

## 1 Jeroboam's Kingdom

The prophecy of Ahijah, like many others, was not for immediate fulfilment (Solomon never lost his hold over the tribes of Israel) but it signalled the end of Solomon's dynasty and changed the future for Jeroboam. Someone in his company must have seen enough and talked enough for two and two to be put together, and Solomon got to hear of it. Prophets, with their wild and stubborn dreams, could be a danger to kings, and so could those whom the prophets chose to favour. The king took action, and Jeroboam had to escape to Egypt, where he remained in exile as long as Solomon lived.

But when Solomon died everything changed. He and his father David had ruled Israel for eighty years, welding the fractious tribes into a mighty kingdom, but his son, Rehoboam, could not inherit their success. When he came north to receive the tribes' submission at Shechem (the traditional meeting place) they were not prepared to accept him automatically. The magic of David's name no longer guaranteed their allegiance, and they wanted an end to conscription before they would acknowledge his heir as king. When Rehoboam refused to meet their conditions, their resentment of rule from Jerusalem erupted into angry defiance. The spell was finally broken. They rejected him and David's line completely:

Down with David and his family!  
What have they ever done for us?  
Men of Israel, let's go home!  
Let Rehoboam look out for himself!                    (IK 12:16 Good News Bible)

The Ephraimites, the largest and strongest tribe, who had always considered themselves the natural leaders of Israel, now put forward their own candidate. Jeroboam returned from exile to be acclaimed king at Shechem, and Israel was once again in the fold of Ephraim. In the end, Solomon's son kept only Judah and Benjamin (with the royal city of Jerusalem) and Jeroboam ruled the ten northern tribes, as the prophet had promised.

A decisive change had taken place in Israel, which would never again be one nation. The attempt to make it so, as a federation<sup>1</sup> and as a kingdom,<sup>2</sup> was now over, and God himself had made the decision to abandon it. When civil war threatened to follow the break, the prophets brought about peace, if not unity, by declaring that it should be accepted as "Yahweh's doing".<sup>3</sup> The dividing of Israel was Yahweh's work, his final judgement on the reign of Solomon, which had seemed so fair, but had squandered the good will built up by his father. Yahweh had pronounced sentence on the glory of Solomon, whose descendents would never again rule Israel.

The God of Israel does not stand aloof from his people's affairs but meets them even in their political rows and upheavals. Because they are his people, he has a view on where

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<sup>1</sup>See Joshua 24 and the Book of Judges. <sup>2</sup>See I and II Samuel. <sup>3</sup>IK 12:21-24.

they are going. He himself has plans for them which bear upon their community, their politics, their government. Nothing is beyond his involvement. Nothing is safe from his influence. His approach affects everything of importance to them. He is a real God, and any relationship with him has significant and tangible consequences.

According to the Book of Kings, when the prophet Ahijah confronted Jeroboam on the road to Ephraim, Yahweh was speaking to Israel, and God was declaring his will for his people. By our standards, it is a shocking thing to allege. Ahijah recognised no difference between religion and politics, and God - according to us - does not embroil himself in politics. Moreover, Ahijah spoke of breaking up the kingdom of David, which God himself had established, and God, according to our most respected theologies, is a God of unity and order, not of division and destruction. But there it stands: the Bible's vision of a God who tears up and destroys, even what he himself has built; who takes sides and declares his politics even in the power struggles of a petty, barbaric kingdom in the hill country of the Eastern Mediterranean. The prophet who stood by the roadside destroying a new cloak, was the sign and voice of God himself, who speaks and declares himself even in the most tangible and earthy politics.

The God we meet in the Book of Kings does not accept the boundaries we mark out for him as his proper sphere. He is a real God, who opposes and challenges, with a mind and a purpose of his own. No one can claim that he belongs to the realm of pious fantasy and pie-in-the-sky. He is too close to life for that. In the Book of Kings, God is real and active, directing, encouraging, shaping, rebuking his people; and that, I believe, is how the real God shows himself to us. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is God.

We can only begin to understand what or who God is by understanding our relationship to him, and seeing ourselves, too, in the light of that relationship. The question, "Who is God?" is a searching and testing one, for when we begin to consider who God is or who God might be, we find ourselves deep into the question of who we are ourselves. Not only God's identity, but our own is at stake, and in that cause, all our passions move quickly onto the defensive.

