

5 Naboth's Vinyard

We cannot separate the reality of God from the political and social experience of God's community, for it is there, in the full life of God's people, that God reveals Godself, involved with them, winning their trust, calling for commitment and integrity on their part, to match God's own integrity and commitment to them. Between God and the people who know God there exists a personal, communal relationship that is fundamentally important, for even God, it would seem, cannot reveal God in any other way: the revelation of God, God's communication of himself or about himself takes place only in the setting of a believing community.

Establishing that relationship, God to God's people, took precedence over all other considerations. It predated any schooling in morality or advance in civilisation. Before any of that, it had to be established that God valued them: chose them and loved them; and that, in return, they chose and loved Yahweh as their God. From love, which inspires trust, and trust, which is able to commit, love ensues: the enduring commitment of a whole community, a people, to their God. And, as we see from the earliest history of Israel, it is only in this dynamic that God is revealed.

If God approached Israel as God really is in Godself, there must be something in the very nature of God that this personal and relational dynamic reflects; but that consideration lies beyond the scope of this book. For the present, I can only say that the one reality we can ever attribute to God, the only reality Israel could attribute to Yahweh, is that reality that God discloses in God's approach to us, a reality that envelops the community as such and calls for its wholehearted commitment. That was the crunch between Elijah and Jezebel: whether God is to show us, in his relationship with us, who and what he is; or whether we are to construct the reality of God from the other realities we experience.

God reveals Godself, and therefore the reality of God is known, in God's relationship with God's people. For Israel to receive the disclosure of God was not to acquire some knowledge but to find themselves, together and as a community, formed in a new relationship. The experience in and by which they knew God was their identifying experience, an experience that committed them to one another as surely as it committed them to God.

The most basic of all experiences is the experience of being together. It is this that identifies each one of us, that I am with others, and that I am with others. And for those who know God, that experience is affirmed and many times enhanced. It is also where ethical or moral behaviour begins: in the relationship that identifies us, that makes us people and a people. And that is why, for Israel, and for us who know Israel's God, ethical or moral understanding begins from God. Some people think it's the other way around, that God begins with the moral or ethical, that the first word of God is a moral instruction, a commandment. But it is not so, and the first word of God is a word of

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recognition and commitment. In the beginning there is a relationship, in which the reality of God is declared to us. And for those to whom it is so declared, that same relationship is the matrix of their ethical behaviour.

It is often thought that contact with God begins with good behaviour. But that is not so neither. At least, it is not how God is revealed in the history of Israel and in the Bible, which records it. God is first and foremost personal, and contact with God is before all else a real and personal relationship, one that creates the very identity of a people related to him. Only then, within a relationship in which it makes sense to do so, does God tackle any moral issues. We can only understand the moral revelation as belonging to a revelation already given and received: of God's commitment to God's people. Moral issues are not the first. They belong within the issues of relationship that have been established before them.

There is another reason why moral questions are not the first. Before there can be moral behaviour, and moral dialogue, even with God, there has to be a recognition of the other as valued, a realisation of value beyond ourselves that calls for commitment and consistent behaviour in us. Without such integrity, the ability to decide and to act consistently with those decisions, it is not possible to relate as persons and it is not possible to be moral. The relationship in which others are valued is first, and morality comes from it.

It is often thought that the first moral issue is to define what "good" is. I don't think so. The first moral issue is whether and how we will abide by what is good when we have recognised it. Are we, and how are we, to apply the standards we might recognise to ourselves and to our own side? No understanding of what is good will be any use unless we have established, and found a way to make it stick, that whatever is moral is binding on ourselves, even when it runs counter to our inclinations or interests.

Integrity, which is the essence of a relationship to God, the essence of Israel's relationship with Yahweh, is also the essence of community, and without it there is no morality. We can only be together, and we can only agree standards for our behaviour together, if we can be consistent, if we can commit ourselves to standards which will in practice overrule us. Most ethical problems arise not from an inability to agree what is good, but from an inability to adhere to that good when it runs counter to our own perceived interests. We fail and we disagree not because we don't know what is right, but because we want to back out of that right when it gets in the way of our own interests.

In much of the bible – certainly in those parts of it we have been following in this book, parts which are among its oldest records – God's concern is to establish Israel and to establish his relationship with Israel, rather than to set down those laws and standards of moral behaviour which might, perhaps, be expected. We often miss the level of moral teaching which would meet with our approval. But God has been establishing a relationship, and within that relationship establishing a commitment which will bind them to its values. Only if they learn to be consistently bound to that relationship will they

begin to learn to be consistently bound by the values discovered in God's moral discourse. It's no use teaching morality to people who are able to live with inconsistency. Whatever enlightened principles they might learn, they will still be able to separate those principles from what they actually do.

