

Prologue: On the Road to Ephraim

Jeroboam's party had passed through the city gates soon after sunrise and, without hurry, was making its way north to the hills of Ephraim. They rode strung out along the road as if any real purpose for their existence lay far behind them or all too far ahead. The men were armed but casual, as if it had not been decided whether the escort was for show or for action. They didn't belong in that quiet countryside; but the quiet countryside seemed to take them in and tolerate them. It had its own life to lead, but it had a way of coping with them, as if nature itself had laid out the road, to get them through to Ephraim with a minimum of disturbance.

For Jeroboam, it was the beginning of a strange journey. Conflicting sensations and memories tumbled through his mind, giving him a strange, uneasy feeling. As soon as he lost sight of Jerusalem, the world had begun to change as if he were waking from a dream: a noisy, frenetic, foreign, glamorous, and golden dream. Like all dreams, it had felt real at the time - provided you didn't look at it too closely - but now, as he woke, he wondered how he could ever have been deluded.

He found himself wondering what he was doing here, riding at the head of his attendants like a great man. It occurred to him that they, too, were part of the dream. They had seemed so necessary, so important to his status and self-respect, as they clattered out of Jerusalem that morning, turning every head in the gathering market. But now, alone on a country road, they were an irrelevant trapping. He was going home. The road ahead led the young Ephraimite back to the land of his ancestors, the real Israel.

He breathed the air in deeply. This was real air. Not like the air you had to breathe in Jerusalem, stifling with the dust of Solomon's constructions. A dry, barren city was Jerusalem, a city of stone and gold, full of princes and workmen. Jeroboam felt good to be back in the real world where crops and pastures grew - the green world where people tilled the soil and walked with their flocks.

On either side of the road was the rich, glad life of the hillsides that seemed to sing with joy to be so fertile, so abundant. Fig trees were in full leaf, looking forward to the summer; olives spread their cool shade, with the promise already of a good harvest; crops were filling out and the grass was scattered with flowers. The land was a happy place, and Jeroboam could not help wondering why men thought they were happy in Jerusalem - why he himself imagined he was happy when he was there, immersed in the bustle of the King's business and enjoying authority as the King's man.

But that, of course, was it. Authority and bustle answered to his ambition. Simple, natural delights were never enough for a go-ahead young man like Jeroboam, and that was why he had worked eagerly, attracting the King's notice and winning powerful appointments in his service. That was why now, as master in charge of conscription for the whole of Ephraim and Manasseh, he was riding home from Jerusalem with a guard of

the King's own horsemen. He was returning to press more of his people into the King's service, to take them from their olive trees and crops and flocks into the King's construction gangs. Jeroboam enjoyed power, and his power was to make men serve their time, to lead them off to the hot dust and machinery of the quarries, to make them labour in building sites, working the barren, beautiful stone.

What kind of illusion had he been sucked into? That this was life and power and success? Dragging healthy men from the land where they belonged and where their work meant food, to mine and quarry, hew and saw and haul, all to the glory of King Solomon? What business had they with palaces, temples, walled cities, vast barracks and stables, forts and even sea-going fleets? What did it all mean to a people who had always lived for the land, whose fathers had fought and won the land for sheep and for crops, whose god had given them the land as their home and their security? What did it mean to a people who had felt the bracing water of Jacob's wells on their faces, and the good ground of Ephraim's hillsides under their feet?

Solomon was a fool, he thought (before he realised that that made him, master of the King's conscripts, a fool's fool). However, Solomon was secure in his fool's fortress. The people did not love him, but his power was beyond question, even to those who hated the burden of his works. There was enormous respect for the House of David, and those who remembered the old days and the terror of the Philistines were grateful for what it had given Israel: two generations of pride and security. Solomon kept the allegiance of his people, even when he took away their independence and broke their bond with the land.

Yet for all that, thought Jeroboam, Solomon was a fool. At least he, Jeroboam, when he returned to the hills of Ephraim, woke from his illusions. Solomon and his court persisted in theirs, living out their lives in the fantasy that the whole land centred upon Jerusalem. Two generations ago, Jerusalem had been nothing to Israel but a sore in Benjamin. Now it had swelled out of all proportion, and David's fortress had become a prison, encasing its own rulers in delusions as hard as stone. The palace walls rang with brazen self-deceit. Here, they imagined all Israel in conformity with their dreams and schemes, a plot of land to be remapped and parcelled out at the whim of their administrators. And they had the power to do whatever they imagined. He himself was an agent of their power, and he knew the weight of his authority.

