

## 4 The Struggle for Israel

Yahweh is a scandalously political God. When he sent Elijah back from Mount Horeb, he commissioned him with a political task that would affect the history of Israel and her neighbors for more than a generation:

"Go back by the same way to the wilderness of Damascus. You are to anoint Hazael as king of Aram. You are to anoint Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as prophet to succeed you. Anyone who escapes the sword of Hazael will be put to death by Jehu; and anyone who escapes the sword of Jehu will be put to death by Elisha. But I shall spare seven thousand in Israel: all the knees that have not bent before Baal, all the mouths that have not kissed him." (IK 19: 15-18)

Elijah is a political prophet. He is concerned with political issues in a world where religion cannot be separated from the whole life of the community. There is no neat division into sacred and secular, for Yahweh is involved in everything that involves his people. He is vigorously active in all their common concerns, for he is too big to be confined to any private experience, too personal, too urgent, too real to hover around outside of life's social and political dimensions.

Those who worship Elijah's God cannot separate their faith from the world. Their religion does not operate in a world of private worship divided from the state's secular concerns. To separate religion and the state is to trivialise one or the other, or both, and Elijah's God will not accept that. He is therefore out of step with the demands of European liberalism, with the expectations both of democratic and of communist systems. He will not retreat into a private corner of human experience, but even in his most exclusive and individual approach (as when he met with Elijah in the wilderness of Mount Horeb) he summons us back to a life embroiled in the community.

Nor does he confine himself to the "nice" or even the constructive side of politics. If our politics includes violence and destruction, then Yahweh is involved there too. When he speaks to Elijah, he speaks of war and death in the struggle for power that will engulf Israel and her neighbours. When politics dissolves into war, Yahweh will still be involved. The commission he now gives to Elijah does not exclude the violence which the prophet and his violent community have come to expect. Elijah returns from Horeb with a new vision, no longer looking for immediate victory at a mere sign from Yahweh; but he is no less bloody in his purpose. His struggle is still to the death, and to the death of many in Israel.

For us, that is the paradox of Yahweh: God himself revealed by his action within this world; yet a god involved in the violent political tensions of a petty local kingdom three thousand years ago. I believe the paradox has to stand. It is a fruitful one, and we should not try to get rid of it either by denying that Yahweh is God, or by denying any part of the

greater, fuller revelation of God that we have received. I believe that, eventually, God corrects and takes us beyond Elijah's religion and his violent politics, but not by becoming less involved in the world. It will be by his, and our, becoming more involved. We will find as we come to know more of God, that he is even more involved than Elijah realised in this world's affairs, in its politics and in the sometimes violent resolution of its conflicts.

If Israel stood firmly by her alliance with Tyre and Sidon, it was not without good reason. On other borders she faced a determined enemy in the Aramean kingdom of Damascus, whose kings were ambitious to expand into Israelite territory. Throughout this century (the ninth B.C.) there was intermittent war between them, and at their strongest, the Arameans were a threat to the very existence of Israel, a powerful reason for Omri's successors to continue his policies.

So the old hostility to Judah was set aside, and peace between the two Israelite kingdoms was sealed by another marriage: of Ahab's sister, Athaliah, to the King of Judah. Moreover, Athaliah, like Jezebel, was no mere pawn in the political settlement. She took with her that enthusiasm for Baal and Canaanite religion which might have united Canaanites and Israelites from the north of Lebanon to the south of Judah, if such as she and Jezebel had had their way. At any rate, the family and cultural links between Tyre and Sidon, Israel and Judah remained the basis of Israel's security - an essential protection, if she was not to be dismembered by the Arameans.

But, by the same token, danger from Damascus was a good reason for fostering Israel's allegiance to Yahweh. This was the serious political flaw in Jezebel's policy: that in times of crisis, when the forces of ancient patriotism were needed, it was the prophets of Yahweh who could best rouse the fighting fervour of the Israelites. Defending their land brought them closer to the warrior god of their ancestors who had conquered it. War more than anything else rallied them to Yahweh, who had always been a warrior leader and a god of battles, such as Baal never was.

The stories that follow tell of war and threats of war over an indefinite period. From an historian's point of view there are discrepancies, anomalies of style and clashes with other historical sources, which suggest that actual events were much more complicated than the story that has survived. So, in most of the incidents related, we cannot now be certain which king was actually involved, what known battle was being fought, and at what period. In general, historians are of the opinion that Israel under Ahab was too strong for the Arameans to invade her, so that some of the stories of Israel's "desperate straits" must apply to a reign later than his. We are dealing, therefore, with stories in which Ahab takes the place of later kings, and particularly the kings of his own dynasty: his sons who succeeded him.