Not surprisingly, our culture prefers the speculative and metaphysical question, "Does God exist?" We never get far with an answer because we cannot say who or what this God is whose existence we query. The Book of Kings tells us how the Israelites, from the time of Jeroboam on, faced the far more challenging question, "Who is God?" and found it an immediate and practical one, a burning social and political issue. Their debate became a fierce struggle in which thrones and lives were lost and society overturned.

The real God is not discovered in contemplation or speculation but in his action among us, in our world and its events. We discover him as Yahweh, the God of Israel, active in Israel's history, and that, as we shall see, is a challenge to our most basic conventions and convictions. The phrase "Yahweh is God" should not be translated "The Lord is God" and swallowed piously as a harmless tautology. It is a disconcerting claim which has the power to shake the foundations of our security, changing our whole way of life. To

discover that Yahweh is God is a shock to our pride and an invitation to meet God where we never expected to look for him.

God, as the people of the Book of Kings discovered, is not easy to accept. Faith in him is not a matter of ideas and doctrines but a relationship - one which only deep and real trust can endure. To meet him is to be exposed to truth and to danger, coming too close to a reality which demolishes all our pretensions. To come close to God is always to come too close for comfort, for our own independence, for any of our protecting illusions to survive.

When Jeroboam became king, he stepped into a host of problems which all but negated his triumph. It was not a good time for Israel to divide and embark on a new dynasty, for soon afterwards both kingdoms were mauled by an army from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> On top of that, the very revolt which had put him in power re-established an older, tribal tradition which could again dissolve the kingdom. Local independence now counted for more than central government, and once again the king owed his authority to the tribal assembly rather than to inheritance. The tribes who had installed him could as easily depose him, or depose his heirs. Since the decision taken at Shechem could be reversed by another assembly, Jeroboam's rise to power was by no means the beginning of a secure dynasty.

Moreover, in breaking with David's tribe, the Israelites had lost more than they realised, for David and Solomon had made the royal city of Jerusalem hard to replace. In two generations, it had taken hold of the people's imagination, not only as the capital, but as the site of Yahweh's temple, his most famous and splendid shrine. If Jeroboam could offer them nothing more than the domination of Ephraim to hold them together, the fickle tribes might yet look back to Jerusalem and the House of David for something more enduring and inspiring.

Tribal jealousy and suspicion of central government prevented him from establishing a new capital, but he fortified the town of Shechem and temporarily set up his court there. Later he moved to Penuel and then to the town of Tirzah, an itinerant king for an uneasy, unsettled nation. But if he dared not set up an administrative centre like Jerusalem, he dared not fail to set up a rival temple. He could not let his people think that Jerusalem might still be the great house of Yahweh. Ephraimite Israel must have its own national shrine. After all, his kingdom could draw on traditions and sites more ancient than Jerusalem, and these would reaffirm her bond with a god who had always meant much more than David's fortress city.

Throughout the land of Canaan, dotted with the timeless shrines of Canaanite gods, there were also the shrines of Yahweh, each bound up in its own way with the history of Israel and Israel's ancestors, with tribal assemblies and treaties, famous decisions and binding oaths made in the presence of Yahweh. Each of them - Gilgal, Shechem Shiloh, Mizpah, Bethel, Dan and many others - had its history of an encounter with Yahweh, a dispute

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<sup>1</sup>cf IK 14:25f.

settled or a crisis-leader appointed. Though David's Jerusalem had eclipsed them in glory, their traditions and their holiness were far older. They could speak to deeper memories and a consciousness of Israel that went back well beyond David.

