

## 8 In Dialogue with God

From Jeroboam to Jehu, the Book of Kings can appear to be little more than a chronicle of rows between kings and prophets. In it we see a struggle between power and protest for the allegiance of Israel, but what is the relevance to us of Israel's religion and politics? Time and distance divide us from them - some thousands of years and a great difference of cultures. But more than that, the moral barbarity, the primitive savageness in these stories offends our sense of civilisation and decency. Elijah ordering slaughter in the Wadi Kishon; a prophet's bitter demand for blood vengeance; the violence of Jehu's rebellion: this is not where we expect to find a revelation of God.

But the primitive wickedness and ignorance in ancient Israel must not distract us from the truth that God speaks in their history. They were vindictive and violent people. They were selfish, proud, belligerent, superstitious, weak and fickle. They certainly did not understand God, and their ideas of him - even the edited versions that we receive in the Bible - are often crude by our standards and repulsive. But God met them where they were. He approached them and spoke to them in their own language; and that is the beginning of our hope. If God could speak in the primitive experience of Israel, we, too, might hope to find God speaking in our own primal and chaotic experience.

To recognise that God approaches us, even within the sordid and bloody squabbles of an ancient community, is to recognise the most crucial of truths, and to shed the most fatal of illusions. It is utterly false to assert, as so many of us do, that we approach God through goodness. On the contrary, it is through God (and through God alone) that we can ever hope to approach goodness. God does not reveal Godself among the good, but among the wicked, to begin making them good.

The primitive passions we discover in the Israelites have survived in us, co-existing with all our advances. Evil repressed by civilisation only breaks out all the more savagely, and knowledge itself provides us with the means of being unimaginably more cruel and destructive than they were. Our civilisation embraces - often with the sanction of religion - the trenches of Flanders, the great depression and the urban slums of the 20th century. It includes Auschwitz and Belsen and the Russian front, Leningrad, Dresden, Hiroshima and Vietnam. It is responsible for the barracks and townships of South Africa, the torture chambers of Chile and Argentina, the rape of East Timor, the bitter, unforgiving hatreds of Ireland. It has allowed the ghastly starvation of Ethiopia and the Sudan. A civilisation like ours has not advanced too far to learn from savages.

The prophets who spoke out for God in early Israel were barbarians by our standards, but we can still enter into a productive dialogue with them. The idea that some more enlightened religion entitles us to dismiss or patronise them is no more than shallow self-congratulation: a fine idea for pious congregations content with their Sunday morning service, or for academic theologians absorbed in their speculations. But anyone with their

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hands steeped in the business of the twenty-first century, their minds and emotions grappling with the reality of the modern world, will find the thoughts and words and wild passions of the prophets only too relevant.

If we cannot recognise God speaking in the midst of ignorance and wickedness, we will never hear him speaking to us who are wicked, and ignorant of even the elements of God's way. Our way forward from the wretched confusion and obstinate, self-destructive wickedness of our present civilisation, is to rediscover and to accept again the offer of a relationship with God, who alone can offer us a future. If we had to rely on straightening our affairs before we could approach God, we would have no hope: but hope we have, from Israel's experience. The God who spoke through Elijah and in the bloody deeds of Jehu can still speak in the clamouring and conflict of our world. The violence and destruction that threatens us may not be the end after all. Somewhere in it all God may yet be speaking, communicating with a people who can speak no higher language, to win them over.

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God speaks especially through prophets. Prophets may or may not be attractive people, but they will always be challenging voices, through whom God puts his finger on our present most urgent need. It is the privilege and the misfortune of prophets to stand too close to God and to bring too close to a flickering, changing world the steady light of God's reality. Yet their vision is the real strength and security of their people. It may shatter popular illusions, and undermine the props of national confidence, but not without replacing them. When they oppose a king who is the nation's security, or tear down the wire of a cruise missile base, there is much more to it than defiance and destruction. There is God's vision of what the community should be and can be, because Godself is the support and ground of it.