The conflict between Ahab and the prophets is representative of a lasting and probably far more complex conflict between prophets and kings in Israel, and the story as we now read it in the Book of Kings simplifies the issue by focusing on two clear sides: Ahab's and Yahweh's. "Ahab" may well be representative of all the bad policies that various kings followed and of many false moves they made. The prophets who oppose him in the story may well have been opposing other kings of a later date. We are looking not at history as it was, but at history as it was remembered: neither pure history nor pure story, but history turned into story so that the whole experience is handed on succinctly and imaginatively. What matters is the point of the story: Yahweh's opposition to the natural way of kings and governments, and to the arrogance of a power that tries to use and exploit him. The story portrays for us what true Israelites and true prophets learnt from many experiences and over a long time: Yahweh's reality as the unique, independent and personal God.

In times of war, Ahab could be glad that Jezebel had not succeeded in eliminating Yahweh. When the need arose, we find that once again there were "prophets of Yahweh" regularly active in Israel. And not only active, but now suitably tamed and court-approved. The policy had swung from persecution to exploitation (as, in the recent past, Soviet, Polish and other governments attempted to tame their native churches by state recognition and supervision). Ahab relied in particular on the Yahweh prophets in Samaria, and for a time there was co-operation between them.

According to the Book of Kings, Ben Hadad II, King of Damascus, invaded Israel twice in the reign of Ahab<sup>1</sup>. The first time, he laid siege to the city of Samaria with a large army of fighting men from vassal tribes whose chiefs had become his officers. He almost forced a crippling settlement on Israel, but he overreached himself and made his conditions too tough. The Israelites were roused by the prophets of Yahweh and rallied to the attack. The Aramean army, disintegrating before their onslaught, proved more impressive to see than to fight against<sup>2</sup>.

On the second occasion, Ben Hadad showed he had learnt from his mistakes. He had reorganised his army, getting rid of the tribal leaders and appointing his own commanders over new troops recruited for himself. This time, moreover, he avoided the hills of Samaria, where his chariots had little advantage, and waited on level ground to receive the Israelite counter-attack. Once again, Israel was faced with superior forces. Their enemy was all the cleverer for his hurts and all the more confident that this time he had it right: Yahweh, the god of the hill country, had given Israel her previous victory, but he would not be so masterful on the plains.

The prophets of Yahweh, however, made no such reservation: Yahweh, the warrior god, was lord of battles wherever they were fought and would give the victory to Israel on any terrain. They encouraged Ahab to march to victory, and when the armies met, victory was indeed Israel's. Beaten, the Arameans fled to Aphek, where Ben Hadad was forced to

---

<sup>1</sup> IK 20 <sup>2</sup> IK 20:24-25

appeal for mercy. His advisers had no better plan left than to dress in sackcloth and humiliate themselves before Ahab, hoping so to satisfy his pride and save their king's life. The plan worked. Magnanimous in victory, Ahab had the King of Damascus fetched to him. He recognised him as a brother king and invited him to stand in his own chariot, where they came to terms. Ahab would spare the life of Ben Hadad, in return for which he received trading rights in Damascus, a valuable economic concession. It was, on the face of it, a generous and advantageous settlement, for to have killed Ben Hadad would only have left the throne of Damascus to a successor, who would have carried on the war with Israel. By sparing the king, Ahab made a valuable friend and secured for Israel's merchants their own bazaar, or market, in the city of Damascus.

Some of Yahweh's prophets, however, were far from pleased. One of them disguised himself as a soldier and accosted the King on the road back to Samaria, pretending to appeal to his judgement on a disciplinary matter:

"I was making my way to where the fighting was thickest when someone brought a prisoner to me and said, 'Guard this man; if he is found missing, your life will pay for his.' But while I was busy with one thing and another, the man disappeared."

(IK 20:39-40)

King Ahab did not extend his magnanimity to his own troops. He brushed aside the appeal and told the man he would have to pay the penalty fixed: "That is your sentence, you have pronounced it yourself." Justice was to prevail in unmitigated strictness, and the disguised prophet fully agreed with the sentence. He threw off his soldier's headgear, showing what he really was, and delivered his message to the King:

"Yahweh says, 'Since you have let the man escape who was under my ban, your life will pay for his, your people for his people.'"

(IK 20:38-42)

The uneasy truce between Ahab and the prophets was broken again. The wide-ranging political and economic considerations that counted with the king clashed again with the passionate and intransigent convictions of the Yahwists. Once again Israel was being dragged in two ways and two discordant voices claimed to speak in her best interests. The King could point to the concessions he had won, but his economic prizes were brushed aside by the prophets, who demanded full blood-vengeance for Ben Hadad's attack on Israel.

What shocks and disturbs us, and tempts us to reject the episode, is the claim, quite clear in the narrative, that God is speaking through the prophet and not through Ahab. We are shown vengeance condemning prudent politics, fanaticism condemning moderation, bloodlust condemning mercy, and we are asked to believe that this is the voice of God declaring his judgement on Ahab. We are tempted, as I said, to pass over the story, or to accept it only in a patronising way as an instance of the inadequacy of Israelite religion.