In much of the Bible's history, primarily the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings we are shown God involved in the untidy and violent political squabbles of his people, their quarrels with their neighbours and with one another. Prophets are bloodthirsty and kings are violent, yet he acknowledges both as his servants and works with them, and through them, with his people. Does it mean he doesn't care about decent, orderly, moral behaviour? And if he does, when are we going to see some beginning of his concern? When does his concern for a good relationship with his people become a concern for standards of morality? Many of us feel that we cannot accept the "Old Testament" God who seems so slow to improve his people and so quick to join in their squabbles.

But if we look again, we shall find that he is passionately concerned for morality, and that when he does confront his people's behaviour, he begins with a standard that challenges even our civilised morality as flimsy and inadequate.

You cannot have morality among people unless they belong to a community, (and God puts the emphasis, where we do not, on "belong"). We tend to think of morality as first of all a private and individual thing, which gradually works outwards through our individual relationships and dealings, towards the more complex relationships of the community as a whole, becoming more problematical as it does so. As a result, we can be very strong on "private" morality - individual good behaviour - yet very weak on public morality - the moral behaviour of the community. Politics and economics, the behaviour of whole organised communities, are felt to be beyond the scope of normal morality altogether, governed either by their own immutable laws, or by some demands of practical realism. But for Yahweh's people, morality begins with the basic political and economic relationships that exist in the community, those that make it a community and by which it survives.

Is not far behind; in fact, it is not behind at all, but is found to be embedded in what we have already discovered. Yahweh's people accept him as their God and are held to that choice. The relationship is binding. It is a relationship of love and trust, however poorly understood, and their own identity, their reality, depends on their ability to commit to that relationship. If then their fundamental moral issues arise within that relationship, they will be able to see them in an already established context of commitment and integrity.

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In chapter 21 of the Book of Kings, we find one of the most relevant and crucial stories of the Old Testament. It is based on an historical incident which inspired a revolt, but we cannot be sure just when it happened or who was involved. It concerns Jezebel and her view of authority, a corrupt king, who was either Ahab her husband or one of her sons,

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and a prophet who may or may not have been Elijah. None of these details really matter. The story in itself is enough to show us where God takes his moral stand, and I shall tell it as it stands in the Book of Kings, with Ahab for the king and Elijah for the prophet. We shall find that the view it gives us of God's relationship with his people and of what he expects in his community stands as a stark judgement on our own moral confusion and our weak acceptance of deeply immoral conduct. This is how the story goes:-

Near the royal city of Jezreel, a man called Naboth owned a vineyard next to Ahab's estate. It was good land, and the king, who was bound to entertain guests on behalf of the nation, thought it would make a useful vegetable garden. So he went to Naboth with what he thought was a reasonable offer:

"Give me your vineyard to be my vegetable garden, since it adjoins my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it, or, if you prefer, I will give you its worth in money."

Ahab's offer was a fair one. Commercially, it was even on the generous side. But Naboth was one of those who clung to ancient ideas about the land: that a man's land belonged to his family, to his descendants after him as much as his forefathers from whom he had inherited it; that it was their roots, the guarantee and sign of their identity; that money couldn't buy it out of his clan, because money is no compensation for the loss of a family's recognised place in the community. This attitude went back to the earliest days of Israel's settlement in Canaan, where it ensured family continuity, rights and independence, but it fell foul of progress in a modern kingdom with an increasingly money-dominated economy. Naboth's answer to Ahab was uncompromising:

"Yahweh forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

Disappointed though he was, Ahab felt he could go no further. He had to respect Naboth's stubborn insistence on traditional rights. He sulked at home, brooding over his thwarted plans in a way that amazed and aroused the contempt of Jezebel. The kings of her people knew no such restrictions and would sweep aside this kind of petty obstruction without any qualms. She was more aware than Ahab of what a king's power had become in their modern society and was not prepared to be hamstrung by ancient taboos or blocked by a little man's intransigence.

"You make a fine king of Israel, and no mistake! Get up and eat; brighten up a bit and you'll feel better; I will get you the vineyard myself."

