

7 End of the Dynasty

Between the kings and the great prophets of Israel, there was constant friction. They seemed to be working with different standards, different goals, different concepts of Israel and different understandings of Israel's God. The ruling family seemed to be secure in its power and no doubt many took that for proof that they were right. But although it was not at once apparent, the death of Ahab and the collapse of his campaign began a decade of disasters for Israel. The Moabites, subject to Israel since the time of David, seized the opportunity to assert their independence.¹ Then Ahab's son and heir, who had reigned only two years, died after a fall from his balcony.² His brother, Jehoram, became king and enlisted Judah's support in an attack on Moab, but it failed to reconquer the Moabites.³ Then the Arameans attacked again, and once again Samaria was besieged, surviving only by a miracle.⁴ The great hope of Omri's dynasty, of a kingdom made secure by astute alliances, was shaken. Israel, for all her concessions and her allies, was still vulnerable.

On the other hand, the dynasty had survived longer than any yet. Two of Omri's grandsons had come to the throne, and Jehoram now seemed secure in it. Jezebel, though less prominent in the record, still had great influence. The position of Queen Mother was, if properly handled, even more powerful than that of King's Wife. Jehoram's cousin Ahaziah was king of Judah, and committed to the alliance with Israel. His mother, Athaliah, was Ahab's sister - the family link that completed Israel's chain of alliance. The two Queen Mothers were still promoting Baal's religion as their common Canaanite culture, and their sons were still ambitious to restore and expand their kingdoms, especially against the Arameans. The alliance was bristling with hopeful plans, and the memory of past failures did not prepare them for the shock that was to come.

The never-ending war against the Arameans was on again, and once again the target was Ramoth-Gilead, the disputed border town that had been the death of Ahab. Ahaziah came north and once again two Israelite kings marched against the town. This time they captured it, but Jehoram was slightly wounded in the battle and returned to Jezreel to recover. One of his generals, Jehu, remained in charge to fend off any Aramean counter-attack, and Ahaziah followed his cousin to Jezreel, perhaps to lay plans for their next move. The kings little realised that they had left the way open for a revolt.

We do not know exactly how the opposition to Omri's dynasty had grown over the years. But we have seen how dynastic succession was never very sure in Israel, and how the policies of the present family had antagonised the pure Yahwists. Yahweh's most dedicated prophets were bitterly opposed to the alliance with Tyre and its religious implications. Probably, too, there was unrest and resentment over the centralisation of power in Samaria and Jezreel, which was again sapping the independence of tribal areas.

¹ IIK 1:13, ² IIK 1, ³ IIK 3, ⁴ IIK 6,7

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Finally incidents such as that of Naboth's vineyard left a burning sense of injustice, at least among those who had suffered.

But whatever the causes, the end had come for Omri's promising dynasty. Even while Jezebel walked in her palace in Jezreel, and Jehoram conferred with his cousin king, preparing for a new onslaught against Damascus, the prophet Elisha sent one of his disciples to Ramoth-Gilead, where he found Jehu and the army's senior officers in conference.

"I have a message for you, commander," the prophet said. "For which of us?" asked Jehu. "For you, commander," he answered. Then Jehu got up and went into the house. And the young man poured oil on his head saying, "Yahweh the God of Israel says this, 'I have anointed you king over the people of Yahweh, king of Israel.'" Then he opened the door and made his escape. (IIK 9:5-6, 10)

When Jehu returned to his fellow officers they asked him what the man had said. He pretended to dismiss it all as a prophet's ravings, but they pressed him for the truth, and when they saw that Jehu had the support of the prophets, they added their own. As experienced soldiers, they were happier to serve a general they respected than a young man who was king merely because he was his father's son. They spread their cloaks for Jehu to walk upon, and a proclamation of rebellion went out to all the army: "Jehu is king!"

