

Part One

The Kings

CHAPTER 1

Israel Before the Monarchy

IT was Moses who made Israel a nation; but a nation needs a territory, and it was Joshua who played the leading role in providing that for them. Then, his work done, he died, and the period of the "Judges" began. To some extent, God's promises to Abraham of old had been fulfilled; Israel was potentially the strongest nation in the immediate area, and her people were to be found in varying strengths, in every region allotted to the Israelite tribes. However, much remained to be done to master and to consolidate the territory, and to transform "Israel" into a land as opposed to a people resident in that land. The era of the Judges was therefore to be anything but peaceful; much fighting lay ahead. The Book of Judges suggests, however, that much of the fighting was forced upon the Israelites, who were quite prepared for the most part to settle down as peasants and farmers, and let the political situation find its own level. This rather complacent attitude was in itself almost fatal, as events very soon proved. Various features and factors militated against the political strength and coherence of Israel.

First of all, it is clear that the Israelites were not united. Numbers 32 relates that in earlier days the Reubenites and Gadites had laid claim to territory east of the Jordan before ever Palestine proper had been invaded; but Moses had insisted that they were to give the other tribes full military support in the struggle in Palestine. The situation was different now; each tribe had its own area, and there it remained. Tribal elders were the administrators of the day, and were no doubt jealous of their position, with the result that the tribes were independent of one another. Nor was there any standing army. During the days of the conquest, every able-bodied man had been a soldier; but now they had all dispersed to their farms and small-

holdings, and could ill be spared to spend their time fighting. The pruning-hook and the plough-share had displaced the sword and the spear. Thus the Israelite tribes had not the machinery for concerted and effective military action.

A second factor was simply the fact of difficulty of communication. Palestine is no very big country, to be sure; from Dan to Beer-Sheba, the traditional northern and southern limits of Palestine proper, is some 150 miles as the crow flies, while the full east-west extent of the country does not reach half that figure at any point. And there were certainly some reasonably good roads; two famous highways were the King's Highway (cf. Numbers 20:17) and "the Way of the Sea" (cf. Isaiah 9:1), both running south from Damascus, the former through Transjordan, the latter via Palestine proper, leading to Arabia and Egypt respectively. And there were many lesser roads.¹ But speed of travel was very slow; the Gospels give some impression of the time it took to make the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is estimated that the 75-mile journey from Nazareth would have taken something like five days.

It is also probable that the Israelites during the period of the Judges allowed the roads to fall into a state of disrepair. Hitherto they had been properly cared for; in the fourteenth century B.C., a local Palestinian prince had written to his Egyptian overlord, to the effect that he had "made ready all the ways of the king".² But the Israelites were new to the ways of settled life, and it took them no little time to catch up with their predecessors in many of the civilized arts. Judges 5:6 testifies that in the early days of the Judges "caravans plied no longer; men who had followed the high roads went round by devious paths".

Presumably messengers were able to make their way reasonably swiftly from one part of the country to another. But in times of emergency, it will have taken an inordinately long while to collect together a body of troops, and then to dispatch it across the difficult terrain of Palestine. When Deborah and Barak had to meet a Canaanite coalition, they mustered as many tribal forces as they could. Evidently some of the tribes they appealed to failed to respond: "What made you linger by the cattle-pens?" Reuben was asked; and other tribes were tacitly rebuked — "Gilead stayed beyond Jordan; and Dan, why did he tarry by the ships? Asher lingered by the sea-shore, by its creeks he stayed" (Judges 5:16f.). Many of the tribes responded nobly; but it is noteworthy that nothing whatever is said about Judah and Simeon, the two most southerly tribes. We must conclude that it was recognised that they

1. See *MBA*, map 10.

2. Cf. Tell el-Armarna Letter 199: 10-13.

were too far away to be of any assistance, and that no appeal was made to them.³

But it was more than distances that separated Judah and Simeon from the more northerly tribes. Immediately north of Judah's territory lay the city of Jerusalem and its environs, still inhabited by the Jebusites, a Canaanite clan (cf. Genesis 10:16). Judges 1:21 mentions this fact, and also shows that the Jebusites and Benjaminites could live amicably side by side most of the time. But when further north Canaanites and Israelites were in conflict, there is little doubt as to where Jebusite loyalties would lie, and their stronghold will have constituted a formidable barrier, effectively preventing the two southern tribes from helping their kinsmen to the north. Nor was Jerusalem the only city of strategic position still in Canaanite hands.

