

9 The Real God

God is real. Throughout this book I have been trying to show what that statement means. Of course, I have only been able to make a beginning, but even a beginning - a first, tentative awareness of God - is an important step. It opens up questions and possibilities. It eliminates some fundamental errors. But above all, because it is a contact with God, however rudimentary, it is a limitless opportunity. We have begun the work of a lifetime. Or rather, God has begun in us a work of eternity.

But there is a problem: we can hardly even say that God is real without lapsing into idolatry. Everything that we call "real" is solid, tangible, subject to reason and to our investigation, identified, observable, assessable, governed by logical and physical laws which we understand. Whatever we call "real" is somehow within our reach, or at least within reach of our knowledge. It is real because we recognise it, know what effect it will have and can watch it behave according to character. It is subject to our experience, or at least subject to our thought, set within the realm of things that we can call "reality".

Our knowledge of things comes from putting them in categories, classifying them and recognising them so that they behave according to type. We feel that we know about shoes, aluminium, cabbages or internal combustion engines, when we can group them with similar objects or contrast them with different, and when we know what they will or will not do. We form general ideas about them: definitions or descriptions that cover most of their class. (For example, my general idea of a table fits most things that would be called a table.) Even human beings are treated this way. We say that they are "rational animals", "featherless bipeds", "naked apes" or "tool-making primates", thereby showing where they fit into our understanding of things. Thus we order and arrange our world, and mentally at least, bring it within the sphere of our competence.

Even spiritual realities are subject to our classifying minds, expected to fit into categories we can describe. They may not be "solid" but they have force or power or effect, and we hope to control, or at least to predict that effect. Spiritual realities have their own character - some would say their own "secret" - which nonetheless we feel it is possible to grasp and comprehend. Whether by reason, religion or magic, we hope to build up a body of knowledge about them, and so to become competent over them.

No matter what it is, spiritual or material, as long as we recognise it as real, we identify it and so make it subject to us. It is subject to our way of seeing things, fitted into our world, our perceptions, and our categories. And that is why we are so near to idolatry when we say that God is real. For we are close to identifying him, describing him, giving him a place within our universe of realities: and to do any of these things to God, is to fall into idolatry. Any god we identify, having a place among the material or spiritual realities we name, or fitting into any of our categories, is an idol. And "real" is one of our

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categories. It would appear that we can't even say "God is real", without lapsing into idolatry.

Our problem is like Jeroboam's when he took on the difficult task of "identifying" Israel's God. It was an urgent matter, because he had to ensure that Yahweh was recognised in Israel without the kingdom falling back under Judah's influence. But he could not arrange it without using places and symbols which had their own misleading associations. He "sinned", ultimately, because his very attempt was sinful. None of us can identify or describe God, and even the best-intentioned, best-informed attempt to do so is the beginning of idolatry.

The problem is that we cannot identify God at all. When we say that God is real, it cannot be because we have succeeded in identifying him, but only because God has identified Godself. God is not some thing we discover and describe, but some One who has approached us and declared himself to us. We recognise God as real only because and as he declares himself to us.

We do not identify God, but God identifies Godself. And identifying himself, God addresses us. Because of that, no matter how urgent our need, we can only wait and listen until God chooses to speak. The initiative is God's, and we cannot go Jeroboam's way, trying to define God for ourselves. We can wait like Elijah on Mount Horeb, till God speaks, but even then if we try to fit God into our world, to include him in our lives or give him a place in our society, we will only fail. It is when we learn to be included in a world independent of us, to receive a place created for us among those to whom God has revealed Godself, that we come to know the real, the living God.

To give God his place - even his "rightful place" - in your life and your society is to establish an illusion and an idol. Jeroboam tried to give Yahweh his place in the new Israel, and he only succeeded in setting up an idol, paving the way for a return to Baal. Ahab tried, both with Baal and with Yahweh, to give them a role in his kingdom, a function as official gods of Israel, but he found himself disastrously out of step with the real God, who was bent on giving Israel a place in his plans. The real God does not "fit in" and can never be given any place, for all places are his to give, and to relate to God, knowing God, is to discover and accept a place that you are given. You cannot include God in your scheme of things, for to know God is to be given a challenging role in God's own vast and ever creative scheme.