So it often is in a revolution: various kinds of discontent look for a leader, but, because it is a revolution, there is no clear and legal mandate for the new leadership. People may be "united" in their opposition to an old regime, but not entirely united in their reasons for opposing it, and not at all united on what should follow it. The French revolution of 1792 and the Russian revolution of 1917 were succeeded by chaos, confusion and fear as people discovered how much easier it was to unseat a failing regime than to establish a new one. The French revolution floundered through the Terror until some kind of order emerged and the nation was ripe for Napoleon. The Russian revolution passed through civil war and Bolshevik victory to settle finally under the dictatorship of Stalin.

Rarely does a revolution succeed if its only inspiration is a new law or a new ideal or a new principle. It has to find a new leader, and inevitably it is re-shaped by the character of that leader. Revolutionary France survived eventually not as the embodiment of liberty, equality and fraternity, but as Napoleon's empire. Socialist Russia took shape not by realising the dictatorship of the proletariat, but by becoming Stalin's Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

It is more fortunate and less messy if a revolution's leader is clearly established before it breaks out. Then a new regime is more or less ready to take over as the old is overthrown. At least there is someone to hold the people together, to re-focus their

attention while everything that once made for their cohesion is overturned and replaced. This was the happier role of Mao-Tse-Tung in China, Fidel Castro in Cuba and De Gaulle in France.

To establish a revolutionary leader, whether before or after the event, is a very significant achievement, and one in which prophets may play a part. Precisely because, in a revolution, law and tradition fail, the word of God for this moment is then decisive. Elisha recognised that the time had come when Omri's dynasty could rule Israel no more, and all that was needed was an authoritative sign, indicating who was to take its place. As soon as his disciple anointed Jehu, the other generals had a basis for submission to him, and a reason for acknowledging him as the new king.

In times of uncertainty, acknowledging a new leader is always a risk. Should you prove wrong and his cause fail, you will fall with him. Often people hedge about timidly, wanting a change, wanting a new leadership, yet scared to declare themselves until they know they won't be the only ones - out on a cold limb. The prophet's intervention was indeed a valuable one, and he knew how dangerous, for he fled as soon as he had anointed Jehu. But once he had done the deed, the way was open for others to acknowledge it. That is a service which prophets can render: to take the risk when others are afraid to jump. In uncertain times, they can commit themselves, and so give a sign to encourage others.

So prophets, ambitious generals and a disaffected people took to Jehu as their new leader. Opposition found a focus in him, and it became Jehu's revolt. By the same token, all the various strands of discontent lost something of their own particular character. They became subordinate to the character and aims of Jehu, and from now on he would decide how and how far he satisfied their aspirations. Even Yahweh, who had prompted the prophet to anoint him, had appointed him as a free agent. He had not made him a puppet. Yahweh now prompted him to go ahead - but that did not mean that everything he did would be Yahweh's will.

The rebels set a guard on Ramoth-Gilead to prevent any news getting out to the city, and Jehu raced off with his own troops to kill the king. When a lookout saw him approaching Jezreel, a messenger was sent to meet him and find out what was happening. The messenger was told, in so many words, to mind his own business. Seeing what was up, he prudently fell in with Jehu's men. When a second messenger failed to return and the lookouts reported Jehu driving on like a madman towards Jezreel, Jehoram leapt into action. His chariot was harnessed, and he and Ahazaiah rode out themselves, hoping that the mad rush meant good news. They met in the field of Naboth.

When Jehoram saw Jehu, he said, "Is all well, Jehu?" But he replied, "Can you call it all well while your mother Jezebel keeps up her obscene idol-worship and monstrous sorceries." Jehoram wheeled about and fled, crying out to Ahazaiah, "Treachery, Ahazaiah!" Jehu seized his bow and shot Jehoram between the

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shoulders; the arrow pierced his heart and he sank down in his chariot. Then Jehu ordered his lieutenant to pick him up and throw him into the field of Naboth.

(II K 9:22-25)

The king of Judah fled down the road to Beth-haggan, but Jehu and his men were soon in pursuit. They wounded him before they called off the chase, and he could only struggle on to Megiddo, where he died. Two kings had been butchered in one day, and there remained the Queen Mother, Jezebel, to be dealt with.