The most formidable barrier separating Israelites from Israelites was the Plain of Jezreel, along the northern boundary of the territory of western Manasseh. The Israelites as yet possessed no chariotry, as did the Canaanites, and this meant that they were rarely a match for the latter once they descended from the hills. As a result, few lowland cities were in Israelite hands during the period of the Judges. So while the tribe of Manasseh held the northern part of the hill-country of Ephraim securely, and the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar had consolidated their position in the hills of Galilee, the Plain of Jezreel in between remained largely Canaanite, though allocated to Manasseh.

It is clear, then, that during the period of the Judges the Israelites had no few problems to face. But as if the natural hazards we have listed were not enough, the Israelites made things very much worse for themselves, in several respects. In the first place, inter-tribal jealousies were a constant feature of the Judges period, and indeed beyond, for it was the mutual jealousy and suspicion of Judah and Ephraim that split the Hebrew kingdom into two after Solomon's death. The Ephraimites seem to have been a particularly quarrelsome tribe; they tried to pick a quarrel with Gideon (Judges 8:1ff.), whose soft answer turned away wrath, and they succeeded in provoking Jephthah (Judges 12:1ff.), to their sorrow. The last two chapters of Judges relate how the little tribe of Benjamin fell out with the other tribes, and was almost wiped out in the warfare that followed. On this occasion, fortunately, the other tribes belatedly realized the danger, and declared: "Heirs there must be for the remnant of Benjamin who have escaped! Then Israel will not see one of its tribes blotted out" (Judges 21:17). Such incidents show that while the tribes never quite forgot their kinship and mutual responsibilities, they came very near to doing so at times.

3. For a detailed study of the possible reasons for the absence of mention of Judah and Simeon see A. D. H. Mayes, *Israel in the Period of the Judges* (SBT ii, 29: London 1974) pp. 98-103.

Ringed about as they were by potential foes, such deliberate disunity was the height of folly. But there was a much more insidious danger, which might well have proved disastrous to Israel. We have already referred to the presence of Canaanite cities in the middle of Israelite territory, a matter of no little military moment; but in the event it was not the military danger posed by the Canaanites that proved a major problem, but the attraction of the Canaanite customs and religion. The Israelites were thrown into continuous contact with the Canaanites, and they learned a great deal from them. It is all too easy to condemn the Israelites sweepingly for their apostasy, but one ought to have a certain sympathy with them. Many of us in the Western world of today have inherited a settled, highly developed culture of many centuries' standing; not so the Israelites in 1200 B.C. Of late their only professional training had been as builders, the slave workmen for the Egyptian kings, and the use even of that skill lay a long time in the past. Bezalel, the architect of the tabernacle and its furniture, had been specially endowed with skill for such a work, Exodus 31:1ff. relates; for Israel had no trained craftsmen in wood and metal as yet. The arts of war they had learned through dire necessity, under God-given leadership; but who was to teach them the arts of peace? Even where building was concerned they had much to learn; archaeologists have brought to light the fact that the cities destroyed by the invading Israelites were far better built than the Israelite cities erected over their ruins. Solomon, some centuries after the conquest, turned to the Phoenicians for an architect.

We can well believe that as the Israelites turned to farming, they were often grateful for the advice and practical skill of their Canaanite neighbours. Others were less interested in the land, and adopted other trades and professions which brought them into even closer contact with the Canaanites. Maritime trade is a good example of a Canaanite interest adopted on a large scale by Israelites. Deborah's complaint about Dan and Asher noted that they were too busy with their shipping concerns to lend a hand to their fellows (Judges 5:17). Were they perhaps too busy, or simply too indolent? It is perhaps even more probable that they were so enmeshed in trade alliances with the Canaanites that they found it neither politic nor convenient to join in an attack on other Canaanites.

There were relatively few occasions when Israelites and Canaanites found themselves at war, or the commercial and marital alliances formed between them might have proved fatal to Israel's unity. (On the other hand, these same alliances might have undermined Canaanite solidarity too, thus evening things out for both sides.) But there were various other enemies, and against them Israel needed to be united; the friendships with Canaanites were a

hindrance to any such communal feeling, for the Israelites found themselves with divided loyalties.

