

2 Fire on the Mountain

It was fortunate for Israel that in the struggle to follow Baasha the general who emerged victorious was Omri. He was perhaps the most brilliant king ever to rule the kingdom. He had the strength, intelligence and determination that Israel needed, and although he reigned only twelve years, he lifted the kingdom out of chaos and established a short but successful dynasty. He united the tribes behind his family, and put the country on the way to prosperity. But perhaps his most significant act for the religious history of Israel, was to renew David's old alliance with the Phoenician kingdom of Tyre and Sidon.

The king of Tyre and Sidon was a priest of Astarte, who, like Omri himself, had taken power by force. The two had a certain amount in common, and their peoples had common economic and political interests. Co-operation between them strengthened both and opened the way to influences for which Israel was only too ready. Since the people of Tyre and Sidon were closely related to the Canaanites whom Israel had displaced or absorbed, their god Baal Melkart and the goddess Astarte were already more than familiar to the Israelites. Omri had opened the way to a new and broader future for his people by recognising the Phoenicians as neighbours and relations.

The country grew more prosperous as the link with Tyre and Sidon was strengthened. The colonies of the Phoenician kingdom, through her long sea-going and trading history, had spread to the very ends of the Mediterranean Sea; and the kingdom of Israel gave the Phoenicians outlets to the east and south. Trade routes were open from one end of the known world to the other, and there were opportunities for business to expand and wealth to increase, in the security and confidence that strong government creates. Between them, the two kingdoms were set for a promising future, and Omri sealed their alliance by marrying his son to a princess of Tyre named Jezebel.

Half way through his reign, he bought a strategic hilltop in the west of the kingdom, where he built the city of Samaria. It would one day be Israel's capital. In spite of the tribes' objections to central control, he was strong enough to impose a national policy, and because his policy worked, bringing order, security and renewed prosperity, his authority was not challenged. When he died, he was able to pass on to his son Ahab a secure throne and a nation united in its sense of purpose.

There was no coup, no bid for power by ambitious generals, and the country passed peacefully from one reign to the next. Ahab was strong enough to carry on his father's policies, and even if he had some weak points, his queen, Jezebel, more than made up for them. Daughter of one king and wife of another, she had considerable influence, and she had the vision and determination to use it. I find that I cannot help admiring Jezebel. In her, the paths of Israel and her own kingdom met and were pointed towards a new and exciting future, in which she meant to play no merely passive role. She seized her place in history with enthusiasm and dedicated herself to wielding together the two kingdoms which shared her loyalty.

She brought from Tyre her own god, or Baal, like those already known and worshipped in Israel, and she saw no reason why Tyre and Israel should not draw closer together by strengthening their common religion. They could only benefit from

Too Close to God

a common god upholding and legitimating both thrones, and prospering both peoples together. Probably, she did not set out with the idea of eliminating Yahweh, for in Phoenician, Canaanite and Israelite thinking, there was room for many gods. Only it must have seemed that the worship of Yahweh was already losing its relevance. The god of warriors and desert nomads was no god for settled cities and farms, for a thriving modern kingdom; and what remained alive in the worship of Yahweh had, since Jeroboam, come closer anyway to that of Baal. The pull of ancient Canaanite traditions, the customs of peasant farmers and town dwellers who had survived to share their ways with the Israelites, proved stronger than Israel's own memories from the wilderness and the days of conquest. Gods of field and city now rivalled the old battle-god of the desert.

Most Israelites, living out their practical day-to-day existence, probably did not distinguish too clearly between Baal and Yahweh. "Yahweh" was a name, but "Baal", meaning "lord" or "husband", could be applied to any god, including Yahweh. As we have seen, the population of Israel was descended from the old Canaanites as well as the Israelite invaders, and from time beyond all memory the Baals had been worshipped in their land. When the god of the desert settled down in Canaan, he was easily identified, in the minds of the mixed population, with the old familiar gods of field and hilltop. The policy of Jeroboam encouraged rather than discouraged the identification, and when Israelites worshipped, whether Yahweh or Baal, they resorted comfortably to the rituals by which the baals has always been worshipped in Canaan.

Even for those who felt there was a difference, it was not necessarily in Yahweh's favour. Yahweh has been a god of the wilderness, of desperate clans struggling to survive against the barren desert. He had been the warrior-leader of conquering tribes who overran the good land of Canaan and took it for their own. He had led them in battle and had given them victory. Yahweh had made Israel. But Israel had long since come of age and settled down, and the question was, who would now be Israel's new god. Yahweh was literally a has-been; Baal was the god of the peasant. He was the lord of settled prosperity in a fertile country, the natural god for an agricultural people and for the small cities they supported. He was the modern god, in tune with their modern way of life: peaceful and seasonal. Baal was a god to suit Israelite and Canaanite alike, from the new royal family to the lowest woodcutter or water-carrier.