To Jezebel's way of thinking, Naboth had no right to oppose the royal plans. He deserved to die for his obstinacy. So she had him framed on a charge of blasphemy and treason, and making her wishes quite clear to the elders of his town, secured a conviction for which he was taken out and stoned to death. His property was forfeit to the crown, and Ahab got his kitchen garden. Through Jezebel, the King had won, and one innocent man had died a cruel death, with no one, apparently, willing to risk the Queen's displeasure by defending him.

It was left to the prophet to oppose Jezebel, and when the king came to take possession of his new property, he was suddenly confronted with the prophet's judgement.

"I have found you out for your double-dealing, and since you have done what is displeasing to Yahweh, I will now bring disaster down on you; I will sweep away your descendants and wipe out every male belonging to the family of Ahab, fettered or free in Israel."

The whole nation, its present security, and its future generations would pay for the crime committed in the name of royal power. If this was the way for Israel to prosper, then Israel would not prosper. If this was the way for a successful government to continue its policies, then that government would come crashing down in ruins. Once again, we are not dealing with a purely individual "sin", one woman's crime against a helpless victim, but with the "sin" of a whole nation: their estrangement from God and his ways, their very search for security and strong government which has taken them away from basic rights and justice.

The intransigence of "ordinary" people - their resistance to change - can be very annoying both for zealous revolutionaries and for progressive governments. And whatever else it was, the government of Ahab and Jezebel was a "progressive" one. The increasing emphasis on royal power and prerogatives was not then the backward step which it would have been in recent European history. It was a step forward for national order and stability (as David and Solomon had shown) enhancing the nation's unity, strength and prestige. To those who took this royal and centralising policy seriously, the lesser man who would not give way to the king's wishes was obstructing the very progress of the nation. To assert the feelings, rights, interests of smaller groups, of mere clans and families, could be taken as treachery against the wider interests represented by the King. Those who clung to their own narrow sense of identity were an embarrassment to the new identity of the nation.

The queen who trampled on the rights of Naboth and contrived his murder was not just a monster of petty selfishness, but a clever and progressive politician, a ruler of character and strength on whom the best interests of the nation, to all appearances, depended. Hers was a mind and will that Israel could rely upon, and all who valued order, prosperity and strength on a national scale would have felt obliged to co-operate with her. She was a woman of conviction, and people trust leaders who have both conviction and power. Her conviction was that of the revolutionary leader, the dedicated dictator, the ambitious town planner, the eager zealot, the unopposed party: she knew so well what was good that no one and no law could be allowed to oppose her.

But God opposed her:

Then the word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite, "Up! Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel in Samaria. You will find him in Naboth's vineyard; he has

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gone down to take possession of it. You are to say this to him, 'Yahweh says this: You have committed murder, now you usurp as well. Therefore, in the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick your blood too.'"
(IK 21:17-19)

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To Naboth, a particular plot of land was his family's and his descendants' inalienable right. Because he could not be persuaded to give it up, it was taken from him by a combination of force and deceit. His story is unfortunately repeated in our own days, where not only ruthless dictators, but ostensibly law-abiding and democratic governments have taken Jezebel's line.

In the Australian state of Queensland¹, about 600 aboriginals are settled in a township called Weipa South. It is 1978. Since 1963 they have been threatened and harassed by the Queensland government, who burnt their former settlements and sent armed police to evict them and relocate them here. Their new houses are rough and hasty constructions, poorly equipped and badly placed. The whole settlement is confined to barely half a square mile of bushland surrounded by a man-made desert of scarred ground. Their world is now an abandoned wasteland of barren red dust, bare, tumbled rocks and senseless ditches, where scrub and topsoil and some twenty feet of bauxite clay have been stripped from the face of the earth.

This had been their home, a "reserve" of 2,000 square miles left to them as European civilisation had taken over the better, more accessible country. Here they had been allowed to live their lives, to hunt and gather, to dance and to plan for themselves and their children. It was all they had linking them to their past, a space where they could still be a people, where they belonged and were at one with the world. But now it was gone, and they were left, isolated, in a tiny patch among the ruins of the earth.

Their land had been rich in bauxite, a huge and easy supply of aluminium for the voracious consumers of Europe and America. The mining company, Comalco, wanted it, and behind them the vast international, Rio Tinto Zinc, wanted it. And the Queensland state government wanted to give it to them. A network of interests and personalities linking concerns as diverse and as wealthy as the Midland Bank, British Home Stores and De Beers mines had their stake in the operations of Rio Tinto Zinc. Powerful names like Baron Guy de Rothschild and Britain's Lord Carrington were involved with the international company. A compliant government had been only too happy to sell the mineral rights and hand over the land. An easygoing, untroubled public, the majority hundreds of miles away in Brisbane, were content to give their government a free hand. The aborigines were no one's concern. A dozen or so of them got work with the company, but for the rest there was no future. And no present but to sit and watch as

¹This and the following three paragraphs are based on information published in "RTZ The Shy Mining Giant" by Dexter Tiranti, in New Internationalist No. 77 (July 1979)

their past was bulldozed, scraped away by the ton and swallowed up for some distant, inscrutable European necessity.