We have to give up the idea that we, even by drawing on our highest powers of thought, can analyse God and tease out the best words to describe him with. We know God only because God has communicated with us. We recognise the reality of God only in so far as God has made contact with us, approaching us within our own universe of space and time. Because God has done so, because there is a history of God acting into our world, and because there is a record of that history, and because God still speaks to us confirming that history, we have words with which to describe him. They are not the best words we conceive, but the words God has chosen to give us. Our only justification for

any idea of God is not some logical force or appropriateness, but simply that God has so presented Godself.

God shows himself in history, affecting it as he does so. That is not to say that God is part of history, a being like us within time and space; but that by acting with us, acting with his people in history, God discloses Godself to us. He does so of course, in terms and categories that we can understand, and they are therefore still inadequate. But they are terms of God's choosing, and accepting them does not mean foisting our descriptions on God, but accepting God as God chooses to approach us. If God speaks to us of who and what God is, his words will not be idolatry. They will be God's self-revelation, not our sophisticated god-making. They may be a scandal, a paradox, a mystery, but they will be words for which God takes responsibility, a way - the only way - of our relating to him. All other ways lead to an abstract deity or to useless idols.

Knowing a person is very different from knowing a thing. To know someone, to be acquainted with them, is to have some personal link with them, to recognise them by some connection or bond of communication between you. A person is known personally, not by general characteristics they have in common with a whole class of things, but by unique, individual disclosures. Knowing people is very different from putting them into categories (which is something we do when we don't know them). We can relate to a person (an uncle, or the lady next door) as a distinct person and an individual, as someone we "know", long before we know very much about them. We can identify them as someone significant to us, even if we have still to learn the most important things about them. We know them (however little we know about them) so long as there is some kind of personal "history" shared by us.

And this is how God has made Godself known. God is personal and relates to us with the uniqueness of a person, by the things God has done and said in a particular place and time, in the history of Israel in the land of Palestine. When we recognise God it cannot be us reaching out to classify God, but God communicating with us, having chosen the place, the time, the words. We simply discover that God is approaching us, speaking to us, and challenging our whole understanding of reality with his self-disclosure to us. It is God who chooses or creates the categories of God's disclosure, and to discover God is to have our own most cherished categories upset and superseded by God's. It is to come under judgment, being tested, tried, changed and fitted for a world of God's making. To discover God will always be a humbling, bracing encounter with an utterly new and overwhelming truth.

To discover God is not to stumble upon some thing, or to dig up an answer to our investigations, but to be approached and reached, at last, by God. It's as if we set out to investigate an ancient and damaged painting, but found instead that a light was searching out and exposing the close-guarded secrets of our own being; as if we set out to unearth a hidden treasure, long forgotten and lost under the rubble of centuries, only to find a living being bent on digging us out, when we didn't even know we were buried. It's as if we set out to study an object, looking, testing, probing, judging – and found instead someone

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who speaks to us, looking, probing our reality, testing whether we will trust and respond to him, and giving us his assessment of what he finds.

And although the assessment may be a judgement, it is also the foundation of our own reality. We are real because God addresses us. Our first and ultimate claim to reality, to exist, is that God speaks to us. Personal reality, based as it is in God's affirmation of us is also personal value: that God, in speaking to us, values us. Our knowledge of the reality of God is one with our discovery of the value of ourselves and of all to whom God speaks. To discover the existence of God is to realise that God uncovers and affirms our existence, and that the One who values us is speaking to us. In the book of Kings and thruout the Bible, God leaves no distance between the revelation of God's existence and the existence, belonging and value of God's people, to whom he makes it. You cannot separate the existence of God from a peasant's right to land.