Jeroboam therefore had two golden calves made, for he decided to picture Yahweh as standing on the back of a young bull, like the Canaanite gods, the baals. Like the cherubim in Solomon's temple, the calves would suggest the awful and powerful presence of Yahweh, all but visibly enthroned among his people to protect them and destroy their enemies. He set them up, one in Bethel in the south of his kingdom, and one in Dan to the north, where the people could gather and the nation could worship Yahweh, as the god of Israel who was in no way tied to the shrines of Judah. Many other shrines were also given priests, from their own traditional families, so that Yahweh was tangibly present among his people, not only in the great national temples but also in homely, familiar places which were hallowed by long established custom.<sup>1</sup>

In this way Jeroboam set about reasserting the true Israel. He wanted to give his people a focus for their sense of identity and their most fundamental beliefs. He needed to express the outlook and values which, in common, would make them a coherent community. They were a mixed and disparate nation to deal with: Israelite tribes who had come up from Egypt or from elsewhere in the east and the south, Arameans from the north, and many kinds of Canaanites surviving in the cities and countryside they had once ruled. But among them all, it had been the Israelites loyal to Yahweh who had been most successful in uniting and defending the nation.

When these had come to Canaan as landless wanderers and desperate warriors, Yahweh had championed them and given them victory over all other claimants. He had been their leader, their distinctive god drawing the tribes together, and their sense of identity had grown up with their sense of belonging to him. It was natural for Jeroboam, like David before him, to look to Yahweh as the inspiration of his people, and to set up symbols of their devotion to him.

But there was something more to Israel's relationship with Yahweh than mere symbolism. It was a personal relationship, in which Yahweh had won their trust as a warrior-leader wins the trust of his followers, through victory and the gift of land. It was based not on dead tradition, but on living experience. He ruled them by the commitment which inspires loyalty, a relationship which could not be lightly entered into or easily set aside. This was the relationship established between God and Israel in the beginning<sup>2</sup> - at least as an ideal - and the question we have to consider is how far Jeroboam's measures recognised and reaffirmed that relationship.

The golden calf and shrine of Yahweh in Bethel was the one unifying symbol that Jeroboam succeeded in giving his people, but even in this he was not without his critics. A prophet came from Judah to denounce the new altar<sup>3</sup> - which was only to be expected –

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<sup>1</sup>IK 12: 26-32 <sup>2</sup>cf Joshua 24. <sup>3</sup>IK 13

but there was opposition, too, from closer to home. The very prophet who had first encouraged him now turned against him.<sup>1</sup> We do not know all the reasons for Ahijah's change of mind, but one of them can be discerned between the lines. He belonged to the ancient shrine of Shiloh, whose tradition, represented by the ark of Yahweh, had passed on to the temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps that was the very reason why Jeroboam passed over Shiloh, and it was probably the reason why Ahijah could not accept the new arrangement. At any rate, when Jeroboam set up his national shrine in Bethel, he found he had lost his first supporter.

A more serious charge against him was that the golden calves were too like the bulls on which the Canaanite gods - the baals - stood, suggesting them, rather than the warrior god of Israel's history. Caught between Jerusalem's attractions and Canaan's traditions, he was yielding too much to Canaanite influence, and that was not really a reflection of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The same thing showed in his choice of Bethel for a major shrine. He had passed over those places which were linked unequivocally to the warrior god, in favour of one which had no association with the Israelites' struggle for the land.

Shiloh was distinctly Israelite and emphasised the difference between Yahweh and the local gods or baals. During the conquest and sharing out of Canaan,<sup>2</sup> it had been the home of the ark, Israel's symbol of nationhood and commitment to Yahweh. Bethel, on the other hand, looked back to a time when the nation's ancestor, Jacob, had lived in Canaan among the Canaanites.<sup>3</sup> It was linked not so much to the great adventure of conquest as to the land conquered. Its roots went deeper into Canaan's soil than into Israel's distinctive history, suggesting something of Canaan's Baal, as well as Israel's Yahweh.<sup>4</sup> For all his political sense in demonstrating the break with Judah, Jeroboam had settled on an arrangement which blurred the difference between Yahweh and the Canaanite Baal; and this ran counter to the depth of religious and national feeling in Yahweh's prophets.

That a prophet denounced him was no small matter, but he was to be criticised even more severely by later generations. Throughout the Book of Kings he is condemned as the arch-sinner of Israel<sup>5</sup>, who led the whole nation into sin. He would be held responsible for many mistakes which would follow from his decision, and the errors of later kings were all attributed to his bad example.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the temple of Jerusalem, both the shrine of Bethel and the many minor shrines that he revived throughout the country proved to have all too much in common with Canaanite traditions, only too acceptable to the Canaanite streak in his Israelites. He had shown the right instinct in recognising that Yahweh was Israel's proper god and the focus for her unity, but he had failed to hit on the right way of

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<sup>1</sup> IK 14 <sup>2</sup>Jos 18:1; 19:51; 22. <sup>3</sup>Gen 28:16ff

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps he also had purely political reasons. Bethel, close to the southern border with Judah, would serve to mark clearly the extent of the northern kingdom's claims.