But it is far more than that. It is history and parable - a story, hot from history, which opens our eyes to something true. It will show us, if we let it, something of the shocking and challenging reality of God. The prophets of Yahweh speak for Yahweh, and if this is not God behaving as we expect him to behave, we should for that very reason take notice. At the very least, what challenges our preconceptions can provoke us into clear thinking, and whether in the end we accept or reject it, we should make every effort to understand it.

I do not propose to explain away the scandal. It is a paradox, and a paradox it must remain. But I will say what the shock does for me - the insight that comes when I do not dismiss or avoid the story but accept it as a revelation of God's ways, and so as a challenge to my own ideas.

The story of Ahab's clemency reminds me of a picture I saw somewhere, of an English general (I think it was the Duke of Marlborough after the Battle of Oudenaarde) confronting his vanquished opponent. Gallantly, he is offering the defeated general the use of his own carriage, to be conveyed to suitable accomodation in a nearby town. It is the magnanimous act of a civilised Christian, far superior to those pagan ancients who used to drag their conquered foes in triumph behind their chariots.

And yet, there is something about such gallantry that sticks in your throat. It is a classy pose, a smooth, self-congratulating exchange that does not mend but simply ignores the bloody reality of war. The troops of both sides are still dying from their wounds. Many who survive will live out their lives in crippled poverty, or turn to crime and be hanged one day, because after the war there is no magnanimity and no place for them in respectable society. But meanwhile, the generals can shake hands and lend their carriages as men who know each other's worth, and in recognising it, reaffirm their own. There is something profoundly hypocritical about leaders who can shake hands after the battle, after the ugly deaths and agonies of their soldiers, but could not do so earlier, in time to spare the bloodshed.

So is has often been with kings and professional generals. High priests of the ultimate sacrifice, they urge on their troops to valiant deaths, instilling and inciting magnificent courage, to see it shattered before the bellowing mouths of guns or cut to pieces on barbed wire and bayonets. Then, when all the blood is spilt, when the trenches are empty of living and full of dead, they can count who has the most survivors, claim victory and admit defeat, and shake hands in a gentlemanly fashion. The battle is over.

So it was with Ahab. His was the mercy of one king to another. He had not spared the lives of his own soldiers, or of the Arameans slaughtered in battle, and as the story shows us, he would impose the strictest penalty on a common soldier for letting a prisoner escape. But he had treated Ben Hadad as if they two were above the common herd, two colleagues who knew how to treat each other in a civilised manner, even though their rival ambitions had sent many to a painful and premature death. Ahab's was the kind of showy generosity that puts the worth of a king, even an enemy, above that of a common

soldier, even a friend. It was a very selective clemency. If his are the accents of civilisation and mercy, then I am not surprised after all, that God committed his answer to the harsher tones of primitive vengeance.

There was, of course, another consideration behind Ahab's mercy: a solid money motive. He stood to gain a bazaar in Damascus, for which he was prepared to barter soldiers' lives that had been given in defence of their land. Wars, of course, are often like that: fought for a certain commercial advantage. But they are rarely put that way to the soldiers who have to die in them. Those who have to take the risk, to suffer and to die, must be convinced that the war is for their own land and families, to hold at bay a ravenous aggressor who is intent on devouring them. Their passions have to be engaged. Soldiers must die for their country, their kin and their freedom, and leaders with an eye for the economic outcomes have to leave any mention of that until the peace negotiations come round.

Yahweh's prophets had been the "propagandists" for this war, and if we are repelled by the word, we have to acknowledge that at least they were honest propagandists (or one of them was). Their voice and their conviction of God's support had inspired the Israelites to fight back, defending their sacred territory against an arrogant invader. They had seen it this way not because the king told them to or paid them to, but because the Arameans were there, marching boldly into their land. In a time of dire crisis the prophets had been a voice for faith and courage, and as such Yahweh had spoken through them, to the deepest passions and loyalties of their people.

Now that the battle was over, they were the voice of those who had died, crying out in protest against the trivialising of their war and its sacrifices. They had not fought bravely and implacably in order to win concessions for the Israelite merchants in Damascus, but to defend the land that was Israel's and to punish the invader. Only such a course had warranted a holy war. Only on such grounds had their battle been identified with the will of God. When the prophet denounced Ahab's clemency, he was condemning the idea that a commercial adjustment could equally be represented as Yahweh's will. Having roused the Israelites to a passionate defence of their homeland that had cost many of them their lives, he was outraged that the arch-villain, the king whose ambition had caused the war, had been allowed to buy his life for a bazaar in Damascus.

The passions of war are savage and cruel, and this episode shows them for what they are: but also that God will sooner side with them than with the cunning self-interest that attempts to channel and exploit them. For God recognises the bloody passions of men, and would have us recognise them, honestly. They are not to be played with, or exploited for tactical advantages. If leaders know how to lead their people into the way of peace, that is good; but if not, if they resort to war, they must not expect the passions they rouse to switch on and off at their convenience. There is something terrible, evil, about the violence triggered off in a people whose home territory is threatened, but there is something even more evil about a leader who tries to manipulate and use that violence. Such passions are not just another resource at the state's disposal. The prophet knew what

war is about. He knew the passion of war as a violent drive which, when it is roused, must have action and resolution.