It is not hard to understand why Jezebel favoured her own god. Yahweh belonged to other days: to the backward, desert culture of rootless nomads. His cult survived best in the wilderness, in the remoter, poorer parts of the country, and had little to say to Jezebel's plans for the future of Israel. To her way of thinking, only obstinacy gave it any strength at all. And she determined to whittle that down, in time and in her own way. Ahab was persuaded to build a temple of Baal in Samaria and furnish it with an altar. Jezebel provided it with staff: priests and prophets maintained at her expense and recognised at court as spokesmen for the gods. She felt confident that, spoken from the temple of Baal, the word of the gods would be properly focused on what she and the royal court wanted to hear.

Her only disadvantage was the short sightedness of Ahab, who still hesitated between the kingdom's modern destiny and its barbaric past, as anxious for Yahweh's approval as he was for Baal's help. He lacked her single-mindedness and enthusiasm, her ability to identify, with a confidence that could only be good for all, the interests of

god and kingdom with those of the king and his family. He could still be overawed by ancient traditions, and although he worked with her to consolidate the alliance, she could not count on him for ruthless enforcement of their policy. But there were advantages even in his weakness: a stronger man might have opposed her or curtailed her power. As it was, she had the best of it both ways: a husband who was strong enough to rule, and weak enough to be ruled, by her. With such a husband, Jezebel would be Queen indeed, and the whole nation would soon recognise it.

Of course, she expected some opposition. Yahweh's priests had their noses out of joint and his prophets were vociferous in their own defence. They were threatened by her reforms and stood to lose both payment and prestige by the downgrading of Yahweh. But their sullen hostility was unwise. There was a fanatical streak in the Israelites that would need firm handling – a little bloodletting to show who was in charge. She purged the prophets of Yahweh - had a number of them put to death for their resistance. She knew, of course, that some among the Israelites – even in the army – hid and protected the Yahwists, but it did not matter, so long as enough died to make her point. After all, she was not the king, and could only go so far...

We misunderstand Jezebel and underestimate the conflict between her and Yahweh, if we think of her as a mere vain and scheming female. She was not the “painted woman” that her name has come to signify, but something far more widely respected and admired: a practical, realistic, sophisticated, powerful and ruthless politician. She knew what she wanted – it was no pretty selfishness, but a scheme of things that would accomplish the destiny of her kingdom – and she had the power and determination to drive at it, relentlessly. Her policy of religious assimilation was indeed the natural basis for cooperation between the two kingdoms, and her ruthless will was bent on securing her own, her husband's, Israel's and Tyre's advantage in spite of all ignorant opposition. To her, the prophets of Yahweh were a backward and powerless band, behind the times and crying in the wilderness. Anyone who was aware of the political and economic “realities” of the day would have seen those prophets as a block in the way of progress, a reactionary force opposing the nation's true future, and a hindrance to the cult of Baal, which was surely Israel's natural religion.

Ahab, like many lesser Israelites, was happy to go along with his wife's policy while keeping up a sort of recognition of Yahweh. He allowed the influence of Baal priests and prophets and did not prevent his wife's purge of the Yahwists. She was clearly a capable and perceptive ruler, and he was more than content to be guided by her, even if, in his own way, he retained some feeling for the old customs of Israel. He was mainly concerned for the unity and strength of his kingdom, and if Jezebel could help him to bring that about, he was willing to let her do it her way.

But the conflict between Yahweh and the baals went deeper than Ahab realised. The baals were, as I have said, settled gods, regular, reliable and cyclic, sending rain and sunshine, cold and heat, in seasonal succession. They were the guarantors of food and fertility. You knew what to expect from them. Of course, they had to be plied and prompted at appropriate times, and they had their moments of anger, when the rain would not come and extra efforts were needed to appease them. But, by and large,

Too Close to God

they were familiar, predictable elements, playing their part faithfully in the annual cycle of sowing and ploughing, growing and ripening, reaping and storing. They were the gods of plenty and prosperity, of harvests and happiness, of feasts and wine and revelry, of prostitution and productivity, of the whole settled pattern of work, reward and relaxation that made up the people's lot.

Such gods also suited the ruling families in their city houses and palaces. The baals had no specific views on the nation's changing policies. They didn't have a political program and left the court free to make its own decisions. The ambitions and lusts of the ruling elite, their craving to wield power and guide the course of history, was no challenge to any baal and none would ever check it. On the contrary, a god such as Baal Melkart would guarantee their power base, providing the rains and the crops on which all their wealth was founded, without having any plans of his own to foist on them.

I do not mean that the rulers cynically fostered such a religion to keep the masses in place. No, they believed it as much as the ordinary peasant or labourer did. It was, however, the very convenient kind of belief which left them as free to do what they most liked – to manipulate and to rule - as the labourer was free to amuse himself, within his natural limits. Baal was not the kind of god to challenge a ruler, or to upset the status quo, or to be too demanding on the mass of his devotees.

