

Part Four

The Faith

CHAPTER 25

The God Who Speaks

A New Testament writer, looking back to the era of the prophets, observed, “When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets” (Hebrews 1:1). A devout Israelite of the era in question would have agreed wholeheartedly that God did indeed speak to him and his contemporaries, and not only through the prophets but by other channels as well. The New Testament writer probably singled out the prophets because of the future perspective of their words, if indeed he was not using the term to include all the Old Testament writers.

When today the phrase “the word of God” is used, very frequently the Bible, God’s written revelation, is meant; but the ancient Israelite would have thought more readily of the *spoken* word. Parts of the Old Testament were already in written form before the monarchy began, to be sure, and other parts were written during the monarchic period (though the precise dating of much of the Old Testament is a very complex and controversial question); but it seems hardly likely that the ordinary Israelite had direct access to the sacred writings. We must remind ourselves, to begin with, that publication as we know it today was impossible before the invention of printing. Even when the Old Testament was finally complete, only the rich few could have afforded personal copies; it was the synagogue (and later the church) which brought the Scriptures to the common man, and the synagogue cannot have come into being before the Babylonian exile. If proof be required that during the period of history we are considering no part of the Old Testament in written form was in any sense “published”, then the total loss of

Deuteronomy till its discovery in Josiah's reign should be evidence enough.¹

Nevertheless, the Israelite had access to the *spoken* word of God in various ways. There were different modes of divine revelation, and different mediators of the divine word. The prophet, the king, the sage, and the priest each had his special part to play in providing the community and the individual with the message of God. From the prophet came the oracle and the vision; from the king came judgement, above all; from the wise man, divine counsel; and from the priest, divine instruction. To a limited extent these rôles overlapped, but as late as the exilic period the prophet Ezekiel could diagnose his nation's malaise thus: "Disaster comes upon disaster, rumour follows rumour; they seek a vision from the prophet, but the law perishes from the priest, and counsel from the leaders. The king mourns, the prince is wrapped in despair" (Ezekiel 7:26f., RSV).

A familiar illustration of the king's exercise of judgement is the story of Solomon's handling of the dispute between the two harlots over the child of one of them (1 Kings 3:16-28). The narrative ends with the note that "when Israel heard the judgement which the king had given, they all stood in awe of him; for they saw that he had the wisdom of God within him to administer justice". Solomon's legal decisions, in other words, were the voice of God to the citizen of Israel.

The priest's rôle was to supply *torah*, divine instruction. In due course this Hebrew word came to denote the divine law as a whole, and the Jews still call the Pentateuch the Torah; but the term at first denoted an individual instruction, and the plural *torot* is sometimes used in the Old Testament.² Sometimes, we know, the priests' "instructions" were sought on cultic matters, such as ritual cleanliness (cf. Haggai 2:11ff.) and fasting (Zechariah 7:3); but we may be sure that their competence extended to wider matters of religious practice and ethical behaviour, and that the Levites (at any rate) went out from the sanctuary on a teaching mission to the community. The sons of Levi, says Deuteronomy 33:10, "teach thy precepts to Jacob, thy law to Israel". The priestly oracle will have been drawn from the ancient, prescribed laws which were in the priests' care; we may be sure that just as the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments had been deposited with the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:16, 21), so every sanctuary in monarchic Israel housed copies of the written law. Other decisions from God could be obtained by recourse to the ephod or the Urim and Thum-

1. This is true, at least, if it be granted that the document then discovered was indeed Deuteronomy (in whole or part).

2. E.g., Nehemiah 9:13; Isaiah 24:5; Ezekiel 44:24.

mim — at least, in the early days of the monarchy. By whatever mode, God gave his living word through the priesthood.

The prophet had recourse neither to mechanical means like the Urim and Thummin, nor to ancient written laws; to him God spoke directly, and that is why he was called “the man of God” par excellence. Each true prophet experienced a divine call to office, and though he might at times reason or argue, his oracles were normally introduced by an unambiguous “thus saith the LORD”. The people — though they did not always obey, to be sure — undoubtedly believed that God did speak to and through the prophet. As a non-Israelite woman summed it up (addressing Elijah), “Now I know for certain that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD on your lips is truth” (1 Kings 17:24). This type of oracle differed from the priestly one in that it was a particular message for specific circumstances. Should King Ahab go to war with the Syrians at Ramoth-gilead or not? He turned to the prophets for the divine word. How and where could a young private citizen find some lost donkeys? Saul knew that the local prophet or seer was the man to seek out. Denied access to the prophets in later life, Saul still sought one out — though a dead one, and the king had to resort to necromancy — and still heard the living word of God.