Rio Tinto Zinc specialised in mining on aboriginal reserves, for aboriginal land rights were very much at the mercy of state governments, which are usually sympathetic to the schemes and dreams of mining companies. In Australia, as elsewhere, a government's excuse for high-handed action is the all-embracing "national interest", which would have been Jezebel's and Ahab's excuse and the excuse of Jezreel's town councillors.

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The story is repeated all over our world, particularly in poorer countries where greed and exploitation can be disguised as vital enterprise and even as development aid.¹ You can see it where "aid" from the richer nations combines with international and local business interests to set up "development" projects that suit the donors far more than the local population.

In the Philippine island of Mindanao, there was money to be made from vegetable oil. Coconut palms make a healthy and regular profit for their owners, who need only land for their large plantations and a few labourers to work them. Under a British government scheme in the 1970s and 80s money was made available as foreign "aid" for those who had the land to develop the industry. For once the industry was established, there were rich and hungry markets. Britain in particular was a huge importer of vegetable oil and its products.

The only obstacle was the local people: farmers, peasants and wandering food-growers who for generations had depended on the land. Like Naboth, they stood in the way of the nation's and the companies' progress. They had little to gain from the plantations, for only a few of them could be employed there, and those few were poorly paid. Compensation in money would do them little good, for after their land was gone, they still had a lifetime to continue feeding themselves, and children to provide for after them. Work for wages is uncertain anywhere in the Philippines, and viciously oppressive, and those who go abroad for work are forced to surrender much of their earnings to a rapacious government at home. In any case, what kind of exchange is it to leave the land where you have grown up and provided for yourself, where your children could live and farm after you, for a squalid slum in Manila or precarious work in a foreign country? Not surprisingly, those who lived on the land were reluctant to leave it, and were not willing to surrender it for the sake of company profits or "national development".

Therefore ways were found of removing them. The Philippine army and private paramilitary groups, between 1979 and 1983, slaughtered more than 700 people, for various reasons, but often to clear the way for plantation projects. Arrests, intimidation,

¹Information for this and the following four paragraphs is drawn particularly from "Kasama", newsletter of the U.K. Philippines Support Group in London, nos. 5, 8, 10, 11, published between Nov. 1983 and Feb. 1985.

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forced votes and finally the disappearance and murder of resisters, eventually persuaded the obstinate peasants to give up their land. Local leaders and outside observers who might have defended them were removed or gagged. There were many methods - from the accidental death of a parish priest, to a British ambassador's intervention curtailing the work of a volunteer. When it came to securing the land for "development", there was no shortage of influential allies for the investors.

And there was never a shortage of investors. When the company NDC-Guthrie wanted to extend their operations in Mindanao in 1982 and 1983, they had the support not only of the Philippines government but of the British as well. Our government was eager to channel more than £6 million through the Commonwealth Development Corporation, as a loan to finance new land acquisition and development. The British Parliament and Britain's Minister for Overseas Development were persuaded to give their support, and the Commonwealth Development Corporation began to think about an investment of its own: a joint venture with the Philippine government.

A British parliamentary delegation was content to recommend continuing with the loan, not because there was no injustice involved, but because, over a period, there were somewhat fewer reports of murder and harassment! They had been promised that the death squads operating as "security guards" would be removed from the plantation area, and felt that this was sufficient reason for continuing their support. But within a short time the gangs were at work again, under a new name. A hundred families who were in the way of development were offered company loans to move. They refused, and the company thugs removed them by threats, extortion and beatings. Their houses were demolished and they were left camping on a strip of land between the plantation and the highway. Finance from the British government paid for expansion (through a convenient subsidiary company) and terror tactics ensured that there was no Philippine Naboth left to resist it.