Yahweh was a very different matter, and those who knew him realised it. Whereas Baal was part and parcel of the land and so was practically owned with it, Yahweh had given the land as his gift, as a matter of history and conquest, and so was ruler of those who received it. He was not an object to be cultivated like the earth, to be controlled as the Canaanites controlled the rains with their rituals, but someone with a will and purpose of his own. Whereas Baal was a personification of the regular, recurring cycles in nature, discovered and exploited in them, Yahweh was personal, acting and communicating on his own initiative. Baal's action each year would be the same as in former years, but Yahweh's acts were a continuing history and revealed a purpose which did not simply repeat itself. Properly predicted, Baal could be controlled, but Yahweh, being truly personal, was dangerously beyond prediction and totally beyond control. He gave himself with a love that desired to lead his people and to create their future as he had created their past. Such a god could only upset the routine of ordinary people and challenge the ambitions of the ruling class, calling for such trust and submission as proud men and women do not give.

In truth, Israel was facing a choice, not just between two alternative gods, but between fundamentally different ideas of God. Yahweh and Baal were not just rivals to the same claim, but rivals making very different claims on the recognition and loyalty of Israel. Most preferred to avoid the choice, simply confusing the two gods, but choice could not be avoided. For that very confusion, the unreality that reduced the gods to a vaguely specified object of worship, devoid of history and commitment, was in fact a choice for Baal. Yahweh was too real, too definite, and his love for Israel too specific to be met with vague religious observance, equally Israelite, Canaanite and Phoenician. As a personal God, he called for trust and obedience as real and definite as his own personal commitment to Israel. He called for choice, and could only be worshipped by a specific and deeply committing choice.

Baal was the god of non-choice, the god you slipped into, responding to the rhythms and promptings of nature – powerful indeed, but not personal. Yahweh, however, the god with a history, was a personal god calling for a personal commitment which had to be total and exclusive. Because Yahweh was really God, confrontation between him and the Baal party was inevitable. Because he loved his people, he would not let them go without a fight.

Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As Yahweh lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except at my order.” (IK17:1)

So suddenly and succinctly does the Book of Kings introduce the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab, that we can miss the boldness of its announcement. It comes like a bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky, but every phrase makes its own radical challenge to Israel, to Israel’s rulers, and to a whole entrenched way of thinking.

Yahweh does not speak through the powers that seem to be in control, but challenges the King himself through the mouth of a prophet from Gilead. Not the bustling towns of the west where royal and economic power is centred, nor Jeroboam’s great Yahweh-shrine at Bethel, but Tishbe in Gilead beyond the Jordan is the home of his spokesman. And the time to speak has now come. In the face of all experience, Yahweh does not accept that he has had his day. He does not belong only to the past, but still lives and is still the God of Israel. Nor is he the god that Ahab acknowledges, or the god that Jezebel uses, or one of the familiar gods that the Israelites cultivate, but the God that Elijah serves. He is not a force to be wielded, or a fertility power to be stimulated into action, but a personal God to be served. Nevertheless, because he is real and Baal is nothing at all, he will show his authority not on his own traditional ground of battle and conquest, but on Baal’s supposed ground: control of the fertile rains. For three years the rain of Baal will not fall unless Yahweh orders it.

Elijah is the witness to a new understanding of Yahweh’s reality: that he is not just one of the gods, not even the strongest of the gods, able to conquer the others on behalf of his people; but that he, and he alone, is God, and the alternatives, the baals, the astartes and the rest of them, not gods at all. If Elijah was not the first to recognise this, he was still one of the very few in Israel who did, and the understanding brought with it a deep and unusual sense of Yahweh’s authority. It drove him to speak out in opposition not only to the most powerful authorities in the land, but also to the whole weight of common opinion. He felt Yahweh commanding him as a servant and messenger to announce the coming drout, to declare that it came not from Baal’s anger, but from Yahweh, and that it would last as long as Yahweh decreed.

Drout is the natural challenge, and the most serious one, to an agricultural society. Winds like the hot breath of an oven blow from the desert, baking the land to dust and hard, cracked clay. Pools disappear, then streams, rivers and springs dry up; grass browns and shrivels; pastures wither away to a bare waste of sand and stones. If crops have been sown, they die. If not, they cannot be sown now because the ground will not take them. Young trees die; animals and men begin to starve, but the hungrier and

Too Close to God

weaker they get, the further they must travel for water. Sometimes, a little rain falls, but it does not set in. There is enough only to disappoint, and to keep a few alive to suffer a little longer. Drought challenges the wealth and authority of kings, who can only accept it, pleading with the gods like the least of commoners, while their resources dry up under the relentless heat of a sky like iron.