In the Book of Kings, God speaks with greatest authority when he speaks through his prophets, and we must learn to listen to that kind of authority. If we are to shape for the twenty-first century a community out of chaos, we must learn to recognise the prophetic word in which God communicates with us. That doesn't mean that we should look for Elijah-like figures. Prophets may look very different from Elijah. Nor does it call for a class of people whose word is infallible, whose deeds are irreproachable - but merely people thru whom God speaks, with a vision that shocks and challenges us. Through prophets of each age, God has something to say to us in every age, something of the age and for the age. We are not guided by infallible voices from the sky - but neither are we left floundering and guessing in the dark. We have the word of God addressing us, if we care to listen, through people who share this world and this moment of history with us.

They are not a particular circle or lineage, they don't come with a special mark, they are not accredited by the ruling party. Their claim does not rest on academic or scientific expertise. They will be recognised only by those who are genuinely open to God, who accept that God is at work in this world's history, who want to hear God and be guided by

him. People who govern can show their credentials: inheritance, the vote of the people, the approval of the Party, the support of the armed forces. But those who speak with God's most direct authority can only speak and lead: their words and actions will stand unsupported as God's, and we must be satisfied with that.

I hesitate to give examples of prophets in our time - because when real prophets speak, those who are listening for God don't waste time on a who's who of God's messengers: they get on with the job the prophets are speaking of. Real prophets do not draw attention to themselves, but to God's will for his people. Moreover, many of those I would recognise as prophets would not see themselves as such. Some would even be offended by the term, because of the false associations it has acquired. (One of the Bible's recognised prophets angrily rejected the title in his own day.<sup>1</sup>) Besides, I am in danger of misleading you, because, in a book addressing a wide, unspecified audience, I have to quote well-known names. But the most important prophets of any age may be small voices, insignificant figures known only in their own locality, or hardly noticed even by those to whom they speak.

However, with all these caveats, let me mention a few who I think are prophets to us, or have spoken to us as prophets for at least a brief time. I have already mentioned Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and the women's groups at Greenham Common in England. Bishop Tutu in South Africa is another, and so, I think, are the Charter 77 group in Czechoslovakia. Bob Geldof is another, and another Noam Chomsky - people who have spoken out and acted out what (I believe) God is saying to us for our time. All of these have something in common because of which I call them prophets. (And if any are offended by the term, I beg their pardon.) They all speak (in words and in vivid or dramatic action) messages which can only be described as God's urgent appeal to us in our day. They all stand outside the institutions of political power - able to inspire, urge, persuade and lead, but not to enforce. They all speak and do with frank and uncowed directness. Their conviction and dedication are clear. When they speak, and when their actions speak, I have to acknowledge that here God is saying something, directly, to his people.

And where God is speaking to his people, however frail or unattractive the spokesperson, there, for our better acquaintance, God is. If we do not listen to him, we reject him and deny him. No set of beliefs or code of laws can take the place of listening to and obeying God as he speaks to us in the present, shaping us and our community together. God's word for now has critical authority, and if we do not learn to recognise it, every kind of authority will come unstuck. If we do not hear God speaking in his prophets, we will soon lose the art of hearing God at all, and our dialogue with him will dry up like a wadi in a drought.

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<sup>1</sup> See Amos 7:11-14.

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In dialogue, God shapes his community, and part of that shaping is the creation of authority. God appointed kings because government is important. Anarchy is not God's option. However, the Book of Kings has taught us that this gift of authority - contrary to the claim of authoritarians - is never absolute and never permanent. No institution or ruler has God's unconditional mandate, and when authority fails to deliver the goods - justice and freedom and security - God is to be found inciting the rebels against it. Authority under God is important, but because it is important it is subject to judgement.

To say that authority is God's gift is not to endorse any one system of authority but to challenge the claims of every system. None is final. None is infallible. None is above change. Neither inheritance, nor democratic election, nor armed power, nor party approval, nor popular acclaim is the basis for authority. Power and rule might come through any of these, but whichever it is, it comes as God's gift, subject to God's judgement. Those who govern are acting in God's place. But precisely because they rule in his place, they are always open to criticism. They can never be "equal" to their task and there will always be others who, equally in God's place, correct and criticise them. The nightmare of autocracy has no sanction in the Bible and only ignorance of what is actually there ever thought otherwise. Those who gave us the phrase "the divine right of kings" gave very little attention to the real God revealed in scripture, to Yahweh whose appointed kings were always subject to criticism, rebuke or rejection. No ruler or ruling party, whoever it claims to represent, can outlaw opposition. There is no mandate under God either for the Czar or for the Politburo.