But Jerusalem was not Israel, and Israel would not forever conform to Jerusalem's rulers. It was a new thought forcing itself awkwardly upon him as he rode homewards, away from the city of his illusions. It jarred and disturbed him, for there was still the irresistible tug of power. For all the illusion, the power was real enough. He liked his authority in the present order, and as long as the illusion ruled, he would have to serve it. He would do the king's work and raise another thousand conscripts, for Solomon, excited at the prospect of completing a palace, was already laying plans for his next project. The king's dreams were still taking solid shape in stone, and his ambitious fantasies still meant power, wealth and prestige for anyone who could serve them. But Jeroboam was less and less sure that Solomon's order would last, and, for all his own success, he was troubled by

one more thought: where would Jeroboam be when the real Israel stood up to Jerusalem and demanded a reckoning?

Without his noticing it, the horse had caught his agitation and was moving forward more briskly. His men - perhaps they also sensed his mood - were as far behind as custom allowed in this safe country, when, by the roadside ahead, he saw someone standing as if waiting to meet him. The man was wearing a new cloak, which, as Jeroboam approached, he took off and tore from top to bottom. The prophet - for only a prophet would accost him with such odd behaviour - then proceeded to tear up the whole cloak, piece by piece. His strong grip ripped with the run of the cloth until, as Jeroboam reached him, he had only strips of rag in his hands. Two of them he kept, but the rest he held out to the rider, ten strips of a torn cloak for the master of forced labour in Ephraim.

"Take ten strips for yourself, for thus Yahweh speaks, the God of Israel, I am going to tear the kingdom from Solomon's hand and give ten tribes to you. He shall keep one tribe for the sake of my servant David.'" (IK 11:31-32)

Yahweh, the god of Israel, is real. He is to be met in every kind of reality, even the ugliest, sooner than in the prettiest illusions or the most high-minded pretence. He is God, and God is real. To encounter him is to find him active and effective: doing and changing, shaping the very pattern of society and history, demolishing its most impressive facades. To meet him is to face a radical and dangerous challenge to every form of delusion.

And we have many. We live by delusions, protecting or encouraging ourselves with useful perceptions that answer to our fears or wishes and not to reality. Solomon was not the last to build a splendid dream and in it to lose touch with the truth. Nor is it only the great ones carving out empires to suit themselves, who rely on illusions, but with them are the mass of people who depend on them for security, finding under their guarantee modest scope for their own lesser ambitions. Workers, farmers, housewives and small businessmen can all feel safer under the show of power, willing to offer it their votes, their taxes, their services as petty masters of conscription.

The strongest, most independent reality, against which we marshal the most determined and powerful illusions, is God. For God who spoke to Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah is not a reflection of anyone's desire or fear or power, and all the habits of power fail and collapse before him. Kings and presidents, generals and mighty financiers - all who have the power to enforce their fantasies - are subject to the final test of reality: what they are in his sight. Wealth, weaponry, overwhelming popular support, the mystique of royalty, whatever it is that makes the powerful most solid, real and persuasive, all this can be overturned by the touch of God exposing its fragile unreality.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is God approaching us, drawing near to speak to us. But God is on the side of the truth that challenge us and not on the side of comforting and reassuring illusions. The real God is too real, too independent and consistent for any

people. We would rather invent a thousand gods than face him. When God speaks, he challenges current perceptions and threatens established powers. Yahweh, who spoke through Ahijah, challenging Solomon's invincible prestige, is God coming close to his people - too close for even the sturdiest dreams to survive.

This book is the story of an encounter with God. It is the history of Israel's encounter with Yahweh during the generations that followed the break-up of Solomon's kingdom. It is the story of northern Israel - Israel without the tribe of Judah - struggling against the reality of a God who approached and spoke to her, and struggling in vain. It is the history of a people's illusions, of rulers' prestige and power, and of the critics who spoke out in God's name, calling both to face and accept the reality of him. Here prophets, kings and people all stand exposed to the light of God, in which the reality of each is tested.

But it is not just history. We will discover that Yahweh is still speaking to us and that the God of the prophets is testing us, trying our strength and our reality as rigorously as he tested the Israelites'. Their encounter with God is the beginning of our encounter. Though much has changed in the meantime, it is the same God whom we are now challenged to acknowledge. Israel's Yahweh is still the God who approaches us, coming too close for comfort, too close to leave intact any of our fantasies and delusions.