Elijah, led by Yahweh, delivered his message and was gone. He made his way first into the desert¹ to the bed of a wadi, until it dried up completely, and then back to civilisation, to the Sidonian town of Zarephath. He was to survive. Apparently, among the very enemies of his God, the Sidonian Baal-worshippers whose ways were taking over in Israel. His obedience to Yahweh was something very different from the King's or the Queen's policy-making, and different, too, from Jeroboam's quick and practical decisions. If there is a logic in his movements – first into the wilderness, away from Phoenician civilisation and its corrupt influence, then right into the Phoenician kingdom – it is not the obvious logic of self-preservation or of stubborn self-righteousness. It is the logic of obedience and trust in Yahweh, who is beyond prediction and who alone knows where his plans lead. In a world that was making its own way and its own future according to its own logic, Elijah was going the strange way of Yahweh, trusting him wherever he sent him.

In Zarephath he met with a poor widow preparing what she thought was her last meal, and boldly he asked her to share it with him.

“Please,” he said, “bring me a scrap of bread in your hand.” “As Yahweh your God lives,” she replied, “I have no baked bread but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am just going to gather a stick or two to go and prepare this for myself and my son to eat, and then we shall die.” But Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do what you have said; but first make a little scone of it for me and bring it to me, and then make some for yourself and your son. For thus Yahweh speaks, the God of Israel:

‘Jar of meal shall not be spent,
jug of oil shall not be emptied
before the day when Yahweh sends
rain on the face of the earth.’ “

The woman went and did as Elijah told her, and they ate the food, she, himself and her son. The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied, just as Yahweh had foretold through Elijah.

(IK17:11-16)

Yahweh is real, and because he is real, he is a challenge to his people, upsetting their usual standards of common sense and self-preservation. To serve Yahweh is not to live by the predictable patterns of the agricultural year, nor to make your way by your own political and economic initiative, nor yet to blunder in the dark, uncertain what to do. It is to recognise his will and obey him because he has spoken to you and you trust him. Because he knew the reality of Yahweh, Elijah spoke at his bidding and went at his bidding to the town of Zarephath. Because the prophet's god was real to her, the widow obeyed him and shared her last scrap of food (though she had a son to

¹ IK 17:2-6

support as well). That is the kind of difference it makes, when the real God approaches you. Because he is real, you are challenged; your life no longer follows the routine patterns of self-preservation and self-provision. You are called to surrender control of all that supports and hedges round your life, discovering that he is real enough and independent enough to rule them in a way you could not have predicted.

To the shame of Israel and its rulers, an alien woman recognised Elijah's authority and trusted him as a prophet. She obeyed him when his own people rejected him, and she and her son were rewarded with life. Yet it would appear that she was Yahweh's enemy after all, for her son fell sick:

His illness was so severe that in the end he had no breath left in him. And the woman said to Elijah: "What quarrel have you with me, man of God? Have you come here to bring my sins home to me and kill my son?" "Give me your son," he said, and taking him from her lap, carried him to the upper room where he was staying and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to Yahweh, "Yahweh my God, do you mean to bring grief to the widow who is looking after me by killing her son?" He stretched himself on the child three times and cried out to Yahweh, "Yahweh my God, may the breath of life, I beg you, come into this child again." Yahweh heard his prayer and the breath of life returned to him. And he revived.

(IK17:17-22)

Far from presuming on her services, the widow knew that God is to be feared. When trouble struck her child, she was sure that some sin of hers found her out. Somehow, unknowingly, she had offended the prophet's god, and in such a case, she knew, the holy man's presence would be enough to expose it and bring her to judgment. Her fear was misplaced, since God revived the child, but within such fear there is a healthy respect which is never misplaced. She recognised that in the presence of God truth will out, and that when he draws near, all kinds of conscious and unconscious evil will be exposed and dealt with.

In the Sidonian woman, Elijah had found a kindred spirit. Being an alien, she did not know Yahweh, but she knew he was a god and that it was no light matter to come close to him. She had allowed herself to become but the servant of his servant – and even at that distance she was vulnerable. To be near God is to discover just how vulnerable we are, how liable to judgment. The widow of Zarephath was not so foolish as to imagine she could be comfortable with him, as the Israelites had made themselves comfortable with their easy, amenable mixture of Yahweh-Baal. She did not dream of manipulating the gods, as Jezebel did, but on the contrary, knew herself helpless before the god who had drawn near to her. God's approach awakens a holy fear that no familiarity can make bearable. Only trust enables you to live with it.

God is dangerous, and to be in contact with God, is to be in danger, as others besides the widow could testify. After three years of drought, Elijah returned to Israel to inform the king that Yahweh would soon be sending rain. He presented himself to Obadiah,

Too Close to God

one of Ahab's officers, who was out in the country looking for pasture¹. Like the widow, Obadiah was far from comfortable in a close encounter with Yahweh. He knew how unpredictable Yahweh was, and how his messenger would come and go without stopping to look after his own interests or anyone else's. Although Obadiah had once sheltered Yahweh's prophets from Jezebel's purge, he did not now presume on Yahweh's favour. When Elijah told him to fetch the King, he was terrified:

“What sin have I committed for you to put me in Ahab's power and cause my death? As soon as I leave you, the spirit of Yahweh will carry you away I know not where. Ahab will not find you here and he will kill me.”
(IK18: 9-12)

To know Yahweh is to know that he is real – a god beyond presumption and manipulation. To deal with him is to enter a relationship in which he exercises complete authority, as a master with a will and purpose of his own. It is to lose your own security, and any pretence to control over your own circumstances. It is to find yourself helpless in the hands of one you cannot predict, only trust. Obadiah did not feel safe with him. He was humble enough to fear him and realistic enough to know that even an officer of the king was out of his depth acting as Yahweh's messenger-boy.