Authority, therefore, is not to be dismissed or ignored; we cannot treat it as having no relevance to the real society God is building. But those who recognise the full meaning of authority as God's gift must be mature enough to oppose authority when it goes against God. They will break laws that are evil, just as they accept and keep those that are not. They will protest at the abuse of authority, but they will not descend into adolescent anti-authority. They will not project onto authority-figures all their childish father-images or teacher-images, just to express their resentment and assert their independence. They will not march through the streets shouting puerile hate-slogans, but they will march through the streets and make public their protest. They will not play silly games of police-baiting, but they will, from time to time, get arrested in their opposition to evil governments. God delegates God's authority to rule, but, precisely because he delegates, authority passes into the hands of fallible human beings. The same God delegates his authority to criticise, and we may, in God's name, criticise even those who rule in God's name. When we understand the authority of God, and how it is given as his gift to his people, we are able both to respect leaders, who undertake the difficult work of ruling in God's place, and to oppose them, where necessary, respectfully, firmly and actively.

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God's dialogue is not with isolated individuals, discussing private arrangements for individual souls. God approaches us as people in community. All the relationships that make for our identity and security, that give us our place in the human world, are

involved in the encounter. Our response to God is inevitably a public one. We find ourselves with others, forming a new and God-centred community, or against others, earning their abuse and persecution.

God is personal, and what is personal is always shared, a matter of relationships and common concern, affecting all. God is political. If we learn nothing else from the Book of Kings, we learn that God makes his claim upon this, our most cherished area of autonomy. When God speaks, he speaks with effect right where we most want to maintain the illusion of independence from him, in our economic and political concerns, in the common and public part of our life.

At the same time, our dialogue is an active one. God is active in the world and we recognise God only as we are caught up in God's action. No one can be spectator or audience only. To stand back from the action is to miss the real God who is at work. Our dialogue with him is a matter of life, which is not speculated upon but lived, and lived together, "in communion" with others. Our encounter with God is not star-gazing, but striving to understand and interpret in action the history that is happening around us - just as the prophets of Israel had to interpret the history in which they were immersed.

The discovery of God gets us into politics before it brings us to theology. It puts us into the world and its tensions, and challenges us to face God who is at work there, winning the hearts of his people. For God relates to us as people together, as a community, before he relates to us in any other way. God teaches us to be interdependent and to exist with others as God's people, before he teaches us anything else. The political, social, economic relationships which hold us together, and about which we argue and struggle, are at the heart of our relationship with God. The bonds of interdependence that make a community are more fundamental than the rest of morality and theology. They come first. They are the scene of our encounter with God. At the beginning and end of our dialogue with him, "we" are a community.

Politics, the business of fitting together as a community is not always an edifying sight, for we make a discredited mess of it. But God is not somewhere aloft and aloof, waiting for us to rise out of the mess. God is here in this tangle of needs and concerns and competing efforts, and however hard it is for us to "pin him down", at least we know where to look for him. The God of Israel is a community God, a social God, a political God.

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As we have seen, God neither underwrites the existing order nor uncritically favours revolution and change. God calls us to be neither cynics standing aside nor uncritical partisans, but political people, to whom every political question is all the more open, all the more seriously challenging, because it is an integral part of God's dialogue with us. It means that we come to our political concerns with no bias but our conviction that God is their master, that we will discover God there, speaking and acting in them as he relates to

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us. We look and we listen; God speaks and we speak to God, expecting him to answer; we wait to know God, and we act to obey him. Thus we find ourselves in dialogue with God.

God who confronts us in the Book of Kings is a challenge we cannot avoid any longer. We who have learnt to individualise and privatise our faith out of all recognition must look again, not just for private salvation, but for the work of God winning back the hearts of God's whole community. For God reveals Godself in the community. Dialogue with God involves us in questions of authority, order, peace, justice, protest, rebellion - the whole painful and passionate experience of being a people together. It faces issues of leadership and charisma, and breeds the burning or patient conviction that has power to remake a people. To be in dialogue with God is to enter into the bonds of trust and loyalty and the stirrings of hope and contention that hold a people together and carry them forward.