To discover God is not to lay hold of reality, but to find that reality lays hold of you. God is not just an additional reality to be added to the inventory of real things we know. He is not even the greatest of those realities - not even if we say he is infinite. God is one who challenges our most personal and our most widely agreed perceptions of reality; one who announces himself with a claim that overturns those "realities" on which we base our very existence and in which we try to protect ourselves. It is not only our private notions that come up for review, but the very public, communal, agreed perceptions of reality by which we identify ourselves as a community, on the basis of which we seek to co-operate and to defend ourselves, and because of which we are at odds with others who do not share our world view, who are outside our own society and nation. The real God, who approached Israel and spoke to her, overturned ideas and beliefs on which the whole nation depended.

Our religion is free of idolatry only in so far as our God can challenge us and upset our most darling realities. The real God must overturn the world we construct out of our perceptions, because it is made up of forces that we learn to harness and things that we learn to control, and God is independent of all our systems of control. However much God acts within our sphere, relating to us in the things that concern us, he will show himself to be God transcending them all.

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Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the real God, and no projection of our desires and fears, or of our collective and national policy. He does not wither away when subsequent deities are chosen by a new age or a new electorate, but is more permanent and consistent than even his most enthusiastic followers, and when their dedicated efforts crumble into failure, he is unchanged. When their will caves in and their opponents dismiss them with a threat; when they are sent packing, humiliated and helpless, running for safety; when they have no resources left, and no more desires but to give up and die, then he is still there, drawing on his own resources. He is unshaken by the failure of his servants and is

able to renew them with a word, with the gift of strength, with food. He is Yahweh, the living and personal God who still rules history and wins the hearts of his people

The choice between Yahweh and Baal divided the prophets and the successors of Omri. I hope it is now clear that this was not just some ancient, irrelevant quarrel over rival gods but a struggle over the fundamental choice that still faces us, whether to worship gods that are the mere reflection of ourselves and our society, or to worship the one, true, personal God, who transcends us yet speaks to us and judges us. We can follow illusions that are nothing, or we can follow Yahweh, who is real and always himself.

The illusions, while they last, seem to be most real and solid, precisely because they are a reflection of ourselves, of our own most ardent wishes and proudest boasts. They seem to be all-powerful, coinciding with the most powerful influences in our society and invoked by its most powerful authorities. Not surprisingly: because they are reflections of that power and the human need that creates it. The illusions, while they last, are as splendid and solid as Solomon's new Jerusalem, as enduring and promising as Ahab's and Jezebel's brave new Israel. They have all the pride and authority of unquestioned power, of a nation united in self-confidence, of rulers massively and unhesitatingly supported, of arms prepared and able to do battle. They are indeed enduring illusions, lasting as long as our will, our strength, our resourcefulness, our courage, our commitment, can sustain them - and then they pass away. Yahweh remains.

God is "identified" for us, not because we have an unchanging and unchangeable concept of him, but because all our ideas of him, immature and mature, relate to the same One, who is beyond them all. The one who spoke to Jeroboam and Elijah and Jehu is the one who speaks to us. Our understanding of him may be better than theirs, but we are still relating to the same One, or rather the same One is still speaking to us. Because we depend on God himself to disclose himself, we can expect the images and concepts he chooses to be consistent: not always the same, because none of them is adequate, but always able to complement one another. What he has shown in the past will not contradict his present approach to us, but past and present together will fill out our understanding of the one who has made himself known.

We can identify a person, and be identified with them, long before we fully or rightly know them. Time and acquaintance may improve our relationship; new circumstances and surprising behaviour may radically alter it; but throughout that relationship we continue to identify them as the same person. A grown woman, with children of her own, has a very different understanding of her mother from what she had as a toddler in a pushchair; but she still identifies her (for good or ill) as the same person. Their relationship has grown through a lifetime of changing ideas and attitudes, but it is still a relationship between them, and not some other people.

In revealing and declaring himself as Yahweh, God has committed himself. However much our idea of God subsequently has to grow or be corrected, his identity will not be different. He remains the same One. He does not become first one god and then another,

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first one person and then another, as the needs and the interests of his people change. He is not subject to altering fashion. Our relationship with Yahweh continues and he continues to reveal himself to us, to draw us into the mystery he is. There is much, much more to know about him, and many false ideas have to be corrected, but it is still him.