The virtues of peace - tolerance, reconciliation, meekness and quiet strength - are beautiful, and to see them swept aside in the tide of fury that makes a war is a terrible thing. But more terrible still is to see that fury deliberately controlled and exploited to serve the fears or ambitions of a ruling group. The barbarous violence of war and the thirst for revenge are nothing to be proud of - but they are something better than the political expertise that can orchestrate those passions to serve the national interest. There are better ways than the way of war, and the Bible itself will lead us to a much better course, but it never sanctions the way of Ahab.

Yahweh's prophet was indeed speaking out for barbarous passions, and Ahab's astute gesture was indeed a mark of civilisation, but when civilisation uses its superior knowledge to exploit the passions of barbarism, it is morally inferior to that barbarism, and God wants no part in it. God is real, and his wars, in so far as he has any, are real and honest. He is more at home with frustrated passions breaking loose than with any political arrangements that aggravate and then repress them. The honest though bloodthirsty rage of the prophet is closer to God than Ahab's sophisticated calculations. War is evil, but the fear and passions that fuel it are not so wicked as the cynical manoeuvring of leaders who try to exploit it.

To "limit" your war and your war aims to economic goals is not an improvement, but a sell-out of the little good there is in the spirit of battle. Nowadays, we recognise this. Imperialism is out of favour, and politicians have to disguise the economic purpose of their wars. They have to bury their merely commercial aims under a pile of rhetoric and all the emotions of a crusade for freedom. They, like Ahab, want to use war and the muscle power of war-readiness for commercial gains. So they speak of national "self-defence" and then subtly shift their emphasis to the defence of "national interests". From there, it is a short jump to the defence of national commercial interests, and finally to the national defence of commercial interests. They are seducers: perverting and betraying the deep feelings of patriotism and self-defence which they harness to money and commercial power.

People will sacrifice a lot for commercial gain, but not their lives. Few will send out their sons to die; few would be proud to say that their husbands or fathers gave their lives for the profit of British landowners or American oil dealers. Consequently, populations and armies are nurtured with propaganda. They are taught to fear and resist an enemy supposedly poised to overrun their country; to kill the monsters who would butcher and abuse their families; to fight a dictatorship that lusts to crush their liberties. And then their energies are directed into sordid squabbles, upholding oppressors and dictators anywhere in the world, if they happen to offer advantages for business.

When American presidents fight their wars in Central America or the Middle East, to defend "essential American interests"; when British governments go into battle in obedience to the President of the United States, they know where British commercial interests lie, but they rely on an army taught to fight for their families, their freedom and their country, for justice and security. Their wars are minor, controlled interventions protecting trade and investment; yet they draw on passions and convictions that would never be roused if they honestly presented their cause as an economic one. They play a wicked game, promoting war in terms of good and evil, of ultimate and holy conflicts when in fact their concern is for something more mundane and practical.

But they are stirring up emotions that cannot be controlled or regulated, stoking passions which will only cry out against any attempt to curb them. When people are given a black-and-white justification of war, when it is presented as a battle between true good and dire evil, it becomes a fight to the death. War between good and evil is to the death, and no one may try to stop it short of that. You cannot justify armies, weapons and war by reference to the monstrous evils of Hitler's Germany or some demonic threat of Communism, and then use your forces for petty battles around the globe in support of trade and financial influence.

When we read the story of Ahab's clemency, are we to conclude that God intends us to slaughter our enemies? No. In fact we are not to draw from it any precise moral rule - it's not a story-with-a-moral in that sense at all. It is simply the picture of an ethical "situation": a particular occasion on which Ahab did such and such, and, through the prophet, God's response was such and such. That is, God's pronouncement through the prophet doesn't tell us any specific thing we should always or never do. Rather it tells us to face the whole bloody and cruel spirit of war honestly and realistically, not to play with it as a political tool but to recognise and accept the terrible reality of the passions that fuel it. Whatever else we are to say or do about it, war is not a tool and the passions of war are not an instrument of policy.

And that is no slight lesson to learn. To mention only what it means for English-speaking readers, it rules out the very foundation line of recent British and American defence policies. It is not so long since our national defence relied primarily and predominantly on the belief that we can go on exploiting the passions of war while denying them any hope of release or success. That is what nuclear armament amounts to: rousing the deepest fears of the people to permanent war-readiness but restraining them, forever, from boiling over into actual war. The nation has to be prepared - morally, psychologically and technically - to annihilate whole populations at the press of a button. Only it shall never happen.

Our governments claim that it is all right to stoke up the furnace, to galvanise the nation for total war, because they hope never to fight it, but the Bible's story shows us that this is

precisely why they must not prepare for it. The policy is an evil and futile attempt to exploit the possibilities of war when war itself has become unthinkable. It is an impossible contradiction, which God himself does not allow. You cannot raise the nation to such a pitch of defensiveness, such a commitment of fear and anger that you convincingly threaten your enemies, and yet hope to hold back from the consequences. You cannot measure out the convictions and passions of war like this. You cannot keep your followers forever ready to exterminate their enemy, and yet forever restrain them from carrying out the threat.