The members of the priesthood, we have noted, might leave the sanctuary to teach the community God’s instructions, whether the people sought them out or not. The prophet, to an even more marked degree, took God’s message to the people, who would rather not have listened to it. “This people’s wits are dulled, their ears are deafened,” God warned Isaiah (6:10); and when Elijah confronted Ahab on one occasion, the discomfited king responded in patent sincerity, “Have you found me, my enemy?” (1 Kings 21:20). Ahab’s successor took deliberate steps to avoid hearing the prophetic word when he desperately needed an oracle, and sent instead to a foreign and idolatrous sanctuary (2 Kings 1:2); but it was the oracle of Yahweh through Elijah that pronounced his doom, nevertheless. Other prophets — Amos and Jeremiah — seized the opportunities presented by large crowds attending temple ceremonies. God’s people could not escape his living voice.

The wise men’s prerogative was “counsel”. A purely human source of instruction, the product solely of human and fallible intelligence? One may occasionally hear such a view of the matter propounded in some Christian circles today, but it is certainly not the view presented in the Old Testament. It is only fools who scorn wisdom (Proverbs 1:7), for they are despising one of God’s valuable gifts to man. Nowhere is the value of wisdom made clearer than in 1 Kings 3:12, where God bestows wisdom and discernment upon Solomon. No king could have ruled Israel properly without divine “counsel”, whether it resided in himself or in his advisors and

statesmen, the highest rank of wise men in ancient Israel. Ahithophel, Absalom's adviser, stands as the exemplar of such a wise man: "In those days a man would seek counsel of Ahithophel as readily as he might make an inquiry of the word of God" (2 Samuel 16:23).

Not only in matters of the greatest political moment did Israel require wisdom; the Book of Proverbs deals with some of the most mundane areas of life — and offers divine wisdom, mediated through wise men of the day. It is self-evident that many of their findings were indeed products of human intelligence and reasoning and observation; it requires no voice from heaven to tell one that "A soft answer turns away anger, but a sharp word makes tempers hot" (Proverbs 15:1), or that "Endless dripping on a rainy day — that is what a nagging wife is like" (Proverbs 27:15)! But human reasoning is one mode of divine revelation, the Old Testament would assure us — or else the Book of Proverbs should not stand in the Canon of Scripture. The wise men were fallible, true; but priests and prophets are sometimes condemned in the Old Testament too (cf. Micah 3:11).

The wise man, then, also offered Israel the word of God; and as with priest and prophet, we may well believe that he too undertook a deliberate teaching rôle, and did not merely make himself available for consultation. The promulgation of the Book of Proverbs itself was part of the teaching rôle of Israel's sages.

In every area of life, then, God-appointed mediators and messengers were to be found, and the word of God heard. But we must give closer attention to one specific area of life vital to the devout Israelite of old: his worship in the sanctuary. Here, to be sure, the worshipper's voice was also heard; but we must not think that the liturgy was in one direction only, from man to God. The Psalter provides us with rich examples and illustrations of the liturgy familiar to Israel during the period of the monarchy; and in it we hear God's voice as well as the worshipper's. The worshipper offered God prayer, supplication, praise and confession; God responded in tones of promise, assurance, forgiveness, blessing, and occasionally warning.

No doubt a rich ceremonial ritual accompanied the liturgy we find preserved in the Psalter; but let us note some of the passages which make God's speech explicit. Such an emphasis we find in Psalm 50, which begins with the words, "God, the LORD God, has spoken" and continues, "Our God is coming and will not keep silence" (verse 3). The words of God commence in verse 5 ("Gather to me my loyal servants"), and in verse 7 he addresses Israel: "Listen, my people, and I will speak." The bulk of the psalm is God's challenge to his people — *verbatim*.

Psalm 15 addresses a question to God in the first verse; the rest of

the psalm is God's reply. Psalm 24 is similar, though the questions are here interspersed with the responses: "Who may go up the mountain of the LORD?" (verse 3); "Who is the King of glory?" (verse 8).