Three world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have grown from this conviction: that God has revealed Godself by speaking to particular people in a particular place – in the first place to Abraham and his descendants. They are different religions, with sometimes very different ideas of God, but they can say they are worshipping the same God, because, ultimately, for all of them when they are true to their history, God is not their concept of him, but One who acted, and identified himself in this particular context. He is God. He has acted and will act so that we may come to know him better.

That God has spoken in history, identified and involved himself (in whatever way) counts for more than all possible speculation about God. He has committed himself and will not go back on it. The revelation he has made, he will not retract, and it remains our true knowledge of God. When God speaks, whomever he speaks to and whomever he speaks thru, all our speculation must fall silent and listen. Because he has acted not just as an unseen, unknown force transcending all history but as someone working within history, it is possible for us to know him. We can respond to him, affirming and committing ourselves to what he has established: not a body of laws, nor even a system of morality, but a relationship in which he gives himself to his people.

That is why the revelation of God recorded in scripture is so important. Some modern teachers fight shy of scripture, of the Old Testament in particular, fearing to accord it any kind of authority, which might limit God to categories that are only too human. They do not want to be bound to a particular culture or the ideas of a particular period and place. But they fail to realise that the surest way of "limiting" your idea of God, the surest way of falling into culture bondage, is to undervalue or avoid the insights of an earlier age and a different culture. The best way to break free of the ordinary limitations of human thought is to be humbly open to ideas from an alien culture many centuries ago, as well as ideas from our own time and culture.

But that isn't the half of it. No matter how many cultures we crossed, or how many ages of thought we travelled, we would still end up with human constructs: ideas of God that come from human ingenuity and are therefore ultimately idolatrous. Only by listening to God where God has taken the initiative, and has chosen to speak through particular people at particular times in particular idioms and language (as Jews, Christians and Muslims believe God has done) can we speak of God and receive ideas of God without falling into idolatry. Only revealed religion puts us in touch with the real God: and that not because its ideas and ways of speaking are more adequate, but because God takes responsibility for them, because they are the ideas he chooses to speak through (often, as we have seen in this book, against our better judgement).

When we say that God is real, we are committed to the personal God who has spoken in history and declared himself: any other is an idol. When we say that God is real, we must mean that God has approached us and spoken to us, revealing Godself as someone who wishes to communicate with us, and so has drawn us into a greater and more permanent reality than we ever meant to undertake.

Those who want to deny that God revealed himself to Israel, who want to say that their Yahweh was only one of the many gods by which people picture the One God, are usually trying to remove God to a safer distance, out of reach of crude and idolatrous misconceptions (as if any of our conceptions could be other than crude). They often mean that we should relate to God not as to a particular god identified in history, but as to the absolute deity, the universal Creator, or the transcendent goal of contemplation. But to recognise God's approach to us, is to recognise a relationship that is not established from a safe distance. God commits Godself to a close and particular involvement. To communicate, God is willing to identify himself, by speaking uniquely to a particular people as their god, meeting their needs and remaining committed to them.

To recognise and respond to Yahweh is to respond to God himself and so to escape idolatry. To replace Yahweh, even with the most refined and informed idea of God, is to fall into idolatry, losing sight of who he is - who he has declared himself to be. If we are not to worship gods of our own making, however sophisticated, we must understand and accept God's own disclosure to us as Yahweh, the God of Israel. That is the beginning of faith. Like Naaman, we can only recognise that the God who spoke to Israel is our God; and we will worship him not as we would choose to picture him, but as he reveals himself, on his own ground. Even the clumsiest understanding is not idolatrous when it is God's initiative to present Godself in it; even the most refined is idolatrous, if it consists of our attempt to describe God.