To belittle Jezebel, or to picture her at this point as the "painted woman" of popular myth, is to take away the real meaning of the struggle for Israel and to miss the significance of the Queen's defeat. Jezebel was no vain or wanton dissolute, nor was she a woman to cringe, even in defeat and facing death. Of course news came quickly to her palace in Jezreel, and a few enquiries must have shown her that, suddenly, all was lost. The army was in Ramoth-Gilead. Jehu had already murdered her son and was pursuing Ahaziah. Officers and people were rallying to him, and when he returned to Jezreel, he would not allow her to live.

She had lived - the better part of her life dedicated ruthlessly to the power of Israel and its ruling family. Married at her father's wish into a barbarous kingdom, she had striven to raise its civilisation and its vision, to further its best interests in alliance with her own people. For a generation, Israel had benefited from her wisdom and unflinching dedication. She would have given them a dynasty to unite the country and restore even the ancient greatness of Solomon's kingdom. She would have made of Ahab's family a succession of rulers fit to crush Damascus for ever and to rule Israel for generations in the strength of Canaanite tradition. She would have remoulded them in the natural religion of the land and its people, for she had seen as no one else had - not even Ahab - the right course and the greatest future for Israel. But Israel had obstinately struggled against her.

In the past, she had blamed her husband, a weak man held by the spell of his ancestors' religion - but her time for recriminations was over now. She had lost, and she would die. But she would show the dogs how a real queen, the daughter of a truly royal house, faces death. She made up her eyes and her face, dressed her hair and prepared to confront her triumphant enemy with dignity. The wild men from the desert had won. Unskilled, uncivilised and ignorant, they had fallen dupes to the mad hopes of their prophets. Barbarism had triumphed and would now be free to destroy itself - she would see no more of Israel, and very soon the world would see no more of it either. The vulgar nation whose every king came to power bathed in blood, would go down drowning in blood. History would vindicate her. Israel under Jehu and the mad prophets of a barren god would collapse before its enemies, and, too late, they would know what kind of a king they had taken in place of Omri's dynasty.

But she herself would die. The future of her family meant nothing any more. The kingdom of her father was far away, and no army would come from Tyre to rescue her in Jezreel. She would be dead, and Israel's hopes with her, before news of the rebellion

reached Sidon. As Jehu reached Jezreel and galloped into the courtyard of her palace - there were no loyal guards to oppose him, and nothing could keep him waiting outside the city walls - she was alone at the window to greet him and to hurl her last defiance in his face. "Zimri" she called him (recalling the king who had murdered his master and burnt the palace down over his own head). Zimri was a fitting predecessor for the barbarian who now reached out his hands for power over Israel. "Is all well, Zimri, you murderer of your master?"

Jehu called out, "Who is on my side?" and when two of her servants appeared, he shouted: "Throw her down." They threw her violently from the upper window and the fall killed her, spattering the walls and the horses with her blood. Jehu, to finish the grisly work, drove his chariot over her, and then, pleased with his achievement, went into the palace where he was now master, to eat and drink and refresh himself.

Perhaps the wine softened his arrogance, or perhaps with relaxation his conscience caught up with him. He began to feel that something more decent was due to the former Queen. Like a disgusting boy who has let loose with an orgy of cruelty, he began to realise with shame, once the passion of the moment was past, just how he had indulged himself. "See to this accursed woman," he ordered, "and give her burial; after all, she was a king's daughter." But when they came to pick up the pieces, little was left. The hungry dogs of Jezreel, drawn by the smell of blood, had devoured most of the body that had been Jezebel.¹

It was not the end of Jehu's bloodbath. Power once seized has to be consolidated. He had killed the country's rulers, but there was a whole family to deal with - as any descendant of Omri's might return to challenge him. A threatening message to the court guardians in Samaria was sufficient to secure their obedience, and they had the descendants of Ahab, children and grandchildren, beheaded. Hurrying to Samaria to complete his takeover, he came across a party from Judah. They were members of Judah's royal family, who, in the confusion of those few days, had not yet gathered what was going on and thought they were still in friendly territory. Jehu had them slaughtered on the spot. He did not intend that Judah should seize the occasion to take power over Israel again.² Ironically, his work was finished for him by Athaliah, who, hearing of the death of her son, was unwilling to relinquish the power she had as Queen Mother in Judah. She had the whole royal family of Judah put to death, and declared herself Queen in her own right.³

