweh, the touch or kiss of his own life, was the closest, most real encounter with him, remaking Israelites from untried sons like Gideon, or despised outlaws like Jephthah, or donkey-drivers like Saul, into warrior-leaders, victory-bringers, reliable judges and kings, like to Yahweh himself.

As a personal and powerful encounter with Yahweh's love, the spirit of Yahweh is the fullest manifestation of his rule, in which he not only enters history and involves himself in human affairs, but shares his life with people, so that they begin to be like him. And here above all the contact is dangerous, the gift not to be taken lightly. To receive the spirit of God is to live with a breath of fire and truth roaring through your whole being and recreating you like one possessed. If the self it encounters in you is anything other than the self that is given by the love of God, it will bring it to light, unflinchingly. It is Yahweh's effective love and his true judgement - one and the same. It is the gift that lays bare the human heart, bringing our inmost thoughts to the most outward and tangible conclusion. If many more Israelites had been breathed upon by Yahweh as Samson was, we can be sure they would all have been destroyed.

That they were not destroyed is the work and the mercy of God, who, beyond destruction, is always rebuilding his community. Samson was destroyed, but Israel was freed from the Philistines. Saul died tragically, but from the ruins of his leadership a new ruler emerged to unite all Israel in victory. David's sin brought the punishment of Yahweh upon himself and his family, and racked the kingdom with rebellion, but his trust survived, and under him and Solomon, Israel became a secure and honoured nation. The power of God is the power of love and liberating judgement, which survives the failure of his subjects, because it is not derived from them. It does not depend on their success. No matter how often or how completely they fail, his power is still his own, to give again, in order to restore and rebuild his people.

Thus the rule of God is not the accumulation of power but the giving of gifts from a power that is already his. His gift and giving, like David's giving to his weaker followers and his gifts to the elders of Judah, are a commitment and a promise; they are not the end of a transaction, but the beginning of a relationship; they never exhaust commitment but always reaffirm it. They are a sign of total commitment, and to accept them is to enter into a total commitment of yourself, an agreement, or covenant, of mutual belonging, which is the foundation of identity and community.

Both the dynastic covenant with David and the federal covenant of Shechem were based on the giving of God. In the covenant with David, Yahweh made it clear that he was giving to David, and not the other way round. In the Shechem covenant, the people recalled that Yahweh had first given them freedom and land. Moreover, each covenant reaffirmed the place of personal identity and community under the rule of God: that these are not in competition with him, but are the very gift of his rule. In the covenant with David, the security of Israel and David's individual success were both Yahweh's sovereign purpose. And the covenant of Shechem expressed at once God's fixed desire to rule his people and their agreement, which bound them together as a community, giving clans and families a basis for their personal existence.

The covenant is binding not by force but by the depth of commitment that dialogue and free acceptance enter into. Once you have accepted it, you cannot deny it without tearing

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your community apart and destroying your own identity and freedom. For if you go back on the commitment of a relationship freely entered into on both sides, what will you not go back on? What can you cite or think of as your "self", your committed identity, your loyalty or solidarity, when you have denied the very act which most constitutes you a free, authentic person?

That is why the covenant involves the jealous anger of God, his judgement and his punishment. God who cares and insists that his people keep their covenant with him is insisting on a commitment without which they can only lose their identity and disintegrate. His insistence is on love, on the whole depth and range of honesty and integrity that love involves, for without that, there is no lasting community, no personal reality, but only indecision and sham. Yahweh will not let his people back out of the covenant - he will not let them run away from their true selves - without encountering his anger and his most determined resistance.

Because it is the basis of the community, we are quick to associate the covenant with law, but it is the relationship, not the law, which is fundamental.¹ The heart of Israel is love springing from the love with which Yahweh rescued them from the Egyptian charioteers and made them his people. The requirements of law can be met and discharged, but the obligations of covenant love can never be "discharged". None of the parties can ever acquit themselves of the commitment. It never comes to its end. It can never be limited to so many services for favours received, but every recognition of love, every response, only deepens the bond of commitment.

Of course, there must have been laws among the federated tribes and in the kingdom of David, but they rarely appear in the record. What does appear is the love that is integrity, or personal commitment, between Yahweh and his community and between fellow Israelites within Yahweh's community. In centuries to come, when the law would have its day and more explicit moral codes would be recorded, the basic rule of all would still be, to "love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength",² and to love your neighbour in the community as yourself.³ This is the covenant and the gift of God, the foundation of community and the relationship in which God rules.

That is the kind of community symbolised by the good days of Solomon's reign, when the kingdom was secure from threat, when justice was readily available to all, when wisdom and the arts flourished, and every person was satisfied, at home under their vine or fig tree. The days of Solomon (whether as fact or fable, past reality or present ideal) truthfully picture the salvation of Yahweh and the glory of God's sovereign rule: the human heart and community in bountiful peace.