Perhaps our most desperate need as human beings is to be in control – of our territory or space, of our resources, of our relationships. Knowing how much we depend on these for survival and meaning, for security and identity, we dread the uncertainty that threatens if we lose control of any one. So the kind of god we look for is not the wild and independent Yahweh, with his own plans and aspirations for us, but the comfortable nature-god Baal, with his regular behaviour and the rituals that control it. (Of course, he has his moments of wild excess, but they pass. If the controls do sometimes break down, we like to think we know how to restore them.) But Yahweh refuses control. Those who know him best know that they are helpless when he comes near; that they cannot hold their world together, when he comes into it. If, like Elijah, they have learnt to trust him, they let him lead them, his way. If, like the widow, they can only obey him, they do so in fear and trembling. If, like Obadiah, they fear but would not refuse him, they can only beg to be excused.

And this Yahweh is the true God of Israel, at work in her history. He is nobody's tame servant, subject to no demands and independent of all authority wherever he acts. Because he is real, and not just a projection of the needs and habits of his worshippers, he does not simply fit in, neither with the stedy round of agricultural life nor with the aims and programs of the government. He is not like the baals and astartes, to be plied and stimulated according to seasonal requirements, but a real, living God, to be obeyed, served, loved and trusted. It seems that no one but his own prophet can really cope with him, and the prophet can do so only by implicit trust and obedience.

Elijah, in his passionate zeal for Yahweh, is not, after all, a mere survival of Israel's former culture, but the sign of Yahweh's continuing commitment; he is not just a

¹ see IK 18

stubborn remnant of Israel's past, but a sign of Yahweh's present reality. Elijah speaks out not because the old Israel won't die quietly, but because Yahweh lives, and still loves his people.

Since the drought was coming to an end, it was Elijah's business to make it clear that Yahweh himself brought it to an end. Knowing that the time had come for a confrontation, he gave Obadiah his oath that when he returned with the King he would still be there to face them. This time, he would stand his ground. They would no longer be able to blur the differences between Yahweh and Baal, but would have to choose, as between enemies. The time for fumbling their way forward and confusing their loyalties was over. Yahweh and Baal were on opposite sides, and Israel would have to recognise who was her enemy.

The King, when he returned with Obadiah, was quick to identify Elijah as the enemy:

“So there you are, you scourge of Israel!” “Not I,” Elijah replied, “I am not the scourge of Israel; you and your family are, because you have deserted Yahweh and gone after the baals.” (IK 18: 16 – 18)

Elijah was confident that Yahweh would now show himself to be real and personally present to this people, and that there was no power in the vain fantasy that was Baal. So he challenged Ahab to summon an assembly of Israel's representatives on Mount Carmel, not far from the royal city of Jezreel, and to bring there the prophets of Baal maintained by Jezebel. The King accepted. Perhaps, for all his hostility, he was in awe of the prophet, or perhaps he was willing to try any magic to end the drought. Perhaps he just wanted something to happen to make up his mind for him. At any rate, the assembly was gathered on the mountain, and Elijah took charge.

The prophets of Baal were given a bull, which they slaughtered, dismembered, and laid out with firewood on an altar. But they were not allowed to light the fire. Elijah had decided that they and he would each in turn call upon their god to end the drought. The fire was to be left to the gods – the real god sending his own fire in acceptance of the sacrifice, and so demonstrating that he was really there to be called upon, a living reality to answer the cry of his people.

The prophets of Baal began their rituals:

From morning to midday they called on the name of Baal. “O Baal answer us!” they cried, but there was no voice, no answer as they performed their hobbling dance around the altar. “Call louder,” Elijah mocked, “for he is a god: he is preoccupied, or he is busy, or he has gone on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and will wake up.” So they shouted louder and gashed themselves, as their custom was, with swords and spears until the blood flowed down them, but there was no voice, no answer, no attention given to them.

Too Close to God

Then Elijah made the people gather around him. He repaired the altar of Yahweh which had been broken down and dug a trench around it. He then arranged the wood, dismembered the bull and laid it on the wood.

(I K 18: 26 – 33)

Three times he had water poured over the holocaust, and then, when evening came on, he called on Yahweh, the God of Israel's ancestors:

“Let them know today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, that I have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, so that this people may know that you, Yahweh are God and are winning back their hearts.”

Then the fire of Yahweh fell and consumed the holocaust and wood, and licked up the water. When all the people saw this they fell on their faces. “Yahweh is God,” they cried, “Yahweh is God.” Elijah said, “Seize the prophets of Baal: do not let one of them escape.” They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the wadi Kishon and slaughtered them there.