With two royal families wiped out in a few days, there remained one last blood-letting, the violent reaction of Yahwists to the hated Baal religion. Joining forces with the Rechabites, a clan who had kept to the strictest and purest form of the wilderness religion, Jehu prepared to exterminate Baal and his worshippers. Pretending that he wished to thank Baal for his success, he summoned the prophets and devotees of the Canaanite god to his temple in Samaria, and when they were all assembled for the sacrifice, he let loose on them his own men and the Rechabites. Everyone was slaughtered, and the great

¹ See IIK 9. ² See IIK 10. ³ See IIK 11.

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symbols of Baal were taken out and burned. The altar was smashed up and the temple demolished. Its ruins were converted - the ultimate indignity - into a latrine.

The great national revulsion that Elijah had so naïvely expected after Carmel, and for which he and his successors among the prophets had laboured over two generations, had come at last in the form of Jehu's coup. As swiftly and bloodily as Elijah himself had acted in the Wadi Kishon, it had run its terrible course. Death and devastation had swept away the House of Omri, the Tyrian alliance, the temple of Baal and the whole structure of Israel's security so carefully put together by the fallen dynasty.

As Jezebel and her supporters must have foreseen, the kingdom without them fell prey to its enemies. Before Jehu's reign was over, Israel had lost not only the little town of Ramoth-Gilead, but all her territory beyond the Jordan.¹ Tribes that had played a mighty role in her history were now forever lost to her. She fell prey to the Moabites, her former vassals, who raided freely into her territory.² Aramean power increased to almost imperial stature and reached beyond Israel to the Philistines and Judah, while the great kingdom that Jeroboam had wrenched from Solomon's son dwindled to a barely viable principality.³

The coup that brought down Omri's dynasty brought down Israel with it, and Jehu was left with a shocked and shattered people to hold together. The remarkable thing is that he did so. His kingdom survived and in time recovered. His son ruled after him, and their dynasty was to hold through five generations, the longest of any in Israel. But the story of Jehu's coup leaves us with many difficult questions. Was it Yahweh's doing, or was it the ancient tribal madness and the arrogance which had often before torn the community apart?⁴ At so great a price and at such a risk, what had Israel gained? If it was her God and her real self, perhaps in time it would prove to be a solid gain; but if it was only rule by the most aggressive, she would surely be reduced to ruins, a few survivors crying in the wilderness that the warlords made of her land.

Prophets in the tradition of Elijah welcomed Jehu's purge. The extermination of Omri's dynasty and its favoured Baal religion earned their unstinted praise and a promise of Yahweh's blessing:

"Since you have done properly what was pleasing in my sight and have achieved all I set my heart on against Ahab's family, your sons shall sit on the throne of Israel down to the fourth generation."
(IIK 10:30)

But other views also are recorded in the Bible: that Jehu failed to correct the fundamental errors of Israelite religion:

But Jehu did not follow the law of Yahweh, the God of Israel, faithfully and wholeheartedly: he did not give up the sins into which Jeroboam had led Israel.
(IIK 10:31)

¹ IIK 10:32f. ² cf IIK 13:20. ³ See IIK 13:3-7. ⁴ cf Jud 9-12; 19-20.

and, even more damning, that his vicious bloodbath would in time bring down its proper retribution upon his own dynasty:

"It will not be long before I make the House of Jehu pay for the bloodshed at Jezreel."
(Hosea 1:4)

These criticisms of Jehu were made much later, from generations of hindsight, but they are part of the total assessment. Jehu, anointed by the prophets, was indeed Yahweh's man, achieving Yahweh's will. But he did not accomplish all of Yahweh's will; and there were things he did which were not Yahweh's will. Jehu was his own man. He would have to receive both the praise and the blame of history, the vindication and the condemnation of Yahweh.