Since they learned so much from the Canaanites, it is not really particularly surprising that many Israelites felt drawn to Canaanite religion as well. Some may have reasoned that Yahweh was the God of the desert, and Baal the god of Palestine. Others may have intended no disrespect to their own faith, but failing to understand that Yahweh was a jealous God, wished to combine both faiths. We may be sure that the spiritual leaders of the nation did their best to disabuse their people of this notion, emphasizing the exclusive demands of Yahweh: "You shall have no other god to set against me" (Exodus 20:3). But the common people had no Bibles, nor any synagogues where they could get frequent instruction, and one wonders how often they heard the accurate facts about their faith. Probably much of the religious knowledge was handed down from father to son — a pattern of behaviour laid down in Exodus 13:8 — and one can well imagine the errors that would creep into such tuition. There is plenty of folk-religion, embodying pagan superstitions, still prevalent within Christendom despite the availability of churches and copies of Scripture.

Thus the merging of the two faiths (technically known as syncretism) was a very natural, if regrettable, development. Another unfortunate factor was that there was considerable superficial similarity between Israel's faith and the worship of the Canaanites. The worship of both peoples centred around sanctuaries; animal sacrifice, with very similar ritual, figured in both faiths; both had their annual agricultural festivals. The two people also used similar sacrificial technical terms, and even the same title for their (chief) deity. The Israelites had but one God, of course, Yahweh by name; but they often referred to him as Baal, which was not primarily a name but the ordinary Hebrew word for "owner", "lord" or "husband". The term Baal was therefore very suitable for describing the relationship in which Yahweh stood to his people; but of course its use led to endless confusion with Canaanite worship. Centuries later the problem was still so acute that the prophet Hosea spoke of a different Hebrew word to denote God's relationship to Israel: "On that day she shall call me 'My husband' and shall no more call me 'My Baal' " (Hosea 2:16). This other word for husband, in Hebrew *ish*, could lead to no such confusion.

One can appreciate something of the ease with which the Israelites fell into Baal worship. For all that, it was to this single factor that the writer of Judges attributed all the disasters that befell Israel at this time:

Then the Israelites did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord, and worshipped the Baalim. They forsook the Lord, their fathers' God who

had brought them out of Egypt, and went after other gods, gods of the races among whom they lived; they bowed down before them and provoked the LORD to anger; they forsook the LORD and worshipped the Baal and the Ashtaroth. The LORD in his anger made them the prey of bands of raiders and plunderers; he sold them to their enemies all around them, and they could no longer make a stand. Every time they went out to battle the LORD brought disaster upon them, as he had said when he gave them his solemn warning, and they were in dire straits.

(Judges 2:11-15)

This was the philosophy of the writer of Judges regarding the Israelite vicissitudes during a couple of centuries. Two questions arise; in the first place, does his philosophy meet the facts, or has he imposed a pattern on the events? And secondly, why was he, in common with other Old Testament writers, so vehemently opposed to Baal worship?

There is good reason to believe that the philosophy of Judges does indeed meet the facts. As we have noted already, alliance of any sort with the Canaanites led to divided Israelite loyalties, and so caused lack of cohesion in the face of various enemies. But religious agreement with them was even more serious, for it struck at the very roots of Israelite unity, which was based on their covenant relationship with their God. So long as they remained faithful to the worship of Yahweh, they remembered their covenant bonds to their fellows; but when they gave their devotion to local Baals, all such ties were weakened, to breaking point.⁴ Disaster was not only divine punishment for apostasy; it was indeed the inevitable result of it. But at least disaster had the effect of making the Israelites examine themselves, and ask the pertinent question, "Why are we suffering?" A little thought would reveal that it was Yahweh who had given them the land of Promise, and it was entirely in his hands whether they would keep it. And so time and again they "cried to the LORD", and he "raised up for them a deliverer". In returning to their own sanctuaries, they would rediscover the solidarity they had lost, and the situation would be immediately improved.