<sup>5</sup>cf IK 13:33-4; 16:31. <sup>6</sup>e.g. IK 15:26; 16:31.

identifying and recognising his God. His right instinct did not save him from history's condemnation. He had made a difficult choice in complex circumstances, but the Book of Kings makes no allowances and unreservedly denounces him for his failure:

Jeroboam did not abandon his evil ways but went on appointing priests for the hill shrines from all classes of the people... He brought guilt upon his own house and doomed it to destruction. (IK 13:33f NEB)

Such a judgement, by our standards so hard, raises a number of questions, and the first is that of scripture itself: its authority and how this is to be understood. What are we dealing with when we read the Bible? What do we mean by its authority? How are we to take its stories, its pronouncements and judgements? These are familiar questions, and here I want to apply them specifically to the Book of Kings. What is this book? What is its place in the Bible? What is its use as a source for the history of Israel? What is its authority and relevance to us in the twentieth century?

The books we know as I and II Kings are our main contact with this part of Israel's history, but they are not contemporary records. They draw their information mainly from the "Annals of the Kings of Israel" and the "Annals of the Kings of Judah"<sup>1</sup>, both now lost, and from collections of stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. They are in fact assembled from various writings that range from factual and recorded history to pious fantasy stories, with much in between, and the "author" (or collector rather) did not mind what kind of material he was dealing with. He was concerned only to use the various traditions that people of his day looked upon as a record of their past, in order to present his interpretation.

So the Book of Kings is a mixture of history, story and commentary. It gives us an account of things that really happened, but one so interwoven and developed with story and comment, that it is often a problem to sort out the original and actual details. Fortunately, it usually doesn't matter: most of what the Book of Kings teaches us is quite clear and valid without our knowing which bits would pass muster as "history" in the specialist sense.

In the first place, it is a collection of stories which share an experience of life and of God that no mere catalogue of facts could ever give us. It opens up to us the rich and varied insights of several generations. But it is also a moral and theological commentary on history, and it was given this final shape last of all at a time of political and religious reform in the southern kingdom of Judah. So its judgements (for instance, the condemnation of Jeroboam) are made from hindsight, pointing out lessons in Israel's history which often only hindsight could have recognised. It deals with many religious matters in a way which only a southerner, writing for another century in the light of its own reforms, could have seen them.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. IK 14:19,29; 16:5.

To admit all this, is not to deny the inspiration of the Book of Kings but to take it seriously. Scripture is the inspired word of God not as a kind of heavenly dictation, but as the record of a people's history, of a long relationship and dialogue with God, who communicated with them through all their experience. The authority of scripture is that of God's personal, communicating word: not monologue but dialogue, to be understood in terms of his people's experience, and through their efforts to interpret, record and hand on that experience. When we accept that God revealed himself in Israel's history, we accept that it is God revealed there, and that is the authority of scripture. But we accept that God is revealed in a people's experience, and that is scripture's limitation.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, to treat the Bible as scholars and historians treat any other source book does not detract from its authority. Biblical "criticism", as the scholars call it, does not mean a hostile attack, but a patient and attentive analysis of what the bible passages really are and really signify. Only when we have some understanding of the origins, intentions and meaning of the text, do we come into dialogue with God who is revealed there. And only then do we discover his intentions in our own and Israel's past.

In using the Bible, I do not accept a "literal" view: that it is all simply God's written words conveying a print-deep and obvious message; nor do I accept the contrary view that it is only the best attempts and fantasies of the unenlightened "ancients". It is the words of a community, its symbols and records, its memories, chronicles, reflections, stories, feelings, judgements, explanations; in which, as we come to understand them, we encounter the very word of God, his committed and trustworthy communication with them, which in due course, and thru the patient study in which we commit ourselves to hearing him, becomes his communication with us.