Such a foolish and dangerous belief is, however, the accepted war-wisdom of our day. Any vast atrocity may be planned and prepared for, any horrible thret is held to be justified. We are told, until we believe it without question, that the war of nerves is for the sake of our most valued freedoms, for our families, our independence, our territory, our Christian faith, our God. The passions of fear, patriotism and courage are kept at boiling point, as in a holy war, providing the energy for massive war programs and expensive weponry, for training, planning, bunker building, civil defence... We are to be moved to utter dedication in a cause that appears to be supremely right, the very battle of good itself against evil; and then we are to remain indefinitely at the pitch of tension, acting, training, rehearsing, preparing, but otherwise doing nothing, from month to month, year to year, decade to decade, while the politicians fail to resolve their hostilities and squabble on, blaming one another, making and unmaking friends, gaining and losing their petty advantages.

The passions and twisted ideals that make for war, for armies and weapons and slaughter, are difficult to excuse at any time. But at least in a world where they have an outlet they might be made to serve some purpose. If they are able to exhaust themselves, from time to time, we can feel that something bitter and terrible in the human spirit has at least found its expression and release. Then they are partly redeemed by acts of bravery, self-sacrifice and solidarity. But where there is no outlet, the war mentality is totally depraving. If Ahab was wrong to curtail the flood of violence, how much more wrong it is to dam it up completely and store it as a permanent menace. Trying to make peace by being geared up for total war is worse than war itself.

When Great Britain went to war against Argentina over the Falkland Islands, you could almost hear a mighty gasp of relief sweeping not only across this country, but across the United States as well. Even they seemed to feel that now at last, in a world kept for decades at the pitch of readiness, was a war that could actually be fought out - battled through to its bloody, cruel, but satisfying conclusion. Never mind that it wasn't America's war - it was so good to see somebody fighting a real war. Never mind that the "enemy" suddenly identified was one who had been their close friend hitherto. Never mind that large numbers of Hispano-Americans would sympathise with Argentina. A war was being fought, the kind of battle so long prepared for had actually broken out at last. I am not surprised that the American government was swept off its feet by an excess of pro-British feeling and forced to act against its own interests, its own policies, its own friends in Argentina. In America as well as Britain the Falklands War served for a mighty

release of pent-up feeling and a long overdue recompense for years of "holy war" readiness.

On that occasion, the Reagan administration, suddenly surrounded by cheering Anglophiles, was helpless to resist a British return to the American sphere, and we can only presume that in a graver international crisis, his and other administrations would be equally helpless. Nuclear deterrence will work until the fear and mistrust it generates reaches unbearable proportions. Then passion will take over, and in a moment of crisis sweep aside deterrence, government and everything. President Reagan likes to call it "realistic"; others think of it as "practical", but nuclear weapons have brought us to the point where even preparing for war is suicidal. We cannot now let passion rush on to sate itself, but the Bible shows us that we cannot keep the passion while we deny the sating. It is wicked even to try, and God himself has declared against it.

Our own leaders, of course, are not alone. Russians, French and others rely on a sense of dedication to war which can only be described as religious. (Even the Communist Russians speak of a "sacred" duty to defend their motherland.) They all manufacture, stockpile or deploy such weapons as no people would tolerate unless they hated and feared their enemies with a deep and terrible conviction. They appeal, time and again, for just such hatred and fear, invoking the spectre of a ghastly enemy poised to crush and devour: the Soviets, the Americans, the Communists, the Capitalists, the Imperialists. They stir up a fury of self-defence, investing huge resources and emotional commitment, and pretend that when it comes to the crunch, when nerves are stretched to snapping point and world-wide fears are clamouring for action, they will be able coolly and calmly to negotiate, to threaten and bargain, to measure their escalations, to control the reaction of their force commanders, to settle the affair over a telephone, like the rational, wise, experienced statesmen they are.

It is just such a false assurance that the Bible story challenges. Not only is it naïve of our leaders to hope they will not be swept on by the hatreds and fears they have aroused, but it is wicked of them even to attempt it. Better to be an Irish or Afghan guerilla leader<sup>1</sup> rousing your followers to furious hatred of the foreign invaders and sending them in to destroy and kill, than to whip up the same instincts of patriotism and self-defence only to curtail and control them, channelling them into huge defence budgets, a callous arms trade and the grim stalemate of nuclear deterrence.

Whether he forbids or permits it, God insists on our facing the fact that war is passion out of control, passion that will not be bought off or kept in abeyance, or stored for use as required. War is an all but irresistible outburst of self-concern and common loyalty, a mixed fury of anger and dedication. It is not a bargaining counter, a factor, a bluff. In the animals, confrontation is very often a matter of bluff, and so the majority of their territorial disputes are settled without real injury. But we are incapable of such bluff. In us, defeat

---

<sup>1</sup>Thinking of the Mojahedin resistance against the Soviet occupation.

leaves feelings that rankle and torture and break out again in real war or in self-destruction. For good or ill, we are not like the animals, and God will not let us pretend we are.