The hostility of the biblical writers to Canaanite worship needs no more justification than that Yahweh's demands were exclusive. But they viewed the Canaanite religion with more than disdain, they viewed it with horror. So far we have mentioned only its similarities to the Israelite faith, and said nothing of its clear differences. Even from the Bible, we could work out some of the differences, but of course the Old Testament is not interested in giving posterity a full

4. While not all scholars would date the covenant concept so early there is in recent scholarship a strong tendency to explain Israel's unity during the Judges period in religious rather than political terms. See A. D. H. Mayes, *op. cit.*, especially p. 109.

picture of Canaanite ideas and practices; nowadays, however, it is possible to turn to some documents which give much fuller details of the life and thought of these ancient neighbours of Israel. They are the Ras Shamra tablets.

There was very little material to bring us into direct contact with the Canaanites up till 1928. In that year a Syrian ploughman accidentally unearthed a tombstone in the vicinity of a mound, called Ras Shamra, on the north coast of Syria (opposite the "finger" of Cyprus) and this find led to a thorough excavation of the mound from 1929 onwards. The mound of Ras Shamra, investigation proved, covered the remains of an important city of antiquity named Ugarit, a centre of Canaanite civilization which flourished in the second millennium B.C. All manner of valuable articles and objects came to light, among them a large quantity of inscriptions and tablets of the fourteenth century B.C. Some of the latter are in languages and scripts which were already known to scholars, but a new language and new alphabet figure among the discovered texts, and they have naturally been called "Ugaritic". The Ugaritic language, once it was deciphered and translated, proved to be remarkably similar to Old Testament Hebrew, and has already been useful in clearing up one or two difficulties of meaning in the Old Testament. Two names familiar to readers of the Bible which also appear in the Ras Shamra texts are Leviathan and Danel (not the hero of the Book of Daniel, but quite conceivably the Danel or Daniel of Ezekiel 14:14).

These tablets give us a much fuller picture of Canaanite worship than we had before Ras Shamra was excavated. As we are well aware from the Old Testament, the Canaanites were polytheists, worshipping a variety of gods and goddesses. The senior god was not Baal, but El; this name seems to have been the common noun for "god" in the Semitic languages, including Old Testament Hebrew. He was thought of as the creator, and sometimes symbolised by a bull. But by the fourteenth century El did not figure very largely in Canaanite worship, for all his seniority, and Baal was the most important deity. (This may explain why the Israelite prophets objected to the title "baal", lord, being given to Yahweh, but accepted without protest the word "el", god, for him.) Baal's father, the texts tell us, was the god Dagan (Hebrew "Dagon") the god of corn, who was adopted by the Philistines when they overran part of Canaan; Ashdod, where a temple to Dagon stood in Samuel's time (1 Samuel 5:2) (and long before and afterwards), was located on the coastal plain of Palestine where much of the corn was grown. There were also temples to Dagon at Beth-shan, at the south-east end of the Plain of Jezreel, and at Ugarit itself.

Baal, properly the title of Hadad, the god of thunder, was the most widely venerated of the Canaanite pantheon. Whereas El was a

god of quiet majesty, Baal was the deity who was always actively engaged in warfare against his foes, as befits the god of thunder. His foes were the forces of disorder. But he was also the god of vegetation (which explains his relationship in mythology with Dagon); it was because of this aspect of his nature that he was so important to the Canaanites, dependent as they were on the fertility of the ground. Nowadays, when the preservation and storage of food are relatively simple, we tend to forget how dependent ancient peoples were on good harvests, which could spell the difference between life and death, between prosperity and slavery. Small wonder that the Canaanites revered Baal, and tried by every means to induce him to promote the fruit of the ground year after year. The Canaanite worship, says Professor Gray, represents "man's efforts to enlist Providence in supplying his primary need, his daily bread and the propagation of his kind."⁵ This quotation draws attention to the fact that with the fertility of the ground the Canaanites linked the fertility of the womb as well, and attributed both to Baal. Baal worship was in many respects a fertility cult.

The fertility of the ground is of course a seasonal matter. Why was it that Baal produced vegetation every spring and summer, but not in the winter season? The reason for this, the Canaanites averred, was that Baal died every autumn — and came to life again every spring. Baal's resurrection was brought about by a goddess, his consort Anat. After his annual decease, she would go looking for him. He was to be found in the realm of the deity Mot ("death"), and Anat had to defeat Mot before ever Baal could revive; brought back to life, he in turn defeated Mot, showing himself as the god victorious in warfare. And so it came about that Baal was restored to his throne in triumph, and the fertility of the land was secured for another year.