It is another reminder not to be simplistic in our judgement of political events. God, as I have said, is political, which means that he does take sides. He has a preference in the issues and controversies that occupy us. But as I have also said, he is not partisan. He does not unreservedly support even those he acknowledges as "his" side. Those who struggle for the right cause, for God's cause, may still do wrong. The passions roused and released by a sense of right can be fierce and destructive and there is no guarantee that they will remain within the will of God. When we acknowledge a political movement or revolution as right, as carrying through what God himself intends, we don't thereby become uncritical supporters of it. We might still have to recognise that, in the process, it does evil and is liable to God's judgement.

Jehu's coup brought about, for better and worse, a significant change in Israel and a return to a more exclusive relationship with Yahweh. Therefore the claim was made, and is asserted in the Bible, that Jehu carried out the will of God. If we accept this, then we have accepted a very important principle about revolutions: that even a violent revolution can be on the side of God. A revolution cannot be condemned as contrary to God just because it involves violence or leads to chaos. These may be evil in themselves, but it will always be possible that the bloody forces of disorder are in fact on the side that God himself upholds.

It is fair to say that, for most of the last two centuries, Christians have been anti-revolution, and revolutions have been anti-Christian. There has been an assumption that revolution is a godless outburst, and that God is necessarily on the side of order and stability. But this is not the Bible's testimony, and we believers must learn to be more discriminating in our assessment of revolutions. Revolutionary goals, the overthrow of government, cannot be dismissed automatically, as if God were inevitably committed to upholding established authority. (Established authority, of course, tends to believe that he is.) Nor can we simply reject a revolution because it is cruel or chaotic or violent. We may criticise these aspects of it, yet still have to consider that its basic thrust, the fundamental change it is achieving or aiming at, may be the will of God. A revolution, like any other movement in human affairs, has to be judged in the light of God's sovereign and historical will for his people - and the history of Jehu's revolt, the downfall

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of Omri's House in Israel, shows us that this is not to be simply identified with what is orderly, established and profitable.

Behind the civilisation and political wisdom of Ahab's Israel and Jezebel's was the corruption of arrogant power, a royal elite making their own decisions for themselves and overriding all other convictions and rights. Behind the chaos and barbarism of Jehu and the prophets who supported him, was a fierce and primitive dedication to a personal God, a relationship of trust and loyalty to Yahweh that was the real basis of Israel's identity. Jehu is an extreme case, showing us that God's friends are not always the best behaved or the most statesmanlike.

Order and authority are good, as far as they go, giving security and creating prosperity, but where they are really corruption, death dolled up and nicely laid out, they are hostile to God. Where authority is really oppression justifying itself, God is anti-authority, and even the reckless anger of revolutionaries may then be on his side. When peasants or workers revolt and revolutionaries rise for their ideals, it is good if they are moral, restrained, enlightened and merciful, but even if they are not, it is still possible that their rising is the work of God, prompting them to reject evil and resist oppression.

This principle is painfully relevant to us now, as we see the breakdown of order in South Africa.¹ As Bishop Tutu and many others have warned, the country is slipping towards a terrible chaos, but one we cannot condemn, because it is the only way we have left them. The people of South Africa - the black majority - cannot go on accepting their lot. God himself stirs up their spirit to reject oppression and degradation. He himself encourages them to rise and to resist the evil that has tried for generations to crush or cajole all humanity out of them. What is breaking out in South Africa today is God's revolution. The cause of the black people, including the cause of the African National Congress, is his cause. He makes it so, for they are on his side.

That fact is not changed by the cruelty and violence into which their revolution is sliding. God has not sided with the blacks because they are good or civilised, nor has he made them so by siding with them. They are still themselves, human and independent. They may resort or be driven to atrocious cruelties, to the extremes of desperation and bitterness. In time they will have to face the consequences of that, for God's way is not the burning necklace, the destructive tribalism, the reckless killing of rival factions - but he does not disown them because of it. They are his people and their cause is his. Their cruelties are not surprising - to anyone who knows human nature and the terrible effects of repression - and God, in his own time and way will deal with them. They will have to face his judgement on all vengeance and violence, but meanwhile, in spite of that, they are fighting on his side. And we, if we resist them, are fighting against God.