(IK18: 36 – 40)

If we think of this miracle as a show of force demonstrating Yahweh's superior power, then we have misunderstood it. It is not a show of force, but an answer. It is not a matter of Baal's weakness against Yahweh, but of Yahweh's personal reality, that he can respond personally, and answer his worshippers. It was not a question of which god could play the most impressive tricks, with Elijah and the prophets of Baal as rival magicians. It was a matter of which god was real, and personal. The prophets of Baal are ridiculed because there is no one to answer their appeal. An agricultural fertility symbol, hardly distinguishable from the coming and going of the seasons themselves, cannot respond in a critical moment to a particular appeal from his worshippers; but Yahweh, who intervenes in history with purposes and plans of his own, is able to respond because he is personal and real. He does not simply function, as Baal may function in nature, but communicates, and his people may communicate with him. When the fire of Yahweh falls, it does not blast the mountain or the prophets of Baal – which would have been a show of force – but it burns up Elijah's sacrifice, an answer to the prayer that offered it. If the drought ends now, it will not be by the power of Baal, who is not personal and cannot answer, but by the will of Yahweh, who has already answered.

The story of Yahweh's answer on Mount Carmel is unique in the Bible, and has to be understood within its own special context. In the earliest history of Israel in Canaan, miracles play almost no part. Little of what is described in the Book of Judges, for instance, even looks miraculous, but is rather the providence of God confidently expected by Israel's heroes and never failing them. Later, in the story of David, there is nothing that we would recognise as miraculous, even though there is much to show David's extraordinary reliance on Yahweh. Throughout the history of Israel, miracles play an infrequent part – contrary to the popular image of the Old Testament – and that makes the intervention of God on Mount Carmel, where Yahweh acts so unmistakably and dramatically, a special case.

Because it is the story of a miracle, it is a problem for us. We don't like miracles. We prefer not to believe in them. They are chaotic, disturbing and interruptions to an otherwise intelligent order. They belong to the irrational, the magical. The unpredictable. They explain nothing, contradict all reason, and confuse all attempts to appreciate the natural way of the universe as we have it. They are a prop for the insecure, a refuge from reality, an excuse for laziness and wishful thinking, a flight from intellectual and moral responsibility.

Such at least is the modern feeling – even among believers – against miracles. We consider the outright intervention of God, conforming to no laws of nature, to be an illogical interference: God acting irrationally. A God who meant anything, who could be understood at all, would act only in accordance with the regular course of events. He would not fall back on spectacular but maladroit interruptions just as an easy way of proving a point. To this way of thinking, the miracle on Mount Carmel is particularly offensive. It is too dramatic and showy, out of character for God as we think of him, and as we expect him to be. It feels irrational. It could stand as an example of the nonsense we get if we believe in a God who acts outside of meaningful limits.

And yet, this is how Yahweh acted. He answered his prophet with an immediate sign that was taken as proof of his reality. We ought perhaps to look more closely at the miracle and its consequences, to see if it was the meaningless evasion I have just described, or whether there was more to it.

In the first place, it was not just an easy way out or an evasion of responsibility for Elijah. He staked his credibility and his life on the intervention of Yahweh, and it was not just the gamble of an excited moment. For some time he had put himself in danger, opposing the will of a strong and popular government, the fury of Jezebel and her powerful supporters, and the indifference of Israelites generally. He had gone from place to place at Yahweh's bidding, trusting him even for his next meal. Under Yahweh's direction, he had come back to Israel announcing the end of the drought, and still facing his most powerful opponents with a challenge. He was not one to look for an easy escape from his difficulties.

Trusting God, even to intervene in the course of nature or of history, is not a way of evading personal responsibility. It is to accept a far greater responsibility, taking into account in all your actions not only predictable forces of nature and the guessable courses of human behaviour, but also the unpredictable, personal action of God. It is to recognise his will and his plans as you go. This is the responsibility that Jeroboam failed to exercise, when he made his decision about the shrines. It is the responsibility we avoid whenever we try to limit our universe to nature and the human, confining God's action within the bounds of natural and psychological "laws". God is not so confined, and to serve and trust him is an alarming commitment to one whose ways are not mapped in advance. It calls for deep and practised responsibility.

Nor are miracles a matter of skilful magic, as if they were some special, mysterious way of manipulating the world. Elijah approached Yahweh not as if he alone knew how to manage him, but as one who had long since become his servant. It was the prophets of Baal who treated their god as a force to be controlled, or at most a power

Too Close to God

to be wheedled and cajoled. They danced with frenzied energy and slashed themselves, in order to constrain him to act. That is the way of magic or superstition. But God is not constrained (and violent, frenzied prayer, whether in Canaanites or spirit-filled Christians, does not reach to the heart of God). When Elijah called to Yahweh, it was a simple, confident prayer, the expression of a trust that recognised Yahweh's complete independence from all forms of manipulation.