It should be evident by now that the Canaanite conception of their leading deity differed totally from the Old Testament portrait of the Israelites' God. The latter ruled alone, sovereign over all the forces of nature; death was no foe of his, but was his subject. Yahweh was God of nature, but he was not to be identified with it; and the Israelites recognized too that he was Lord over a much wider sphere than just nature, he was the Controller of history as well. Clearly the Israelites had a much superior theology; but one feature of their theology had very important practical results, and that is the fact that Yahweh had no consort, no goddess associated with him. Baal had a consort, Anat — not to mention another one, Athirat (Old Testament Asherah⁶), originally the consort of El — and the

5. J. Gray, *The Canaanites*, (London, 1964), p. 138.

6. The AV; following LXX and Vulgate, translates the word Asherah as "grove", quite wrongly. Cf. 1 Kings 16:33 in AV and RSV or NEB.

marriage of these two was an important feature of the Canaanite mythology, since it was thought to promote the fertility of the ground and its inhabitants. This belief, so different from anything in the worship of Yahweh, expressed itself in an emphasis on sexual relationships; the elaborate temple cult of the Canaanites incorporated "sacred" prostitution. It is certain that the fertility cult practised by Israel's neighbours was a degrading, immoral affair, which proved harmful and demoralizing to its devotees.

Discussing the Ras Shamra tablets, Professor Gray remarks: "These myths give the impression that the Canaanites were very liberal in their religion, seeking by imitative magic in rite and myth to predispose Providence in nature. Their gods were like the Greek gods, glorified human beings, contentious, jealous, vindictive, lustful, and even, like El, lazy . . . there was no moral purpose in the fertility cult." The Canaanites, in fact, created their gods in the image of man, literally and figuratively; the contrast with Yahweh-worship is patent. The God of the Old Testament is wholly moral in character and action, not arbitrary and whimsical, and moreover he demands morality from his worshippers.

Baal worship, then, tended to be degrading, with an abnormal emphasis on warfare and sensuous love, promoting in its adherents hatred and lust, to which types of lack of self-control man is only too prone in any case. Perhaps the readiness of the Israelites to accept Canaanite ways led to some of the mutual jealousies between Israelite tribes which we have already mentioned. It is certain that those of weaker moral fibre will have found the Baal cult a more pleasant and comfortable religion. The last five chapters of Judges, which do not make very pleasant reading, may serve to demonstrate how thoroughly the defects of quarrelsomeness and lust had permeated Israelite society before the era of the Judges ended. The writer's final comment, "Every man did what was right in his own eyes", is a very apt description, summing up neatly both the political and the moral situation.

Can nothing be said on the credit side? To get an accurate impression of the situation one must study the other side of the coin. In the first place, it does seem that the Israelites never lost completely their sense of mutual relationship; the covenant bond was a reality to which they were prepared to return when reminded of their obligations. Secondly, we may well believe that the custodians of many of the sanctuaries (even if some of the latter were tainted by Canaanite customs and concepts) will have reminded their fellow-tribes of their duties at the annual festivals, when all were to present themselves before the Lord. Thirdly, we may surmise that there were faithful souls, not very vocal and not seeking

the limelight, who steadfastly refused to lose or to modify their belief in Yahweh and their loyalty to him. In a similarly black situation a century or two later the prophet Elijah, thoroughly despondent and pessimistic, was assured by God himself that no less than 7000 in Israel would refuse to bow to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).

Even so, it is safe to say that Israel did nothing during this period to deserve its election, which is a mystery indeed.

The forces tending towards weakness and disintegration were thus very strong indeed, and it is something of a miracle that Israel survived. The attacks of various enemies might well have meant the end of the new nation; yet Israel did survive, and not long after her lowest ebb became for a short while the strongest nation in the Near East. How is this to be explained? Did a military genius arise from somewhere, and change the whole pattern of history? Did a group of fanatics, patriotic or religious, get control of the nation's affairs? Some of the "Judges" were doubtless able generals, and some of them were clearly devout; but the Book of Judges lays no stress on either of these facts. The salvation of Israel was due to the fact that God raised up men and clothed them with his Spirit; he and he alone was the real Deliverer of Israel.