¹ written in the 1980s, but the point is still most relevant

The 20th century was racked, deformed, destroyed, changed, shaped, built and rejuvenated by revolutions. Whatever you make of them, they have shaped the world we live in in the 21st. They are a part of recent history that cannot be ignored. If you have no clear views on revolution, you will face the immediate future devoid of effective proposals for a world that desperately needs to change. The Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the Irish Easter Uprising and Ghandi's resistance in India, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and Suharto's anti-communist purge in Indonesia, the Islamic revolution in Iran and that of Libya, Dubcek's revolution in Czechoslovakia, the anti-Allende coup in Chile, Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence and Zimbabwe's birth in guerilla warfare... the list could go on and on, and the revolutions came in all kinds and levels of intensity, but they channelled the courses of history in the 20th century. Some were successful and some were not, and some were reversals of previous revolutions. If we have anything to say to the modern world and its struggle for identity and community, we must know where we stand with regard to revolution for the issues of security, justice and freedom which the 20th century tried to settle by revolution are still before us. Tho we now live in a world dominated by a single superpower which is hostile to revolution, the questions won't go away, and without a theology of revolution, we are in danger of over-simple reactions which ignore the voice of God speaking to us in our present history.

This is not the place to develop such a theology, but it is appropriate to underline those one or two basic principles that come from the story of Jehu. Firstly, even a violent revolution, bloody and chaotic, can be in the cause that God himself promotes. This is an important point to establish, for the opposite principle seems to determine the judgement of many Christians today. Successive American governments have found it sufficient to point to the violence of revolutionaries in order to condemn them as anti-God. The present British government adopts the principle quite explicitly: that any movement engaged in violence is to be totally opposed, and that nothing can be conceded to a cause until it first renounces violence. This has been their stand with regard to the I.R.A.'s terrorists and hunger-strikers, and to the striking miners. It is a too self-righteous position denying the possibility that disruption and violence may occur in a cause that is nonetheless right. It does not face the fact that it may be injustice that is driving people to violence. Believers must insist, in the face of such glib simplifications, that any cause, even the cause of the violent, must be looked at impartially, and aware that God himself might be in it.

(Since I wrote the above paragraph, the British, Irish and American governments have wisely set aside the all too self-righteous principle and compromised with a cease-fire as the only precondition for talking – and even that cease-fire involved some preliminary talking and encouragement. The resulting agreement with the IRA and the power-sharing government which followed, fragile tho it is, vindicates their wisdom.)

Secondly, there is the converse that even those who believe they are fighting for God's side, for fundamental rights and needs, cannot claim to be above reproach and criticism. It is possible for evil to be mixed up in God's own cause. God neither waits for a people to be morally irreproachable before he identifies with them, nor makes them so by sleight

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of hand once he has identified with them. Their vices, their violence and the tragic consequences of them, remain, and even those with whom God identifies may also be living out the evil within them. Jehu's revolution was the realisation of Elijah's hopes, and so it was welcomed by the prophets in his tradition as God's revolution, but as the future would show, Jehu's success was ambivalent, his dedication only partial. Even what the prophets hail as God's success, may well prove on reflection to be only a partial, qualified success intermixed with failure, the good work of God darkened by human evil.

Those who carry through a revolution often have their own kind of arrogance. For them, the revolution being right, must be supremely right: no one can speak against it, and no one can speak against them without being condemned as anti-revolutionary. Like much arrogance, it is a frantic cover-up for insecurity. It comes of fear that if once the sacred tenets of the revolution are questioned the whole new order will come tumbling down. It is a disguised admission that the new is not as strong as the old, that it lacks roots and tradition, that it is not yet mature or secure enough to withstand criticism.