A second issue which the story of Jeroboam raises for us is that of sin. The Book of Kings charges him with the "sin" of idolatry - but it seems clear that his intention was actually to re-establish the worship of Yahweh, only in an "Israelite" form, independent of Jerusalem. He would have thought that his golden calves were no more idols than Solomon's cherubim. Whatever the long-term results, (and we shall see that they were disastrous) can we therefore judge his sincere mistakes as sin, the way the Bible does?

I believe that we can and must do so, only we have to apply a wider and more realistic concept of "sin" than we normally have in mind. We think of sin as breaking a written or moral law; we expect a reference to explicit commandments or universal moral requirements. But the "sin" of Jeroboam relates directly to Israel's relationship with Yahweh. His action was sin, not because he was conscious of breaking a law, but because it led, in the long run, to a breakdown in that relationship. On this understanding of sin,

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<sup>1</sup> cf Hebrews 1:1.

the judgement on Jeroboam is not changed by the fact that he meant well. Sin is not just a subjectively guilty action, but anything that turns out to be the wrong course of action, undermining the relationship between God and his people.

To be Yahweh's people, and to lead Yahweh's people involves you in standards and possibilities of sin that could not apply outside of a personal relationship to God. God governs his people not just with a list of rules they can be expected to keep, but constantly maintaining his personal relationship with them, guiding and helping them, showing them what he wants them to be and to do. Therefore, obeying him means more than keeping rules he has enunciated in the past: it means doing his will in the present by recognising and responding to his guidance for the future. This is what Jeroboam failed to do - perhaps he was not capable of it - but in so failing he sinned and led Israel into sin.

Perhaps he did no worse than to act too hastily, hurrying to make a decision when he should have gone about it more slowly and carefully. David, when he set up the shrine in Jerusalem, had proceeded with the greatest caution and even misgiving.<sup>1</sup> He had known that it was more than a matter of his royal decision: it was a matter of waiting and watching for a sign of Yahweh's will. Perhaps Jeroboam's fault was to rush in and make what seemed the best arrangements without - in whatever way was available to him - consulting the will of Yahweh. We don't have the details, so we can only guess. But we do know (as this book will show) that his arrangements turned out badly, and that is why the Bible lays the sin of Israel at his door.

Obedience to the rule of God requires deep, personal trust: a relationship, not just a knowledge of rules. Those who, like Jeroboam, move forward on their own cognisance, not knowing God's way, have not understood the relationship. And they undermine it even when they try to act for the best. Sin is not just knowing the will of God and refusing to do it; it is also failing to discern his will, when you go ahead and act on your own initiative. To obey God is not just to keep his rules where they are explicit and otherwise to do as you think best. It is to be in tune with him, to know him, to be open to his guidance. In other words, obeying God is not an action but a relationship.

The sin of ignorance, acting unwisely because we are unaware of God's will, looks excusable to an age that doesn't believe it is possible to know God's will. But the essence of being God's people is knowing his will - sufficiently at least, to guide our present action - and being always under challenge to recognise and do it. To be God's people is to make your plans neither in confident self-reliance, nor helplessly guessing in the dark, but under his direction. He does have plans for his people, and he guides them according to those plans, if they are willing to listen. But sin is a block in the understanding between Yahweh and his people so that they fail to recognise what he is doing. If Jeroboam put Israel on

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<sup>1</sup> II Sam 6:1

the wrong course, it could only be that he was not in tune with Yahweh. That essential relationship was not there, or was not strong enough, and that is sin.

A private in the army can be expected to keep the rules and obey orders. He cannot be expected to know the mind of his superiors or to carry out their plans without explicit instructions. For him, obedience and doing right is a matter of rules and orders. Beyond that, he can only "do his best". The army can ask no more. On the other hand, a small group of partners in a business can be expected to know one another better, and to fit in with one another's plans, even though from time to time they may have conflicting ideas about the best way forward. They don't rely on rules or on giving orders to sort out and coordinate their efforts. They meet frequently; they discuss; they share their ambitions and ideas; they build up a relationship within which they can work out any inconsistencies or disagreements. If, in spite of all this, one partner begins to act in a way that fouls up the plans of the others, then something has gone wrong with the relationship. They are not good partners.