That is why the treatment of Naboth, the disregarding of powerless minorities is an outright denial of God. Because it denies the personal bonds that hold the community together, it rejects those very relationships in which God reveals Godself. The very existence of God, as God has shown it, binds God's people to him and commits them to one another. Therefore, to assert that the nation is a structure of power rather than a community of persons is to reject the essence of God, and the strong who bully their way to power, or bully their way in power, in the name of the power they have won, are doing just that. So too are the weak who throw their support behind dominating authorities, tolerating arrogance because it offers them security. There is no distance between belief in God and the commitment of solidarity with all of God's people.

Commitment to others and with others is the fullest expression of personality; and such is the personal reality of God. The relationship into which God draws God's people is nothing less than the most permanent solidarity, real belonging and security which underpins the personal value of all in God's community. God values his people. That is God's first and fundamental revelation. Though he vastly transcends the very universe they inhabit, they matter to him. That is the essence of their dialogue with him, and why God can be trusted.

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To relate to God and speak with God, we must be able to trust him, and there is a sense in which God must be able to trust us. God must find us, or make us, trustworthy. You cannot engage in dialogue with people who do not mean what they say, for whom words are empty sounds and gestures simply a useful manoeuvre. So, to enter into dialogue with God, we have to be able to commit ourselves, to face what we are and what we are saying, and to stand by it.

That is why God's message in the mouth of prophets is so often a judgement, for God shatters our illusions and self-delusions in order to strengthen our feeble hold on reality.

Judgement is God taking us seriously so that we may take ourselves seriously and eventually recognise both what we are not and what we really are. Long before we are saints, long before we begin to realise what God has in store for us, God is concerned that we should be real. God wants us to be independent of changing expediency, able to declare and commit ourselves for real.

But we resist commitment. Through fear or mistrust of the reality God is, we withdraw from him to take a more reserved or shifting position. It may be the "sin" of Jeroboam: resorting to our own wits and our own evaluations in the belief that we have nothing else to rely on. Or it may be an attempt to perpetuate control by setting up gods of our own - baals or gods we can change when they no longer contribute to our agenda. Or we find in the strange culture and foreign accents of the God of Israel, an excuse for seeking the "real" God in a construct of our own more enlightened thinking.

Because we cannot face the challenge of God, we find ways of undermining our own belief. We avoid the consequences; we bargain with God; we set limits and conditions, but we only tie ourselves up in a futile attempt to tie him down to our current position. We hear his voice, and try to silence him with the clatter of our own proposals. We claim to believe in him, but have a hundred reasons, of prudence or caution or common sense, for not believing what he says. Our encounter becomes a struggle, to change and distort not only his meaning but also our own. Our integrity is in shreds, for we can no longer speak and act with commitment. The thread of dialogue becomes a tangle of inconsistencies, twisted and broken by our attempts to hold onto it while we deny its true direction.

Without commitment, we cannot really face God, for God's approach makes us whole and all the more deeply committed. God enters into dialogue with us not as a passing exchange but as a permanent engagement claiming our trust and loyalty. We are given new value and meaning because God speaks to us and offers Godself as the unique personal reality, face to face with whom we too become personal and real. Dialogue with God is for those who are authentic in God's sight, who will let themselves be judged and taken truthfully and seriously. Their response to God will be real and honest even if it is primitive and still misguided, and it will be the beginning of great things.

Those who have learnt to trust and to be trustworthy have learnt to listen to God, for God's language is the language of trust. It has meaning within a relationship where God is committed to and secures the commitment of his people. Elijah spoke the language of God when he offered his sacrifice on Mount Carmel, and that is why God answered him, visibly accepting the sacrifice. However primitive the theology behind it, it was a personal approach, the kind God had encouraged and committed himself to accept. That is why the prophet-communities who put their trust in God and moved into the wilderness to serve him there, found God responding to them. Their little accidents, their need of bread and inspiration, were the simple occasion of God's answer to their trust.