We saw this arrogance, and the fear behind it, institutionalised in the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. Founders of the revolution became infallible teachers and their writings a holy book. The revolutionary party was deemed fundamentally inerrant, (as it still is in China) and when faults and inadequacies have to be admitted, scapegoats are found and show trials prove that they were never really part of the revolution. When truth simply cannot be resisted any longer, criticism is given a short rein and a brief liberty. Long before it gets out of hand, all is brought back under official party control, and opposition is stringently curtailed. The arrogance of the revolutionary has become the arrogance of a new establishment.

Arrogance and the excessive claims of revolutionaries in turn discredit not only them but their cause. When revolutions fail to bring freedom and happiness, the faith of their followers is undermined and the unbelief of skeptics is confirmed. Those who find their zeal is betrayed and those who never had any zeal both seek consolation in cynicism. As each revolution fails to bring about paradise on earth or the finally good society, those who originally supported it are disillusioned, and those who originally opposed it feel vindicated. History never does, and probably never will, usher in a perfect state of society, and it is easy to condemn all the rhetoric, all the enthusiasm, sacrifice, hope and effort of a revolution as hypocrisy or waste. But believers must be prepared to see more, and less, in every revolution. We must be able to recognise the good, and the hand of God, even in a violent and flawed revolution. We must be aware of the shortcomings and outright evil in any human enterprise, even when God is in it.

A believer can enter into revolution with enthusiasm and humility. If God can really be at work in Jehu and in the disastrous Israelite revolution of his day - if we can recognise and accept his action there - then we can begin to hope that he is also at work in the disastrous blunderings of our own times. There is hope that our well-meaning but often misguided and always flawed attempts at political improvement may be under God's prompting, to bring about a world, a people, in harmony with his will. To say that "God is with us" is

then an expression of our trust in him, and not an arrogant claim to goodness or wisdom. We can be passionately enthusiastic for a cause, as if God himself is driving us on, and yet remain open to criticism and correction, knowing that we are, after all, under his judgement.

We, of course, need feel no special zeal for Jehu's rebellion. It is ancient history and we should reserve our enthusiasm for the great changes that must be brought about in our world. But if we understand about Jehu, and the Bible's qualified approval of him, and the unqualified approval of prophets in his own day, then we have learnt how to see the strivings of revolutionary history with enthusiasm and humility. We are freed from the narrow limits of cynicism, which cannot allow enthusiasm, and from the arrogance that is afraid of humility. We are free to give our support to a revolution without claiming infallibility for it, without idolising its leaders or exaggerating its achievements. Accepting that God does not stand aloof from the ambiguous struggles of political history, but does indeed have his side, we also accept that he is never unequivocally on one side, and that even those who are basically in the right may be wrong on many counts.

We need - we desperately need - a God who is involved in the politics of this world, who sides with justice against injustice, with resistance against oppression, with freedom against domination. It is not enough if God is content to let anything at all happen here, in this world, while he uses it to prepare souls for his own "other" world. Faith in such a detached God soon dies of desperation - for we are not just eternity fodder. The world of God's perfect will, the eternal world, is being made here in the world and in the lives we now know, or else it is irrelevant to us. The God who gets involved with Elijah and with Jehu, with the prophet's passion for the God of his ancestors, and the rebel's zeal for the reform of Israel, is God for our century too, a God to give us hope. Yahweh does not stand aloof from this world, declining to take sides in its struggles, but takes sides most definitely and shamelessly. Those who support the struggle for justice and for freedom can be encouraged to seek his side, provided they know it will be his side only in a qualified sense. Then they will not be tempted to arrogate to themselves his unqualified righteousness.

Ahab and the whole of Omri's dynasty stood for national security based on a civilised modernisation of Israel in alliance with her natural friends and allies. They stood for a basically Canaanite Israel, in alliance and co-operation with the Canaanite peoples of Tyre and Sidon, and those of Judah. They represented a powerful, centralised monarchy as the best guarantee of Israel's strength and independence, and they stood for continuity, the stable transfer of power through inheritance.