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The Naboth story is one that directly confronts the most serious social injustices of our own time. Not just oppression and exploitation, but the exclusion of the weak, robbing them of their place in the world, is the first and the final injustice. It is the first because it lays them open to every other kind of oppression, and the final because it takes from them their last hope of working towards recovery. When you take from the weak their meagre resources and the land from which they provide for themselves, however poorly, you take away their place and their future, even if you offer compensation. Nothing can compensate for the loss of a home and a place to belong in, unless it is a guaranteed and welcome new home, a place which, not in the eyes of the rich donors but in the conviction of the poor receivers, is a genuine land of their own and a new place to belong in.

Sometime in the early 1960s the United States Department of Defence discovered that they needed an island in the Indian Ocean.¹ They had no territory there, but the British government had a number of islands shortly due for independence. Therefore, in the mid-1960's, Britain negotiated independence for the island of Mauritius on the condition that some of the smaller associated islands be retained by Britain. These were then formed into the British Indian Ocean Territory.

In 1966, as part of a defence deal, the British Indian Ocean Territory was leased to the United States for fifty years. It was a quiet, behind-the-scenes arrangement. Parliament did not debate the issue, and it was left to the appropriate ministries and departments to conclude the deal. The Pentagon was particularly interested in a little vegetable patch of an island - Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago - nicely placed for a surveillance post from which to monitor the movements of the Soviet Navy in the Indian Ocean. (It was later to prove useful for bombing Iraq, and then Afghanistan.) They established a base there, gradually, through successive agreements with British governments: first a communications facility, then support facilities, then an extended runway - till the island was transformed into a significant military base, a vital link in the United States' world-wide chain of surveillance and control.

Unfortunately, the island of Diego Garcia was inhabited. A handful of "Ilois", 1800 of them, had lived there as British subjects for several generations. They supported themselves by coconut harvesting and fishing, by growing vegetables and keeping poultry, and there was a small coconut processing factory. Occasionally boats called from Mauritius or other islands with food for sale, and once in a while, when they had saved a bit of money, islanders were able to take the long boat trip to Mauritius for some special shopping. It was a simple, idyllic existence, not without its tensions and frustrations, but, for a small population, it was the way of life they and their parents and grandparents had known, and they had no wish to lose it.

But their government had other plans. A mere 1800 people (no more than the population of the Falkland Islands) could not be allowed, whatever their rights, to determine the military policies of Britain and the United States, with their huge international responsibilities. From 1965, islanders who went shopping in Mauritius found they could not return. When they came for a boat back home, they were told there was no room, or no boats going, and there was nothing they could do but wait. They could not communicate with their people at home. They were no concern of the Mauritius Islanders, let alone the people of Great Britain or the United States. They could only camp on the waterfront and wait, and, when it became clear they were not going to get passage back to Diego Garcia, drift off to squat in the slums of Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius.

¹ Much of the following information on Diego Garcia has been taken from "Diego Garcia: A contrast to the Falklands"; Minority Rights Group Report No. 54, by John Madeley.

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In 1967 the British Indian Ocean Territory bought out the island's factory and began to close down its operations. From 1968 food ships stopped calling, and by 1971 less than half the population were left on the island. In September that year, they were assembled before the local manager's house and told that they would all have to leave the island, as the Americans were taking it over for good. They were evacuated, first to a nearby island and two years later to Mauritius. As the ships were crowded, they could take only a few personal possessions, and with these they were literally dumped in Mauritius, abandoned to find their own way into a new kind of existence there. It was ethnic cleansing carried out with finesse.

I will not go into the subsequent history of the Ilois: their degradation and starvation in Mauritius; their long fight for compensation, and their total neglect by responsible authorities until, after years of indifference, pertinent questions began to be asked, not by the British Parliament, but by the United States Senate. Meanwhile perhaps the only totally successful act of ethnic cleansing in modern times had been carried thru as a joint operation of Britain and the United States – two powerful nations to evict one of the world's smallest populations.

Their case continues. As I revise this text in 2002, the "Chagos Islanders" are again in court, pressing their claim. In the meantime, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister who stood proudly for the cameras with the British troops in Kosovo, has declined to apologise for a British government's own exercise in ethnic cleansing. There may yet be hope of justice for the surviving islanders, but already some have been starved or driven to suicide. Naboth has again been dragged from his land and stoned to death, and Jezebel still rules in some of the world's most civilised nations.

The three cases I have outlined are only a selection from many: but they are enough to show us what is fundamentally wrong with a moral system which does not begin with the right of all to belong, to have their secure place in the community and in all of its plans for progress. What should shock us out of complacency is the involvement not of brutal dictatorships or ruthless totalitarian states, but of some of the world's most committed democracies: the United States, Great Britain and Australia.