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A people that knows God, to whom God has shown Godself, is in dialogue with the one ultimate reality. But they find that God provides for them in their world, and does not leave them speculating about some other-worldly mystery. God feeds them and heals them. Even as they rise to the mystical heights and glimpse his transcendence, above every familiar reality, they find God is still enticing them to trust him, providing unexpectedly for their next meal... That is the beginning of "sacramental" experience, where words and gifts which have their own simple and immediate relevance, point beyond it to a relationship with the transcendent God. Sacramental theology begins with a community whose life is touched by God, who find themselves, in words and signs of God's choosing, drawn into dialogue with God.

Miracles, too, have meaning for those who have learnt to trust God. Each has its own unique significance as a word in dialogue calling for a meaningful and personal response. The miracle on Mount Carmel, and the miracles in the story of Elisha were not just wonders, but words from God, engaging Elijah and the prophetic communities in an on-going dialogue. Only those who are willing to be engaged in the dialogue will be able to understand the miracles. To others, they will be a marvel to gape at before going back to the proper business of living; or an offensive nonsense to be rejected in the name of rationality. Whether as miracle or as sacrament, the language of God is baffling to non-believers; it is elementary magic or superstition. But to those whom God has approached, drawing them into dialogue, both miracle and sacrament are meaningful personal encounters. Their place is in a frank and trusting dialogue, a committed relationship with God.

Part of that dialogue, too, is the prophetic message, whether from Israel's past or our present. It is the word of God that still comes through to remind and guide us, judging and challenging us with an authority that cannot be whittled away. We either accept it, growing in the truth God gives us; or reject it and so reject God for a new god of our own making. If we respond and meet him as he meets us with open love, we will find the greatness of our past opening out in scripture, where part of the dialogue has been recorded. And if we persevere in that dialogue without mistrust or reservation, we will find that it embraces the whole of present history, the world we are now living in and trying to shape.

The revelation of God is a personal, meaningful communication. Its relevance can never be limited by us, but is always open beyond our calculations to everything that God may intend. To meet God is no escape from the hardness of reality but joyful acceptance of it. It is no indulgence or fantasy but a binding commitment. It is not an easy way out of problems, but it is the beginning of real answers. It does not end our searching but encourages it and gives it wider scope. God's word to us is never the last word, but always looks for a response, a return to the adventure in which we are discovering God. The dialogue goes on, and his signs, his miracles, his word in prophecy and in history, have always more to communicate. God reaches out to his people, establishing their identity not as a closed, defined status but as an open-ended relationship with him. For

God values them as persons who have begun to be his people and have yet to discover all that that may mean.

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The ideas into which the Book of Kings has drawn us are far from irrelevant. They may seem little enough, before the problems that confront us as we begin this twenty-first century, but they are the beginning of a dialogue with God that goes to the root of our most pressing concerns. The biblical vision of prophets and kings is the basis for a far-reaching change of attitude that resolves the contradiction (but not the conflict) between order and opposition, between the need for authority and the all too obvious need for rebellion. Its call for integrity as the very foundation of our identity is the radical answer to a world that struggles to make its way with evasions and inconsistencies. Its view of community, at the very beginning of morality and theology, is one most desperately needed in a world where religion has lost politics and politics have lost the people. Its primitive account of the dialogue between God and his people, bridging the gap between God's transcendence and our physical reality, makes sense and relevance of religious language which has become a nonsense to many.

Throughout, it has been a question of active involvement and commitment. The relevance is there not for spectators or connoisseurs but for those who are drawn into dialogue, becoming actively involved in the work of God. It is community and action, because God reveals Godself in community and action. It is a dialogue of co-operators working together on a vital concern, to build the community that is God's people.

Between ancient Israel and us there lies a long period of time. Fortunately, what links us is not just our common vicious humanity but our continuing dialogue with God. In the history of Israel we are not looking at some detached and monumental exemplar, but at the actual roots of our own community, a relationship which we are still living out. We are not only learning from the past, but actually engaging in that same dialogue where God is still creating and winning God's people. It is a dialogue without limits, for it draws us into a limitless reality: God's unbounded personality.