¹ The law covenant - which lies beyond the limits of this book - is only one of four types of covenant between Yahweh and Israel, and all the covenant stories, even that of the Law, emphasise the relationship: cf Ex. 20:1-2; 34:6-10.

² Deut. 6:5 ³ Lev. 19:18

But the picture must never be separated from the relationship - or it degenerates into a parody of God's revelation. The picture is not pious speculation about another world or escapist spirituality for Sunday mornings, but a radical claim about the reality of this world, in which God himself acts, and acts decisively. This "covenant" view of community is totally opposed to the rival views of community offered by our own society, and helps to explain why both the "free", or capitalist, and the communist versions of it are so dismally godless.

The materialistic, hedonistic and individualistic dreams of modern America and Western Europe, and the crushing totalitarianism of Soviet Russia are both divorced from the view of community I have been describing in this chapter. The one is obsessed with the individual and individual pleasure; the other attempts to build the community on force, the domination of a ruling clique or party. The one denies the deep commitments implicit in freedom and gift; the other does not see that only freedom, a relationship of trust and love, can make for true and binding commitment. The one appeals to the divisive but supposedly beneficial laws of competition, the other to a ruthless law of historical inevitability. The one builds power on a constant appeal to selfishness; the other hoards its strength by secrecy and intimidation. Neither draws or rests upon the limitless power of God, which is in gift, promise and covenant. Neither recognises that his rule alone offers scope for the unlimited hopes of personal being and community. Both are opposed to God's way of ruling, of building community and of liberating the human person, and neither can have the allegiance of genuine believers.

To accept even the most basic elements of God's relationship with his people, those that emerge from the earliest experience of Israel, is to come into radical confrontation with both capitalist and communist society, with the nation-state as we know it in the developed, ex-Christian world. It will take a great deal more than this book to say where that confrontation leads us, or what God is creating in our day in place of the Canaanites, but it must be clear that to believe in the God of Israel and to place yourself under his rule is to break with the rival patterns of society in which we have grown up. It is to be open to something quite different: a community in covenant with him and accepting his rule as a gift to them, their freedom and salvation.

What we have seen in the earliest history of Israel is only the beginning of God's salvation, but it is a beginning, a sign of hope to those of us who have forgotten how to begin. God offers us salvation not in a slick formula but as an enduring and challenging relationship. It is a gift that sets us free and gives us roots in a new land where we are a new community. There is no salvation for those who build their own securities and cling to their own narrow self-image. Salvation, the realisation of God's sovereign rule, is the new life of those who are willing to be subject to him.

I hope I have shown that of our three concerns, personal identity, community and the rule of God, this, the rule of God, is the first and most important. Not because it overrides the others, but because it is their very ground and guarantee. We have not defined it, but we

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have begun to recognise it. We have seen a power that rescued and inspired trust; a love that dissolved dreams and shattered illusions, yet offered more than self-assertion could ever achieve; a commitment that would not stop short of complete wholeness and freedom. We have spoken of integrity, truth, reconciliation and covenant gift, but more than all abstractions, we have recognised the rule of God as an encounter with him, an actual dialogue and engagement recalled in the story of Israel and continued from there into our times.

The rule of God, like any personal relationship - a friendship, an alliance or a love affair - has a history. It is not just a metaphysical fact, but something that began in history, with the Habiru slaves who called upon their god and found themselves delivered from slavery. Its story is that of the landless tribes who joined forces in Yahweh's name and took Canaan for their home; the story of Deborah rallying the clans, of those who came and those who did not care; of Gideon smashing down the Canaanite pole and building an altar to Yahweh; of his victory over Midian and the touchiness of Ephraim. It is the story of the great assembly at Shechem and the commitments made there, of Abimelech's desire to dominate; of Jephthah and the slaughter at Jordan fords; of Samson's bitter revenge and the challenge to Philistine supremacy. It is the story of the Levite's reconciliation with his wife and her father's persistent hospitality; of the crimes at Gibeah, the war with Benjamin, and the elders' ingenious plan for restoration. It is the history of ancient shrines, of Mizpah and Shiloh, of Eli and Samuel and the ark of Yahweh; the story of the monarchy, of Saul's appointment, struggle and tragic defeat; of David's outlaw days, of Nabal and Abigail and his prudent mercy; of his men and his commitment to them, the division of spoils, the winning of Judah and the founding of a dynasty. It is the story of Jerusalem, David's city, and the wild and wonderful procession of the ark; and of David's sin, the judgement it received and his unquenchable trust. It is the history of God's covenant with him, the paradox of unconditional giving that binds and commits more deeply than any conditions; and it is the golden story of promises and hopes fulfilled in the reign of Solomon. All this is the work of Yahweh, in which his sovereign love speaks to the trust he first inspired. It has not ended, but now, in this book, we can only glance at the way it leads from here...