Jehu's rebellion was a reaction against this: the pride of experienced soldiers who would rather serve one of their own comrades than unproven heirs to a throne. It stood for the independence of tribal Israel that always itched to put kings in their place. It sprang from the ambition of a strongman, who believed he could rule Israel, and, because he could, had as much right to as anyone else. It also stood for the old Israel and the God of old Israel, a conservative reaction taking her back to the ways of the wilderness and the

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traditions of her fighting ancestors. But in the long run, the important thing was that it stood for exclusive loyalty to Yahweh in the faith that first made Israel a nation, as his people.

God was with Jehu in that Jehu, however selfishly and bloodily, responded to that tradition of Israel which really was at the heart of her identity: her relationship with Yahweh. Jehu's ambition overthrew civilisation and security, but whether by luck or judgement he did so in the name of something which was ultimately more important than both of them: the personal claim of Yahweh upon the people he had made.

That claim was one which the dynasty of Omri, however successful it was, had never been able to recognise. Whether it was Jezebel striving valiantly to reorganise the nation around the worship of Baal, or Ahab attempting to mould Yahweh to his own schemes, or the royal family pushing its plans forward without concern for the claims of lesser people, they were in opposition to the unique rule of Yahweh. In their practical politics, power, authority, success and prestige counted for everything and they had no time for Yahweh's approach. To them he might be a god like other gods, a force to be reckoned with and exploited, a national symbol to be used, but never a personal God speaking to his people, laying claim to their loyalty and appealing for their trust. What mattered to them was the great display of strength, solidity, achievement and security. The real and personal relationship with God, that makes a people real in his presence, was beyond them. So in time - and surprisingly quickly - they fell apart, and a good part of Israel fell with them.

Yahweh is a God of prophets and rebels. As in the days of Solomon and Jeroboam, he is still a political God, passionately concerned for the community he rules. But as with Jeroboam, so now with Jehu, those with whom he works are not turned into puppets to perform as he makes them. They remain themselves, with their own interests and intentions and their different ideas of how to serve him. If the dynasties that cracked or tumbled were under his judgement, so too were the new forces that took their place. Yahweh is God at work in the wild political turmoil of this world. His side is there, for those to join who will, but no one, even by joining it, puts himself above criticism. Sometimes those who recognise him and where he is leading are the barbarians, passionate, obsessive and destructive, and in time they will come under judgement as such. But meanwhile they have taken up God's cause, and God, whatever we might do in the name of civilised niceties, does not disown them.

In effect, the Ephraimite kingdom which began with Jeroboam had half proved itself. It had survived, and in spite of coups and internal strife, the monarchy still existed. No one seemed able to establish a permanent dynasty, like the house of David in Judah, but then again there had been no move such as Jeroboam feared, to return to the rule of Jerusalem. In Bethel, Jeroboam's national shrine survived, and his golden calf was still Yahweh's pedestal (or, to the superstitious, Yahweh himself). The people of the northern kingdom could say, with some sense of identity, that they were Israel, the people to whom Yahweh had given the land of Canaan.

But if a meaningful and lasting relationship with Yahweh survived, it was in the wild prophets and their backwater communities, rather than in the mainstream of national life. There the enthusiasm of people and rulers was only too much in doubt. Israel survived as a kingdom centred on Ephraim, but was there anything more solid and durable to give them a name? Was there any real commitment to a real God? If Jehu's revolution meant a return to loyalty, a conscientious and trusting recognition of Yahweh, then perhaps the future would be good for Israel. But if there was nothing permanent in his enthusiasm, if it was only a route to power, if the cruel purge that wiped out Baal and Omri was nothing more than Jehu's bloodlust and ambition, then perhaps he too had nothing to offer but illusions. And if so, how often can Israel survive the breaking of illusions?

These questions go beyond the scope of this book. They have their answers in the later chapters of the Book of Kings, and in the prophets Amos and Hosea. For the present, for us, they must remain the question that end the history of Israel under Jeroboam and the house of Omri.