We may well feel that we need something more enlightened than the prophets' flood of vengeance. But the prophets' flood of vengeance is more honest and so closer to God than our attempt to use the threat of total war as a lever against our enemies. The prophet's simple and grim demand for satisfaction is more enlightened by the truth of God than our attempts to wrap up the same passions in a deadly and continually frustrated war-readiness. That at least is the meaning we must give to the prophet's word in our day. Of course, there is a higher morality than his, but it is not Ahab's, and that higher morality, if we were to apply it, would prove to be something even more demanding and challenging.

The story of Ahab and the prophet, strange and irrelevant though it might have appeared, faces us with the very truth that is now crucial to our survival. It shows us the pattern of threat and anger, of self-defence and the passions aroused against an invader, in a light that makes nonsense of any attempt at "control" over the forces of war. Perhaps I need to stress again that I am not criticising politicians for trying to cool or restrain aggressive patriotic feelings. That is just what good politicians should do - but not after they themselves have whipped them up to a desirable pitch. Presidents and Prime Ministers of the world's great nations need to be told, with the clear voice of prophecy, that you cannot make war, or threaten war, and rouse a people's deepest fears for their homeland or their national identity, without surrendering control of the events which follow. The very idea of controlled nuclear deterrence is God-defying arrogance which denies basic human realities.

(The preceding few paragraphs, written in the 1980s had in mind the policy of deterrence which was then the major defence strategy of the world's most powerful nations. The situation has changed since then, but the stockpiles are still there, even if they are no longer at the centre of political and psychological tension. They are not far in the background and we could soon be back in the same dreadful deadlock of suspicion and fear. Indeed, the current references to "weapons of mass destruction" and an "axis of evil" indicate the same appeal to fear and hatred. If the appeal leads to determined action against all those who stock weapons of mass destruction and ignore international law, good may come of it; but if it is the excuse for selective targeting where oil and other commercial interests are involved it will be as evil as ever the way of Ahab was.)

I hope we have also learnt from this episode something of what it is to be a prophet. A prophet's word is not necessarily the last or best word, but it is a true word, as far as it goes, and one in which God speaks. A prophet speaks for God, but he is still himself, and God who speaks through him does not change him from being what he is. In a flawed and inadequate world God speaks even through those who are flawed and inadequate. He does not insist self-righteously on an absolutely moral and enlightened position to start

from, before he identifies with any of our feelings or convictions. The morality of prophets is not always what we would like it to be, but it does us no harm to be rebuked and challenged even by moral barbarians, if it brings home to us the contradictions in our own civilised morality.

It is good for us to hear God's word and to know his judgement. It is good for us to know that he communicates with us and that there are people through whom he speaks to us. But this does not mean we have a slick and immediate solution to all our doubts. There is no short cut to understanding God. Only a humble and lasting relationship with him will enable us to discern his voice and enter into dialogue with him. For if there are those who speak for God, there are those, too, who pretend to speak for him, and those who suffer delusions. Anyone who is not passionately keen to know God's will, but only wants some kind of reassurance and security, will be easily misled.

In ancient Israel "prophets" often came in companies, with leaders and spokesmen among them, and there was rivalry between them. If ever a genuine prophet spoke, it was not as a single, unchallenged voice: there were always others to say differently, to contradict or to give their own message. The prophets of Yahweh are not for the lazy or insecure, to give them an easy, automatic, uncontroversial reference for God's will. They speak for the ones who will listen, who are willing to search for God's will, who are genuinely anxious to know it - so that they will be able to find it. To the majority in his own time and place, even a true prophet sounds like one among many clamouring voices, all claiming, apparently with equal authority, to speak for God.

It was no wonder if kings like Ahab sought to bring their own order into the confusion. Control was more productive than persecution, and amid so many conflicting voices they found prophets enough to pronounce the views of Yahweh in perfect accord with their own ideas. Such prophets became an institution. They were accepted and their word counted at court. In return, they recognised their place and continued to announce Yahweh's approval for the king's plans. Ahab, whose wife had once persecuted the Yahweh prophets, now surrounded himself with the most amenable of them as his own spokesmen. This way, prophets who preached an unacceptable message could be isolated and denigrated. The King could answer the voice of Yahweh with his own tame "voice of Yahweh".

But some prophets continued to speak for Yahweh as one who would never bow to the will of a king, however prestigious and successful. They knew that Yahweh could never become a mere reflection of his people's wishes, and that he would go on struggling, against all the odds, for their conversion and loyalty to him. They spoke out even against the King's most popular and plausible ambitions, and in the struggle, Israel was torn between rival voices. They called for her commitment to rival ways: to become a nation such as nations were, achieving her own security by obedience to a king, and guided by his schemes; or to be Yahweh's people, with no way to go but the way of their God who had led them in the past.