The test he proposed suggests a primitive, even crude, theology, but this was not an exercise in theological instruction. It was an appeal to Yahweh. All that he knew of Yahweh and of his commission from him, told him that the time had come to end the hesitations of Israel. And not he, but Yahweh alone could do that. For Elijah on Mount Carmel, there was no way forward but by such an appeal, relying on Yahweh to act and settle the conflict once and for all. When he offered a sign that it was Yahweh who acted, God did not disown him. Yahweh responded to his appeal and his trust was vindicated (though whether it settled the conflict remains to be seen).

In fact, it is wholly in that context of appeal and response, of trust and dialogue, that we grasp the meaning of the miracle. The really superstitious and magical view of God is the one that tries to confine him to the realm of cause and effect, expecting him to act like a force in nature and not like a person, to function rather than communicate. Such a view cannot understand miracles, because they are acts of personal communication. They are not to be understood like physical phenomena, in terms of their causes (even supernatural causes) but like personal behaviour, in terms of their intended meaning.

In a personal encounter, we understand someone by recognising their meaning, what they want to communicate. When a child puts his arms around me, or a woman comes to my door wearing a blue rosette, I don't try to explain their actions in terms of physical causes. I look at what they mean, what they are communicating. That is the big difference between understanding physical events and understanding personal actions. If you ask me why the branches of the trees are waving about wildly, I'll say that a strong wind is blowing them. If you ask me why a man in a dinghy is waving his arms about wildly, I'll say he wants help. We explain physical events by pointing to their probable causes. We explain personal actions by showing what they mean, what they convey or communicate. A personal act is meaningful if it discloses someone's unique will and intention, or their response to an approach: that is, if it reveals a communicating person.

We get hung up on miracles because we try too hard to relate them to physical events. If we believe in them, we strive to show that they couldn't have had any "natural" cause - as if anything at all that had no "natural" cause would be satisfactory as a revelation of God. If we don't believe in them, we either try to show that they did have natural causes, or we insist that they couldn't have happened because they don't conform to the natural pattern. Now that all makes for an interesting debate, but one in which both sides are avoiding the most important aspect of miracles: their meaning as an act of personal communication.

Science has taught us to make sense of the physical world by experiment: by setting up situations we can repeat again and again, to show how things work and will always work. Understanding involves tests and observations which we can repeat to confirm

our results. But that is not the way to reach understanding in a personal relationship. Personal communication is distinctively unique. A brilliant piece of repartee, a verbal rally, only dies if we try to repeat it. A critical discussion leading to a serious decision or an important disclosure will only occur once. Even when we do repeat it (as when we read the minutes of a previous meeting) the repetition is a very different thing, changed by the very fact that it is a repetition. Further discussion, further communication, builds on what has gone before. A conversation, a discussion, an encounter makes sense not because we can repeat it and get the same results, but because we have made contact with someone, someone has responded to us, and we have communicated, because we can go on from there to something more, and different.

And that is how God reveals himself. He acts in a way that is personal. What he does is the expression of a personal relationship. He doesn't simply function, like nature or a machine. His actions are not understood in terms of cause and effect. Whenever he acts, there is always someone to whom he is relating. There is always giving and receiving, approaching and responding, trust and dialogue. Unless we recognise this, we will miss the meaning of everything he does, and fail to see the meaning, or the basic intelligibility of his miracles.

The important thing about any miracle is not its relationship to normal patterns of cause and effect, but its meaning: what it says or communicates, the intentions of God, whom it discloses. The miracle on Mount Carmel is not just an irrational act of interference in nature, but a unique word in Yahweh's dialogue with his people, an answer to be understood within that dialogue as Yahweh's response to Elijah's call. Yahweh responds because he is committed to his people. He responds in this way and at this moment because Elijah has asked him to accept the sacrifice, and Elijah is his servant. A mere act of force would have been impersonal and irrational, but an answer to Elijah's prayer was personal and meaningful. Yahweh acted on Mount Carmel not because he is the kind of God who will from time to time rain down fire from heaven; but because at that moment in their dialogue this action meant something quite clear and important.

The miracle on Mount Carmel was neither an act of force, nor a magical show, nor a meaningless intervention in nature; nor (as we shall see in the next chapter) was it a short cut to a solution. It was a moment in Yahweh's continuing dialogue with Israel: an answer to Elijah's appeal and a declaration of Yahweh's commitment to his people. It was a communication, to be understood in terms of personal, not impersonal, meaning. It can only be understood in the light of Yahweh's relationship with his people.

Even then, there might be misunderstandings. Yahweh's answer was taken up in turn, and Elijah now responded, as best he could. Since Yahweh had spoken, there was no reason for Israel to hesitate any longer. God had been revealed. The proper response was decision, and to Elijah's way of thinking, that could only mean decisive action to destroy the enemy.