Even more can be expected of a couple long married. Years of familiarity, of rough and smooth experience, have taught them to know and sympathise with each other. They have differences, but they have learnt how to work them out. They may have different and conflicting ideas - but they know how to allow for them or resolve them. When they act, each knows how the other will react; they know how to anticipate each other's wishes; each knows how to find out what the other wants. If not, if they can only relate to each other by set and explicit rules, or if they are out of touch and not communicating any more, or if they completely cut across each other's intentions, then something has gone badly wrong. The relationship has broken down.

All three of these relationships: the private in the army, the partners in business, the married couple, can be models for our relationship with God. We are his servants or subjects, following his instructions. But we are also partners, working together with him; and we are committed to him in love and loyalty, as in a marriage. We obey him, we cooperate with him and we live with him. And therein lies our problem about sin. Traditionally, we limit "sin" to the first kind of relationship, making it a matter of disobeying orders and breaking rules. But sin is any breakdown in the relationship between us and God: a failure in communication, a distance or disharmony when we should be at one with him, a separation when we should be acting together.

Doing God's will is not always a matter of being guided by legal or moral rules. It is often a matter of choosing from many possible courses, when all of them appear to be morally permissible. This will apply to things as serious as choosing a life-long career, or as inconsequential as planning a picnic; to concerns as private as choosing a boyfriend, or as public as the government's budget. In all decisions, God is involved with his people. (This does not mean that every decision is a solemn one. Many are quite light-hearted, and then God is involved in their very light-heartedness.) But whatever his people are doing or deciding, whether it is covered by rules or not, they do and decide together with God. They can expect their dialogue with him to continue through all their activities.

That is what it is to be God's people, and no leader is fit to preside among them who has not learnt to discern and decide in tune with God. If they fail to do so, and the wrong policies are followed, then it can only mean that their dialogue with God has been interrupted or ignored - and that is sin.

So the wider concept of sin goes with a deeper concept of God's people: a people under God's rule not just as subjects obeying laws, but as friends and followers whom God loves and with whom he shares his activity. Not law but dialogue is the framework of their relationship, and whether or not explicit laws are broken, when that dialogue breaks down, we have what we call in translations of the Bible "sin". The judgement on Jeroboam, the consequences of his decision, were not clear until generations had passed, and so, in condemning him, the editor of the Book of Kings anticipates the later history of Israel. But so it has to be. In a personal relationship, estrangement is often noticed only long after the first false steps that began it, and Jeroboam's sin, if it is not corrected in time, will be the beginning of a painful and tragic estrangement.

A third issue to emerge from the story of Jeroboam is that of authority: particularly the rule of God over his people's social and political life. The clash between Jeroboam and the prophets was not between civil and religious authority, still less between secular and sacred. Jeroboam was king by God's appointment. As King-Priest, he was able to offer sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> The prophets on their part acted politically, as king-makers and king-declarers. Neither side would have understood a distinction between secular and religious. The clash concerned something else: conflicting views of what was Yahweh's will, between rivals who, on both sides, shared in Yahweh's authority.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from the argument is that such conflicts are possible and legitimate. Part of my hope in writing this book is that we will come to recognise again the importance of God's authority and how it affects our social and political lives. Indeed, I believe that God's effective authority is our only hope for the future. But we cannot accept it until we have got rid of some false ideas of about it.

Too often in our history, rulers have claimed God's authority in order to rule without being accountable. It has been an excuse to suppress criticism; emperors, popes and kings claiming that, because they ruled in God's name, no one had the right to oppose them. A great deal of "Christian" history has identified God's authority with authoritarianism, and God has been identified with the established order, as if he was forever in favour of the government: a false idea which a little more attention to the Book of Kings would have corrected.

That false idea still has a hold on many, either because it supports their own privileged status or because it serves as a kind of compensation for their weakness. So we see a

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<sup>1</sup> See IK 13:1

black Christian "Zionist" church in South Africa religiously supporting the white government, and we see many Christian groups supporting doctrinaire and authoritarian governments like President Regan's or Mrs. Thatcher's<sup>1</sup>. There is a feeling that their kind of authority is what you expect from God. Alternatively, there is the idea that "God's authority" must mean power wielded by religious leaders. It is all too easily assumed that a community ruled by God would be a kind of theocracy in which clerics would make the decisions. The Ayatollah Khomeini has shown that this is still a powerful and practical possibility in the twentieth century.