That struggle had gone on now for a generation. Elijah's failure to rally the nation after Mount Carmel had left Ahab in control, and years of experience had taught him to manipulate his subjects, his enemies, his local leaders, even the gods and their prophets. Success after success had given him and Jezebel confidence that the future of Israel was theirs to direct, and with the arrogance bred of success, they would tolerate no opposition.

Hostility came to a head when the King laid plans for his next war against the Arameans<sup>1</sup>. It was an expedition to reconquer the border town of Ramoth-Gilead. He had enlisted the help of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, who came north with his army to be received at Samaria, where Ahab arranged an impressive display of national unity and commitment to the war. In deference to Jehoshaphat, whose more traditional kingdom would certainly expect Yahweh to be consulted, Ahab was able to trot out an array of prophets-by-appointment, all eager to declare Yahweh's blessing on the enterprise:

The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were both sitting on their thrones in full regalia, at the threshing-floor outside the gate of Samaria, with all the prophets raving in front of them. Zedekiah, their spokesman, had made himself iron horns. "Yahweh says this," he said: "With these you will gore the Arameans till you make an end of them." And all the prophets prophesied the same. "March to Ramoth-Gilead and conquer. Yahweh will deliver it into your power."

(IK 22:10-12)

But Jehoshaphat had his doubts. Though himself already committed to the war, he was not over-impressed with the tame prophets of Ahab's court. He would be reassured if the word of Yahweh came from an outsider - a known but unofficial prophet whose message might be more genuine. So he persuaded Ahab to send for such a one, Micaiah ben Imlah, whose prophecies had been notoriously hostile to Ahab and who was consequently out of favour. Micaiah came, the messenger who summoned him briefing him hurriedly on the way: "All the prophets are unanimous in giving a favourable answer to the King. Try to agree with them and predict success." But Micaiah answered, "As Yahweh lives, I will say what he says to me."

In fact, when the question was put to him, Micaiah dutifully responded as the court prophets had done, but his words were such an obvious mimicry of their catch-phrases that everyone could see he was mocking them. Ahab demanded a more serious answer - but the truth, when Micaiah spoke it, was not acceptable either:

"I have seen all Israel scattered on the mountains  
like sheep without a shepherd:  
and Yahweh said, "These have no master,  
let each go home unmolested.' "

(IK 22:17)

---

<sup>1</sup>See IK 22.

The troops would return, but they would return leaderless, their expedition a failure.

Micaiah's reply caused an uproar. Ahab fell back on his excuse that Micaiah always spoke against him, and persuaded the King of Judah to ignore the message of doom. But Micaiah was not finished with Ahab and Ahab's prophets. He had a parable for them. War had already been declared, he said, between Yahweh and Ahab, and Yahweh's agents were already throwing the servants of Ahab into confusion:

Listen to the word of Yahweh! I have seen Yahweh seated on his throne; all the array of heaven stood in his presence, on his right and on his left. Yahweh said, "Who will trick Ahab into marching to his death at Ramoth-Gilead?" At which some answered one way, and some another. Then the spirit [the spirit of prophecy] came forward and stood before Yahweh. "I," he said. "I will trick him." "How?" Yahweh asked. He replied "I will go and become a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets." "You shall trick him," Yahweh said, "you shall succeed. Go and do it." (IK 22:19-22)

The King's prophet Zedekiah could not stand by and see his own authority as spokesman so rudely challenged. He struck his rival on the jaw and demanded to know since when had he acquired the spirit of prophecy. Micaiah's answer was to predict the doom of Zedekiah, too. The King's great showpiece of national unity for the war was turning into a public brawl between rival prophets, and Ahab could not let it go any further. He had Micaiah thrown into prison, to be kept on bread and water till he returned safely from his campaign. But Micaiah had no hope of the King's return:

"If you come back safe and sound, Yahweh has not spoken through me."  
(IK 22:28)

Micaiah's parable was not, of course, a literal description of Yahweh's court. We need not get hung up on the problems of such an interpretation. Here Yahweh becomes a character in a story, a great king like any king with plans of his own and servants to carry them out. What Micaiah is trying to bring home is the imminent and great danger in which Ahab and his nation stand, because of their illusions. The struggle begun with Elijah is approaching its end, and the enemies of Yahweh are already facing destruction. They are pitifully helpless, since the very show of strength and assurance that makes them so confident is itself only a snare to destroy them.

Ahab is a victim of his own success, as are all those who surround themselves with ego-flattering yes-men. He is so hopelessly trapped by the very things that witness to his undisputed power and authority, so deceived by his own success, that it is as if God himself were playing with him, deluding him with a lying spirit in the mouths of his prophets. But of course it is Ahab who has really put the lying spirit into the mouths of his prophets. The whole royal policy, so eminently successful, of harnessing the prophetic movement in its service, is already bankrupt. From Jezebel's prophets of Baal

to Ahab's tame Yahweh prophets, the most independent forces in religion have been yoked to the ambitions of Israel's rulers, and that itself is now their downfall. Having taught the very spokesmen of the gods to tell them what they want to hear, they now hear only their own lies coming back to them to lead them on to destruction.