Too Close to God

Elijah said: "Seize the prophets of Baal: do not let one of them escape." They seized them and Elijah took them down to the wadi Kishon and slaughtered them there. (IK 18:40)

The Baal prophets had been proven wrong: fraudulent and subversive, since they had claimed to have the means of ending the drought and so had misled the nation. Death was the only "reasonable" penalty, and just as surely as Elijah would have been put to death, if he had not been vindicated, the Baal prophets were now slaughtered, on his order, in the dry bed of the the wadi Kishon.

It is clear, and important for us to remember, that Elijah is no Christian saint - not even what we would call a civilised human being. For him, and for the Israelite witnesses, it was psychologically impossible to see the response of God without reacting according to their own violent understanding of the conflict. Elijah's relationship with God did not consist of a high standard of morality, but of such rough loyalty and trust as God's commitment inspired in him. That God accepts him and speaks to him as his prophet, tells us something about God's choice and his approach to his people. It does not justify Elijah's morality.

I cannot stress too much how important it is to understand even the murderous conclusion of this story. The slaughter was wicked, revealing a dismally savage idea of God, but contact with God does not begin with an adequate theology, or even with civilised standards of behaviour, but with trust. The very scandal of the story reminds us how "basic" God's approach to us must be. Our first real relationship with him is one of free, personal, trusting submission, which he, being personal, seeks before all else. In revealing himself, he begins where we are, where we can respond from within our own limits. He speaks to us to establish a relationship of trust before he gets round to correcting our morals or enlightening our theology.

We like to think that God is all about being decent and well-behaved; that we can therefore understand him and fit in with him in the same way as we accept and comply with "reasonable" moral standards. We like to think that good behaviour and a civilised view of things are the very stuff of suitability for contact with God and that any agent of God's must exhibit the standards of decency we recognise. It is a very moral, respectable, impersonal and false idea of God, and Elijah's story, like some other parts of the Old Testament, challenges that falsehood. Being without any "higher" recommendation, Elijah brings us back to what is really fundamental: the personal relationship, which is not enlightenment or civilisation, but trust and loyalty: or faith and love.

Elijah's trust was vindicated and God showed himself committed to the wild man from Tishbe - a commitment we can only accept, whether we like the man or not. Elijah's ways should not be ours, but Yahweh's commitment to those who trust him is still the same, and we, too, will not have to claim goodness or enlightenment before we can begin to rely on him. The trust that accepts him is the beginning of a sound relationship even if our response is otherwise crude and barbaric. God accepts it as a beginning and he continues to reveal himself to us as long as we continue to trust him.

In the story of Mount Carmel, of the miracle and the slaughter, we have a genuine and important revelation of God's relationship with his people. In the miracle we see how

Elijah approached God and how God responded to him; and in the slaughter we see how Elijah and the Israelites responded to the act of God. It is not all edifying, but it is a genuine and human encounter leading into the wider experience of God's reality.

Yahweh is God and not a god to be equated with any other. Israel's commitment to him was not a cultural phenomenon or a by-product of passing circumstances - it was the result of God's own personal approach to them. Yahweh is God, personally committed to Israel. Baal was at best one culture's attempt to see God in the forces of nature, but when the real thing is offered - when the real One offers himself - all mere attempts are obsolete, however modern or sophisticated. To go on even with the best attempts to reach God, is futile and perverse if God has already reached you.

To such a one as Jezebel, it was just stubborn ignorance that would not, in the national interest, replace Yahweh with Canaan's natural Baal. To the majority of Israelites it was a fuss about nothing, when they found time and space in their lives for both of the gods and many more. To Elijah, however, it was clear that Israel must choose: not just between rival cultures, or rival images of God, but between imitation and reality. Though they might accommodate any number of gods, they could not worship both God and a god. They could not have both Yahweh and Baal, except by reducing Yahweh to the same unreality and inconsequence as Baal. And Yahweh would not be reduced: he would insist on choice and commitment.

"How long will you hobble along on one leg and the other? If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him."

What Jeroboam had seen as a fairly straightforward task - to arrange Israel's worship of Yahweh around convenient shrines and a familiar symbol - turns out to be something vastly more complex, challenging, risky, lively, strong and subtle: a people's encounter with the real God, who has ways and a will of his own. It is the building of a personal relationship, involving a whole nation's response to the reality of God. It is not surprising that Jeroboam got it wrong, for he did not know Yahweh as Elijah knew him, and as we shall see, even Elijah did not get it right.

Elijah too, underestimated Yahweh and failed to take in the full scope and subtlety, determination and patience of God's commitment to Israel. His encounter with Yahweh had pitched him against Jezebel and the Baal party. It had driven him out to live from Yahweh's own hand in the wilderness, and then into exile to meet the needs of a Sidonian woman. It had brought him back to challenge the King and the Queen's prophets and to stake all on Yahweh's answer, with the assembly of Israel to witness. Then, in his moment of victory, it had released in him the violence which slaughtered Baal's prophets. But even that was not the end of it. For the reality of Yahweh was something more than even Elijah understood, and after victory, it was his turn to learn the meaning and intention of his God...

Too Close to God