We are not talking about the former government of South Africa or the or Burmese junta. We are talking about constitutional democracies proud of their freedoms, their adherence to law, their respect for human rights and morality. In each of these cases there has, after much harm and bitter argument, been a partial backing down by the governments concerned. Australian states have had to face the question of aboriginal land rights. The British government eventually withdrew its support for the more obnoxious projects in the Philippines. There has been some compensation paid to the former inhabitants of Diego Garcia. But all this has been done as a reluctant concession to public opinion. Only vigorous and prolonged agitation by dedicated supporters has caught the public's attention and stirred the conscience of governments. What should stand at the very beginning of morality, the solidarity of the community in which morality has its place, has

been left till last, ignored or grudgingly conceded, as if people have no right to be such an inconvenient check on national and international plans.

Governments cannot pretend to morality if they cannot get right the fundamental basis of all morality: that we are a people together and that no group, however small and weak and inconvenient, can be denied a place in the world we are trying to shape. We cannot claim to be concerned for morality if our way of progress is to throw workers on the scrap-heap and feed the young into dole queues, to deny immigrants a place in the community or to drive peasants and hunters from their land. Whatever the economic advantage, whatever the legal excuse, whatever the popular backing for our policy, we have broken loose from the very bedrock of all morality when we dispossess the weak.

It is hypocritical or ignorant of pious citizens to demand morality in our private and public life, if all they mean is legality, and good behaviour in sex. To rail against pornography, permissiveness, fraud, vandalism, laziness, dishonesty or violence, is all missing the point, if at the same time we are prepared, as part of some wider political or economic scheme, simply to disinherit some of the people. Morality can only begin, for us, when we bring an end to urban slums, to dole queues and the camps of stateless, homeless refugees. We cannot be moral while we tolerate, in many parts of the world, the system that dispossesses populations to provide us with the good things of life, from coffee and carnations to minerals, power and international security. The first moral challenge is the creation of a community in which all have a secure and acceptable base; after that we can sort out how we should behave towards one another within that community.

Of course, change is a part of life, and no community can remain static. Perhaps Naboth should have realised this. But those who see the need for change often fail to see the need that every person has of a place in the new order. Bemused by abstractions, by ideas of strength, economic recovery or expansion, national interest, equality, socialism, the triumph of the working class or of free enterprise, they forget people, families, communities. They ignore the need of all for a continuing sense of identity and belonging in the new order.

There are fair words and promises, claims of progress for the whole nation, but in fact each revolution and each new triumph of a progressive administration creates a pool of dispossessed, disoriented and embittered cast-offs: the sturdy beggars, evicted crofters, redundant agricultural labourers, the emigrants, the defeated Indian tribes, the landless aborigines, the refugees, the modern unemployed, discarded mining and industrial communities. With such a history behind us, people have reason for being suspicious. It's not enough for the powers that be to relocate and rehouse, to offer a fair price for confiscated land or a generous redundancy payment. They must show, convincingly, that everyone affected has a stake in the future, that no one is required to hazard their own identity and security for other people's progress. They must recognise that people and communities matter more than budgets, and that no improvement can be allowed to create a pool of rootless exiles. When a party program or a national scheme dispossesses and

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destroys lesser communities, it destroys personality and so destroys the basis of all community, whatever its achievements otherwise.

At the very beginning of morality stands love: loyalty and solidarity. Not a warm, sentimental feeling or a romantic fancy, but the practical, effective commitment that puts a value on each and all as members of a community. In Yahweh's community no one stands alone, but no one is submerged. The nation does not override and obliterate them. The mystery and the challenge of personal existence, the meaning of solidarity, is the unsentimental but real and deep love which God fosters in his people. The individual has no isolated meaning, apart from community, and the family cannot be separated off to live for itself alone; yet, in its turn, the community has no value except in the meaning and value it gives to each and every one, to each small clan and group. Yahweh fosters neither an association of individuals nor a totalitarian monolith, but a community of persons.

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God opposed, as he still opposes, the immoral community where some can be excluded, deprived of their place, because it serves the progress of others. This is a fundamental moral demand, and its breach is a matter not of individual sin but of common, shared guilt. The sin is the sin of society, in which a large number share, each in their own degree. It is the wickedness of a corrupt society shared by the many who simply accept its standards and demands and take its benefits for granted.

So the punishment of Ahab's sin will involve more than the king himself. It will pull down his whole family, and shake the nation that relies on them.