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To assert that God identified himself as the particular god of one people, would seem to imply the arrogant claim that one culture, one nation, one way of life and one view of the world is singled out for special favour. In fact, the opposite is the case. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is indeed God himself speaking to a people he identifies as his people. But as a result of that, their whole existence, their national aspiration and the evolving sense of their national future and interests come under challenge. The natural economic and cultural development of their community is shaken and disrupted by the intervention of God. It was Ahab, not Elijah who stood for the self-development of Israel's culture and nationhood.

To say that Yahweh is God, does not mean that one people and one culture has privileged status, to be normative for others. It means that one particular culture is subject to the personal God who has spoken in it, and he will always claim the right to modify, develop, change or overturn it. The one who identifies himself is vastly more than the culture through which he does so. So it is not the Israelites' concept of God that is important. It

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is not even their concept of Yahweh, but Yahweh himself, declaring himself: and Israel itself will be overturned (more than once), so as to remain Yahweh's people, to whom he discloses himself.

When the real God approaches us, we find our own "realities" called into question. All that we call realism: practical, reasonable expectations; carefully planned hopes and well-laid schemes; political sophistication, expertise and success: all these, in the light of God's reality, are shown up for unreal - insubstantial and fragile attempts to play at being. They lack the depth and commitment and enduring purpose of real and personal existence as God reveals it. The story we have been following from the Book of Kings is not the story of Israel confirmed in her concept of God and granted her requirements of him, but of national and private illusions shattered again and again. Israel finds that the one who speaks to her is no mere national god, no mere embodiment of her self-image and aspirations, but the real God. She is up against reality - and that is a shattering experience.

We began with Israel united under the House of David and overshadowed by Solomon's magnificence. But Yahweh declared an end to that dynasty, and the kingdom was split in two. All the promise of Jerusalem, the confident plans of its court, the expectations of a ruler who had the respect of the known world - Yahweh who spoke to Israel through Ahaziah and Jeroboam and the discontented northern tribes, overturned them all. They passed away and came to nothing in a new encounter with the real God.

He is a challenge even to those he favours, and if the heirs of David were disappointed, Jeroboam was also frustrated in his plans. God was too big to be contained by his ideas. Yahweh spoke through the prophets to challenge his perception of his task, astute and politic though it was, and his attempt to establish a lasting dynasty over the tribes of Israel was even less successful than David's had been.

But Elijah, too, came unstuck. Yahweh's most faithful servant, the one who in all this history was most loyal to him, most dedicated in his desire to serve him, most clear in his recognition of the personal God who spoke to Israel - he too found that Yahweh had plans and ways of working that baffled him. Where he expected victory, Yahweh let him face defeat; and when he wished for death, Yahweh summoned him to a life of continued activity. He does not "spare" even the prophet who trusts him, and Elijah most of all had to learn how real is the God he served. Yahweh is the great shatterer of illusions. Whether wicked or noble illusions, foolish or very understandable, Yahweh shatters them all: he is the real God.

Jezebel came to Israel with the conviction that authority and power meant the right to push aside every obstruction, that royal economic and administrative decisions should simply overrule narrower rights. It was a conviction born of proven experience in many kingdoms: that strong governments able to put down opposition meant strong and prosperous nations. And because people feel secure under a firmly established authority, many Israelites agreed with her. But Yahweh opposed Jezebel, and the king whose

prestige mattered above all was forced to retreat, humiliating himself before the prophet of Yahweh. He is a God who comes against the "national interest" even as some of its ablest and foremost leaders see it, for he is the real God, not conditioned by any nation's interests.

And yet that very reality affirms his people's unshakeable value. Naboth may be brushed aside by a progressive nation-builder who is determined to take out every obstacle in the road of progress; and by any realistic standards Naboth did not count against the assertion of royal power. He was foolish to resist, as the puny resistance of hunters and farmers cannot count in the world of logging companies and international food corporations. But the very existence of God revealed to them asserts that they count whatever powers and interests try to override them. God, who really is, stands against the powers that deny the place and value of his people, for in that they deny the reality of God.