But none of these attitudes to authority is biblical. The Book of Kings and the whole Bible uphold the idea that authority comes from God - even when it comes through elections - but give no support to authoritarianism. God does delegate his authority to those who rule among his people, but not in such a way as to rule out dissent and opposition. The Book of Kings faces us with the paradox that although it is God who gives rulers their authority, it is also he who opposes them for their misrule. And if he delegates his authority to rule, he also delegates his authority to oppose and criticise. The delegation of God's authority, the gift of his power to his people, does not eliminate controversy, but sharpens it. There are those who represent God among his people - but no one is God's sole representative. If you are appointed by him, you have received a task from him, a commission and a duty. Others will be appointed to their own task, which may include, since we all need to be accountable, the duty of criticising your performance.

God established the dynasty of David and united all Israel under it. He had even promised the future to David's heirs - but, for all that, he tore the kingdom apart and gave most of it to Jeroboam. God sanctioned the revolt against arrogant authority, just as surely as he had established that authority in the first place. Jeroboam, in turn, was given his authority by God, and through the tribes' election, but neither the voice of God nor the choice of the people put him above challenge. Neither anointing nor the ballot box confers the kind of divine right that kings, presidents and prime ministers have been known to assert.

Authority in the community ruled by God is accountable authority - answering both to God and to the people it rules. It will never be the absolute paternalism of a Czar nor the intolerant elitism of a ruling Communist Party. It will not be the rule of force, crushing all opposition, nor the smug self-righteousness of elected leaders with a comfortable majority. Those who have the right to rule have the duty to rule well, and those who have the authority of God to rule, come under the strictest short- and long-term judgement. To lead God's community is to be more than ever open to challenge and criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> This book was written in the 1980s (after "The Warrior God") but not published. Where quotes and examples still seem to me to be relevant and helpful I have not updated them.

Kings may claim their divine right, elected rulers may assert their moral or legal majority, the Party may insist on its exclusive qualifications, but those who exercise political power with the authority of God will recognise that he speaks through many voices, any of which may justly criticise and oppose them. To bring God into the question of authority is not to close the matter, but to throw it wide open. Under God, both the exercise of authority and opposition to it are to be taken seriously.

This book is concerned with God's activity in history, seeing him at work in the past and discovering his involvement in the present. Both are important to us. If we in the twentieth (now twenty-first) century are to find any meaning or structure in our lives, or any confidence with which to face the future, we must have some idea of what is ultimately real and true. If we are not to be rushed along by blind forces, tumbled helplessly into some inescapable and chaotic fate, we need to experience a reality that is solid enough to challenge and change us. We need, if it is possible, to know God. And it is only possible to know God by his action among us, past and present.

In the history of Israel we have a starting-point, a contact with the real God who is revealed to us also. It is a contact we need, for it means that God has revealed Godself. We are not building on abstractions, for God has approached us. God chose his time and his place, and in a language that meant something then and there, declared himself. So our contact with God begins with the ordinary, dusty, bloody politics of the Ephraimite kingdom of Israel. There are other possible starting points, but they all involve Israel, and they all lead directly into Israel's politics: the people's relationships with one another and with God.

We are looking back then, for inspiration, to an Israelite kingdom of three thousand years ago: a long time, but we will find that their experience is a pertinent challenge to us. In the first place, there is something about the Book of Kings and its distance from us (in time and culture) that can jolt us out of our own narrow perceptions. In learning from a community which is superficially so different from ours, we will not be tempted to stop short at the superficial. Moreover, there is continuity between them and us. The same God still addresses us, and we will find that in many areas God still has the same task in hand. God's community in the time of the Ephraimite kingdom will show us a good deal that is basic to ourselves and our twenty-first century society. But perhaps most important is the very fact of God's involvement. The stories of the Book of Kings describe a time when it was firmly understood that, one way and another, God is involved in this world's affairs. That we will find a very unsettling but instructive lesson.

However, the history of Israel needs no apology. It will speak for itself, and we shall find that God still speaks through it to us, powerfully and persuasively.