"I will now bring disaster down on you; I will sweep away your descendants and wipe out every male belonging to the family of Ahab, fettered or free in Israel."
(IK 21:21)

The crime against Naboth was more than one king's private sin. It was the community's sin, and the punishment declared by the prophet will affect the whole community. The king's family will be wiped out and the nation will face anarchy. The community's power-structure, founded on false values and working through arrogance and violence, will collapse.

For what was wrong with Israel was the whole nation's way of thinking and living. It made the king's individual crimes of oppression and exploitation possible. Many sections of Israelite society had a stake in the struggle of Omri's dynasty to create a modern nation out of recalcitrant tribes and clans, and they were only too willing to overlook a few casualties on the way. People needed the security which had come to depend so much on the king's prestige, and it is not surprising that there were so many accomplices to further the King's project: his queen, the town elders and magistrates, the venal witnesses, the execution mob.

The actual perpetrators of evil - those who are most directly and obviously guilty, stand at the front or cutting edge of society, doing its conscious and unconscious will. Behind them lies the whole weight of self-interest and apathy that gives them their power and their opportunities. Even tyrants and dictators represent the people's desire for security and a quiet life. Their worst crimes are committed not only in their own interests but in the selfish interests of the many who go along with them. Even Hitler and Stalin, whose victims are numbered in millions, could only, at any one time, attack a minority of their subjects and relied both upon the active co-operation and upon the passive indifference of other millions of ordinary, "decent" people from all walks of life.

If the community, in the interests of joint security or strong leadership, is willing to sacrifice the rights and security of a minority, then the community has sacrificed its own solidarity. Such a community, welcoming dictatorial power just because it is strong and able to bring prosperity, is guilty of the crimes its leaders commit. It is no good arresting or firing a few company officials or some heavy-handed police. It doesn't achieve much to vote out a state premier, sack a cabinet minister or a development officer. Even the removal of a prime minister or president, or a shake up in the military establishment doesn't cure the evil. Though many heads roll, as long as the same social forces operate, new heads of the same persuasion will soon replace the old. As long as endemic sin affects the life of the community, it will once again, after the protests have died down and the scandals are forgotten, support the same oppression and exploitation, deceit and violence as before, because its interests continue to be the same.

In Israel, as among us, the nation itself was at fault. The new Israel that the monarchy was creating was corrupted as the new breed of Israelite sought security in the pride of rulers who were accountable to no law. They were too easily impressed by authority just because it was powerful. Consequently, the right punishment would fall not just on one man, however guilty he was. Yahweh would reject the evil in Israel not just by the punishment of one bad king, but by the fall of Ahab's dynasty, the ruin of all those who sought to share its power and the collapse of the nation that expected to stand strong upon such a foundation. From the time of Naboth on, the nation itself is under sentence.

Ultimately, the story of Naboth's vineyard is not about individual guilt and individual punishment - if we try to see it that way, we finish up with a mess of loose ends. It does not deal with sin as a simple, individual offence, but takes the much more serious view of sin as an attitude shared, a stance taken by society and involving all in guilty acquiescence, except those few who bravely stand out against it.

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The story of Naboth's vineyard is an important one. It brings us into the question of morality, of Yahweh's own standards, where the previous stories have apparently left this aside. But not in the way we would expect. Given our culture and its accepted view of religion and morality, we would expect to pass from the question of God's existence, over

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some kind of step, to the question of God's will: his law or the moral standards he requires. The whole tendency of our thought is to create a gap between pure doctrine (questions of God's existence and nature) and morals (questions of practice and behaviour), a gap we then find difficult to bridge.

It is a commonplace of modern ethical theories that you cannot get from any statement of fact to a statement of value. (No description of what a thing is can, of itself, tell you whether that is good or not.) The various ethical theories of our century all have to come to terms with that basic problem. In fact most of them take their shape from the way they do so. From Catholic "natural law" theories to existential ethics to marxist pragmatism, they all have their distinct ways of moving from observations of fact (what is the case) to observations of value (what ought to be or should be done). Positivists find themselves arguing for the sheer dichotomy of factual and value judgements. Existentialists put great stress on freedom and "authenticity". Christian moralists find the written law a good guide for individual behaviour but are left uncertain about social evil.

In the story of Elijah, however, the major difficulties of modern ethics are pre-empted. For statements in the Bible, whether of fact or of value, do not stand as isolated, objective symbols, but as utterances. Every statement is somebody's statement, uttered by someone in order to communicate. The important thing is not only what is said, but that it is said. And that it is said at all reveals a person, who intends to relate to another, who considers it worth while communicating with them. Every statement, whether of fact or of value, is a declaration of value. To put it in plain terms, if you say anything at all you are showing that you think it worth saying, and that the person you address is worth speaking to.