To the genuine prophet, the attack on Ramoth-Gilead was very different from Ahab's previous attack on the Arameans. That time the Arameans had invaded Israel and the Israelites were fighting for their own land. Prophets of Yahweh had no doubt that in such circumstances Yahweh fought for his people. But Yahweh is no imperialist. When war was taken into the enemy's territory, to annex or even reclaim disputed towns, his support was by no means certain. To those who find it difficult to imagine God taking sides in a war (and to those who find it all too easy) it is very important to do justice to the record. Apart from David's campaigns, and some incidents in the Book of Chronicles, the Bible rarely if ever claims Yahweh's support for an Israelite attack into foreign territory. In the conquest of Canaan, God's support was given to a landless and homeless people in their desperate need of land; now, he helps them to defend that land; but he does not assist them to extend their borders against Damascus. God loves his people and understands their need for a place and a home of their own, but he will not have them make war to increase their territory.

If the war policies of today's big powers are at odds with the way of God, so too are those of many smaller nations. Even those who have justly struggled for their own land and freedom are liable to overreach themselves. Often a liberating movement, having gained its point, finds itself too full of steam, of fear, anger, valiance and blood-lust, to stop and learn the ways of peace. Its energies are turned against its neighbours, and the dedicated warriors are taught to find new enemies beyond their own borders. In our day we have seen the Vietnamese, Cubans, Libyans, Ethiopians, Iranians and Jews claiming their own country or overthrowing oppression and foreign domination. But we have also seen them go on from liberation to aggression as the Israelites were doing in the time of Micaiah. It is a very natural development, against which the prophets have given God's judgement.

God, being political, takes sides, but he is not partisan. He does not take sides uncritically. He recognises the basic needs of land, freedom, identity, and he supports those who are fighting for them. But to have God on your side does not make you infallible - rather, it exposes your sins: your excesses and shortcomings. It is dangerous to be God's people, and any true theology of revolution will recognise this. God's political involvement is no guarantee of unreserved support either for the "legitimate" establishment, or for the revolution. The genuine prophets could assure Israel of God's support only because they could also pronounce God's judgement against her. Believers who support a revolutionary cause, believing it to be God's cause, will be the first to criticise it in God's name, when, as will often happen, it gets carried away and no longer obeys him. If you have the authority to declare God's support, you also have the authority to declare his opposition.

## Too Close to God

We are constantly under pressure to take sides in a simplistic way: with America and the democratic way of the West, or with the vicious and subversive terrorists (never mind that harsh dictators are welcomed on both sides); with the right or with the left; with established law and order, or with revolutionary alternatives; with the labour movement and the trade unions against the "bosses", or with the economic and financial authorities against the "demagogues"; with the well-established interests of the big powers, or with the new demands of the world's developing nations. But the example of Yahweh's true prophets warns us against any glib and superficial categorising. No side is unequivocally in the right, and even when we have taken sides, as we must from time to time, we have to remember that every side is subject to the judgement of God. No categories are final. Only the word of God himself is final, as he judges and supersedes all our categories.

He is a God who takes sides, and his commitment is deeper than our most fanatical enthusiasm. He has views, and they are stronger than our most obstinate opinions. But he is true to reality and not to our pretensions. He cannot be tied down simplistically to any of our positions. Just when we think he is with us, we find him judging and rebuking us. Just when we find a voice so barbaric that it offends all our standards, we find that he is speaking through it, of things more fundamental than our most fundamental standards.

He does take sides - but not the sides we define. He himself defines his side; he himself declares who his people are, creating them as he goes. He is always consistent, always true to himself, never changing in his commitment; but in that very consistency, that very integrity of his, he goes beyond all our predictions. Therefore to recognise the political side of our relationship with him is not to discover some slick, ready-made answer for all political problems, but rather to find that there are answers, and that we must look for them in challenging dialogue with him. He is so far beyond any tentative stand of ours, that we are again and again surprised by the stand he takes, and judged by it, and found wanting.

God identified with Israel as his people, with her leaders as his servants, and when their land was really threatened, he supported their resistance to the invader. But this only brought Israel and Israel's leaders into closer contact with a more challenging, honest and consistent standard. The very God who identified with them was there to oppose them in their arrogance and to break the stubborn rulers who thought they had got him on their side. As Micaiah had prophesied, the attack on Ramoth-Gilead was a failure, and Ahab lost his life. A random arrow caught him at a weak point in his armour, and the wound bled dangerously. He tried to leave the battlefield, but fighting was so thick around him that he could not do so. His charioteer supported him, kept him standing as his blood flowed down into the chariot, and facing forwards while his men strove to drive back the Arameans. But by evening he had died, and his death was the end of the battle:

At sundown, a shout ran through the camp: "Every man back to his town, every man back to his country; the King is dead!" They returned to Samaria, and there they buried the King.  
(IK 22:36-37)