Jeroboam was Yahweh's king, and he understood at least this much: that Israel was nothing if not Yahweh's people. I think he deserves to be remembered with some approval for that. Rule, over any people or nation, involves more than the mere wielding of power; it involves giving them a sense of identity and the means of expressing it. To succeed in ruling, you must reaffirm the people's sense of belonging, of being a community. And Jeroboam knew that Israel's identity and cohesion could only be found in the worship of Yahweh.

The revolt that put him in power left him with ten tribes to weld together, to consolidate and define into a nation. He was sensible enough not to put himself, a yet untried dynasty, at the centre of their hopes. Only Yahweh could be the centre of Israel, and only his worship could express their common identity. So Jeroboam tried, however clumsily, to reaffirm the place of Yahweh in Israel's community. Unfortunately, his self-interest and urgent need to redefine his nation led him to act too hastily, and he went astray.

The golden calf he set up in Bethel was an ambiguous symbol which would one day become an idol,<sup>1</sup> and his wide encouragement of local shrines would also lead to degeneration. The shrines kept alive the sense of Yahweh's presence throughout the country, but this very closeness to the land would bring him, in the people's mind, closer to the Canaanite Baal, for Canaan had always been the land of Baal. Where the Canaanites had worshipped Baal, and still did (for many of them survived among the Israelites) Israel now worshipped Yahweh, and many could see no difference between the two. Israel was becoming Canaan, the people identifying less with the warrior god of their history and more with the fertile lord of the land he had given them. With good intentions, but without understanding Yahweh, Jeroboam was indeed a trap for his people, and his ways a triumph rather for the traditions of Canaan than for the real Yahweh of Israel. He bequeathed Israel a form of religion that would prove to be a fatal distraction from, rather than a confirmation of, her identity as Yahweh's people.

Overall, his reign was a limited success. It lasted twenty one years, during which time he succeeded in restoring the kingdom's security. But he did not establish a permanent dynasty. The principle of inheritance had been challenged with his own appointment, and it was still open to challenge. When Jeroboam died, a son of his came to the throne, but held it only for a year. Then he was murdered by Baasha, a strong man of the tribe of Issachar, who immediately slaughtered Jeroboam's entire clan.<sup>2</sup> The family of the Ephraimite king perished as the Ephraimites had once perished at the Jordan fords,<sup>3</sup> and ruthless self-assertion took over as it had done in Abimelech's day.<sup>4</sup> Baasha proved strong enough to hold Israel, and even to threaten the kingdom of Judah (until they paid the Arameans to draw him off),<sup>5</sup> but when he died after twenty years' reign, the kingdom of Israel was again up for grabs. His son and heir lasted only a year before he was murdered, and this time three powerful, ambitious generals slogged it out for the throne. One, Zimri,

<sup>1</sup> See Hosea 8:5-6. <sup>2</sup> IK 15:25 <sup>3</sup> Jud. 12 <sup>4</sup> Jud. 9. <sup>5</sup> IK 15:18-20

murdered his master and took power for six months. But when he found the kingdom slipping from his grip he committed suicide, burning the palace down over his own head.<sup>1</sup>

So the ambition lust, and egoism of the strong, the natural leaders, turned them against one another, and the honour of ruling, even among God's people, turned into a degrading spectacle of greedy power grabbing. The most ruthless murderer was undisputed ruler, and the nation was made a wilderness of warring ambitions. In this chaos, the people of Yahweh were no more than a battle-prize, the property of the strongest bully, and their very existence, as well as their identity, was threatened. A nation that could never pass from one king to the next without civil war and the collapse of government, could not last for long. The Israelites were in danger of disintegrating into fractious tribes again and of falling prey to ambitious and better organised neighbors.

The critical question for Israel, as she staggered from one reign to the next, threatening to break up every time an effective king died, was that of her own identity. Jeroboam, having overthrown the dreams of Solomon, had attempted to establish that identity through the shrines of Bethel and Dan, but a people that cannot safely recognise its own leaders is one that has lost its identity and does not know itself or its god. The man who took the throne of Israel now would face a pressing challenge: to make the bond with Yahweh more permanently effective, or to find some other power to hold the nation together.

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<sup>1</sup> IK 16:9