God supports and encourages many things, many courses, many people, but he breaks the illusions of all of them, for God can not be tied down to any other will. Whatever illusions we have of managing, using or directing our own gods, they melt into vain unreality when God confronts us. Jezebel's seers may ply and pressure their Baals; Ahab may tell his tame prophets what to say; but Yahweh eludes them all. The God of Micaiah gives his own answer, popular or unpopular, whether it wins the approval of authority or provokes an angry backlash. He is the product of no one's decisions or interests. He is Yahweh.

When Naaman come to Israel seeking a cure for his skin disease, he expected that the wonder-worker would be well placed in the country's power structure, a well-known and respected figure at court. It would be a small concession for the Commander of Aram's forces to come to him for a cure. He would honour the man with appropriate gifts - he would pay his way - and return as clean-skinned as a grandee of the court of Damascus had every right to be. In short, he suffered from the delusion that the power of Israel's God ran, like the power of all gods, in the familiar channels of power: that Yahweh went to work as all great men go to work, achieving their great things through agents whose worth and power is also great.

He was humbled. His illusions were shattered by his brusque encounter with the prophet, and he had to learn "sweet reason" from his servants. He had to bow to the will of a God who showed little interest in the customary observance of rank. Protocol, to us the essence of discourse in high places, gets scant attention from Yahweh. His way is his own way, a rebuke to the play and posturing that passes for greatness among us.

Neither will he play the game at the other end: with those who, acting as his representatives, try to turn it to their own advantage. Gehazi believed that a prophet was worth his pay - and a great deal of pay at that. To him it was only right that those who bore the heat of the day working for Yahweh should, when the right people came their way, be properly enriched. His was the illusion that you can safely trade with God's

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power. It can be done, for there are those who will pay for the gifts of God, but not safely. Gehazi goes marked with the judgement of God on those who turn him to profit.

The house of Omri was overturned and broken in the end, because its power rested on illusions. Omri's Israel, however successful it was for a time, and however popular the dynasty, was not the real Israel. The nation as Ahab saw it and as Jezebel strove to shape it, was not the Israel of Yahweh but a power structure built on passing success and arrogant self-assertion. It lasted nearly three generations, but even an illusion of three generations' standing is overturned and shattered, while Yahweh continues his work.

In the end, Yahweh was on the side of the rebels because there was no way he would uphold the illusion. Jehu, too, in time, would have to face the bitter reality of his "success"; but here, where this book ends, it is the noble dreams of Jezebel, the unflinching delusion of rulers who believe they can govern in their own right, obliging even the gods to cooperate with them, that are shattered into pieces.

God is real, and only what is real in its own measure can stand exposure to him. He will always favour reality, the truth, over the most attractive falsehood. He will always uphold what really is, against what is only pretended. At his approach, mere appearances melt into nothing. He rejects the superficial, even if it is superficially good. He recognises and deals with the real, even if it is really bad.

He brushes aside our most edifying and respectable games to concentrate on what is our real passion, our real engagement. Even if the reality is scandalously deficient, crude, ugly and violent, he will still address us and prompt us as we are, and not on the basis of any pretended virtue. He does not waste his breath on poses. He has more in common with real and passionate vengeance than with counterfeited moderation. He has more to say to a committed butcher like Elijah, than to an image-builder like Ahab.

To come close to God - to be brought close by his approach - is always to come too close for pretence, bluff, façade, self-deception or delusion. And when you realise how much we depend on these to survive and establish ourselves, you begin to realise what a dangerous and alarming thing it is to encounter God. To face him and to speak with him is to have every mask, front, image, projection, stripped away and your real self exposed. It brings you too close to the truth for those cushioning illusions to work any more.

Yet to come close to him is to become real in the fullest sense, to have meaning and identity as persons. To be real is to be able to face this reality of God and give God your trust. We are real in so far as we can face the reality of God, related to God without crumbling into nothingness. Of the major characters in this story - Jeroboam, Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah - it is Elijah who emerges as the most real and enduring. The prophet who waits and obeys, far from dwindling into passive nonentity, becomes a giant in character and action, the inspiration of a whole new way of life for many in Israel. Serving the real God, he becomes an authentic person. He had his illusions, but because

he knew and trusted Yahweh, he was able to survive the shattering of them, to return to the conflict, God's prophet still.