Within a conceptual system of logic (as all Western logic has been at least since the early Middle Ages) statements stand detached from the speaker and are analysed purely as a chain of symbols conveying ideas. And it is true that within such a system, there is no logical way of passing from fact to value. But in most of the Bible, statements remain attached; they remain somebody's statement. They do not merely represent ideas, but reveal a person. They express not only what they refer to, but the speaker's values, that what they refer to matters, and that the person addressed matters too. If you accept them, you join in the dialogue and accept the personal values they express.

To us, there is a logical jump from statements about the existence of God to issues of social policy and moral rights. For Elijah, there was no jump. The existence of God, and his identity as Yahweh the God of Israel, are matters of dialogue, in which God addresses his people, answers them and relates to them, declaring their value in doing so. It is we who create the distinction between existence and value and so divide God into the one who creates and the one who commands. It is not the way that God revealed himself. I believe that, properly understood, the Bible as a whole develops our understanding of God in the way that the story of Elijah proceeds. Here, we pass from total concern with Yahweh's personal reality (his unique existence) to total concern with an issue of social morality; and far from constituting a logical jump, the change is a matter of simple, consistent development. The one issue is implicit in the other and rises naturally out of it.

For Yahweh's approach, personally communicating with his people, is at one and the same time his revelation that he is real and his revelation that they matter to him.

If, as I have stressed, the existence of God is personal, then already, from the time we begin to recognise it, we enter into a personal relationship with him, and recognise the value he gives us by his desire and will to communicate with us. The will of God is not expressed, in the first place, as a list of rules or commandments, but in the very act by which he reveals himself, making his existence known to us. That is why God identified himself not as a distant Creator handing down rules for our behaviour, but as Yahweh, the god of Israel, as God-committed-to-his-people. He revealed himself not as a metaphysical authority, but as Yahweh winning back the hearts of his people. If we recognise him at all, we recognise the value he puts on them, accepting his word which affirms that they belong with him and he with them.

Our (religious) way of thinking follows an extended route from the idea of God (or a complex of ideas about who and what he is) through statements of his law which are seen as "commandments" for individual behaviour, to their application in the wider social and economic field. We go from theology to individual ethics to social ethics to political applications, and we feel that the long chain of reasoning is uncertain and far from basic. It is a long way from the existence of God to what you do about aborigines whose home is on valuable mining land.

But for Elijah there is no distance at all between knowing that "You, Yahweh are God and are winning back this people's heart", and condemning Ahab's exercise of royal authority as "displeasing to Yahweh". Discovering God the way the Bible does (and I believe there is no other way to discover the real God) means responding to his personal approach and reaffirming the value his approach puts on his people. Understood Elijah's way, there is no distance between the recognition of God's existence and the value enjoyed by his people. To recognise God who reveals himself in dialogue with his people, is to be drawn into that dialogue and to recognise the value of his people. If he speaks to them - speaks with them - they matter. Social morality is clear from the beginning. Even before he knows that it is wrong to slaughter Yahweh's enemies, Elijah knows that you cannot simply remove Yahweh's people when they are an obstacle to progress.

Of all moral, social, theological and psychological issues, this is the most directly related to the question of God's existence: the value of his people, to whom he reveals it. There is no distance between recognising the existence of God and recognising the aborigines' inalienable right to land. To deny the latter is to deny the existence of the Bible's God. To ignore the need of Indians in Brazil, islanders in the Pacific, farmers in the Philippines, Blacks in South Africa, Palestinians of the West Bank, peasants in Colombia, of the weak everywhere, to a place and a home where they feel secure, is to deny their fundamental personal value, and that is to deny the reality of God.

For those to whom God has spoken, the existence of God and fundamental human value are inseparable. There is one line linking the stories of Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb

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with that of Naboth's vineyard: it is the one account of a personal God who is both real enough and cares enough to enter into dialogue with his people. They encounter him, God speaking and answering them, both because he is real and personal and because he values them. He is God who cares about Naboth's right to his land and his place in the community. When God speaks of morality and behaviour, it is not of abstract principles, nor of cool, dispassionate judgements, but of personal value passionately held and inseparable from the revelation of him. A radically moral society springs inevitably from that personal relationship in which alone we respond to him and know him. If it does not, we do not know him.