Great though many others were, they do not stand up in the presence of God. Ahab and Jezebel can appear real, solid and dynamic, but only if God is left out of account and history considered without God. Jezebel could not encounter the real God, because he would always be beyond her control. For all her determination and tragic greatness, she was limited to what she could handle. Kings like Ahab and Jeroboam were burdened and constricted by the need to protect their achievements: they were limited to what they could hold on to. Even the rebel Jehu owed too much to his own lust and ambition. He could not rise to be God's servant - only his instrument. But Elijah, who trusted Yahweh, learnt to trust him beyond all expectations, and to go wherever Yahweh sent him. For all his limitations, he was the more complete person, open to God and so open to something greater than himself, open to a future which was more than he could know. Because he could turn to Yahweh, even in utter defeat, and ask for death as a gift from him, he could receive from him a task beyond his asking. Jezebel in her defeat faced death nobly; but Elijah in his learnt to live again, drawing new purpose and meaning from the inexhaustible resources of God.

The made-up face, the bold front that confronts enemies, is a pretence after all. A brave pretence, facing even death with courage and scorn, but an illusion for all that. Its poise and dignity could not endure the approach of God. It can meet death, but not God. In the end, even Jezebel is unreal: the woman of strength and character and vision cannot survive in the face of God's approach. Her kind of greatness is indeed greatness to the end - but it comes to an end, where it can do no more than paint its face in a last act of defiance.

It is no accident that Elijah's end has grown into legend, and that later generations saw a destiny for him beyond history itself and reaching to the very end of Yahweh's purposes. The transcendent aura that surrounds his departing is not a touch of unreality, but the recognition of our own limits: that we cannot say the last word of his story. There is no describable end to the person who is truly the servant of the living, personal God.

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To discover God is to encounter someone who takes hold of us and claims authority over us. We have "found" God when we find that God is ruling our lives and that we can no longer be in command. Such a discovery is not the rare experience of advanced "saints" but the only real discovery of God, for anyone. It was the inspiration of Elijah's career: that the God he knew as real and personal called for implicit obedience and trust. It is a dangerous discovery, and those who want to make their nest in a safe place of their own choosing will find the real God too real, his approach too close for comfort.

To know God is to recognise the one whose personal reality transcends all reality as we know it - who is far beyond every familiar place - but nonetheless speaks to us and relates

Too Close to God

to us, right into every domain of our reality. We cannot first ascertain God's existence and then, quite separately, decide whether to accept him and commit ourselves to him. To recognise that God exists at all, is to recognise God's overriding reality and his overriding claim on all else. To resist these, is to deny his existence, whatever illusory god we put in his place.

He is Yahweh. To recognise that Yahweh is God is not to tie ourselves down to a primitive concept of God but to open ourselves up to an endless and challenging relationship. To say that "Yahweh is God" is not to close the matter, but to enter into a relationship with God in which God opens up unlimited possibilities, with further questions and further answers. It is not to end the search for God, but to begin it. It is to enter a world of language, symbols and scriptures which are none of them the last word. We can never say where it will end. We have recognised the personal God whose reality we can never define but only experience, accept and live with: Yahweh, the God of Israel, who strove to win the hearts of his people.

This book has been a small beginning, a probe into some of the murkier, more primitive origins of Israel. But there we have discovered the challenge of God who can still be found at work in our murky, primitive and tortured world. What we have found provokes us to go on, not only learning, but doing and living, for this beginning is a commitment in which we are still being led.

We cannot hesitate or half-co-operate. We are challenged to come close to God, or rather to recognise how close God has come to us: too close for our petty pretences or our grandest illusions to survive, too close for any of our fantasies to hold up. We cannot start and then change our minds; or begin with Yahweh and then improve upon him. He will do all the improving. We cannot stop when he proves too real, too consistent for our changing circumstances, because he will not stop. We cannot call a halt and declare for ourselves what kind of God he will be. Yahweh, the God of Israel has already come too close to us for that.