Without doubt the priest functioned in the sanctuary as the mouthpiece of God, pronouncing blessing and giving assurance. On such special occasions, it may be, the king too played a rôle in the ceremonial and the liturgy. It is clear that the words of Psalm 2, for instance, can have been appropriate only on the lips of a king of Judah; it is a psalm in which the king speaks and in which God speaks to him. Psalm 45 is addressed to the king — "in a king's honour", says its author, "I utter the song I have made". The king was a symbol of the well-being of the community; their well-being was bound up with his, and it was therefore fitting that he should play a special rôle in the sanctuary. When God spoke to the king in blessing, the people knew themselves to be equally blessed.³

In these many and varied ways, then, the ancient citizen of Israel and Judah was aware of the voice of God. It was always accessible to him, and at times it was thrust at him when he least expected or wanted to hear it. Perhaps we should ask the further question, however, what sort of a God was it whose voice he heard? This question will be partially answered in the next two chapters, for the Israelites knew that their God was especially a God who had done great things and who promised to do great things in the future. At this juncture we may content ourselves with seeking some indication as to how the Israelites envisaged his character and being, as opposed to his works and words.

His name was Yahweh, a truly distinctive name. There is no evidence that it was borrowed from any other people in the way that the gods of Mesopotamia or Canaan tended to move from one country to another. The meaning of the name, unfortunately, is not at all certain; even Exodus 3:14 conceals as much as it reveals, whether deliberately or otherwise.⁴ In a world of many deities, in any case, the Israelite needed more than a name to make it clear what sort of God he worshipped, important though that name was. (Indeed, names were considered far more important in those days than in our modern western society.) Hence the Old Testament writings describe God in a variety of ways, and with a variety of epithets.

The name Yahweh itself, in any case, was used by Israel long before the period of the monarchy. While we cannot isolate the

3. For the rich ideal of the king's value to his people, see J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT ii, 32: London, 1976), pp. 135-197.

4. The NEB translations in text and margin give some idea of the range of possible understandings. Nor is it clear whether the verse is interpreting the etymology or merely the function of the name.

monarchic era from what went before and what came after, the endeavour must be made to set Israel's faith against a monarchic background; in other words, to see what aspects of that faith were either new or else received new and particular emphasis during that era. One point of interest is a description of God, which far from receiving new emphasis seems to have been used sparingly and selectively by the preachers and writers of the day: the phrase "Yahweh (God) of hosts". The word "hosts" (Hebrew *tsebaot*)⁵ means "armies", and although it is disputed whether angelic armies or the Israelite troops were originally meant, it is clear that this description of God was appropriately used against a background of military activity. Yahweh was the God who gave his people military defence and victory as they needed it. In the period of the Judges, he had raised up men of his choice to act as deliverers by putting his spirit upon them. The term "Lord of hosts" seems to have been specially associated with the Shiloh sanctuary, or perhaps one should rather say with the ark of the covenant, to judge by the occurrences of the title in the early chapters of 1 Samuel.

After David's time, however, when Israel's wars were altogether more professional and profane, and when the ark was never moved from its shrine in Jerusalem, we may conclude that to Yahweh's spokesmen it was no longer so clear that Israel's wars were his wars; and the prophets had no wish to bolster up national pride by a false theology, or rather a misplaced faith in Yahweh. But at a time of a desperate military emergency for Judah, when Sennacherib's armies were on the point of snuffing God's people out of existence, then once more a prophet offered hope and courage in the name of "Yahweh of hosts". The prophet was Isaiah, who heard the phrase uttered by the seraphim at his call to prophesy (Isaiah 6:3), and who was never afraid to repeat it in appropriate circumstances; it was "the zeal of the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 37:32) which would bring discomfiture to the proud Assyrian king. Against the background of the imminent fall of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah was again not afraid to use this divine title. But in most of the pre-exilic prophets one finds the familiar phrase used very sparingly if not avoided altogether. The wars of God's people are not all holy wars.

The title "Yahweh of hosts", therefore, serves to illustrate how we may isolate some of the special emphases of the monarchic period; its use also shows that we must beware of viewing descriptive divine epithets as purely conventional; each one had its special function.

The use of the term *ba'al* for Yahweh has already been mentioned.⁶ It was a term which not only fell out of use but was in

5. Cf. "Sabaoth" in Romans 9:29 (AV).

6. See above, p. 201.

fact firmly rejected before the monarchy ended. During the Judges period and early monarchy it was freely used to describe Yahweh, as can be seen from personal names in Saul's family such as Merib-baal and Esh-baal. As a title its meaning was unexceptionable, for it meant "lord" or "owner"; but its all-too-familiar use in Canaanite worship for the chief Canaanite deity made it ultimately unacceptable in Israel. There were other synonymous Hebrew words which had no such unfortunate overtones, as Hosea recognized (Hosea 2:16f.) Eventually so great was the antipathy of devout Jews to the name *ba'al* that they eliminated it even from the personal names which were then written with the word *boshet*, "shame". Hence the Mephibosheth and Ish-bosheth.

The use and disuse of the name *ba'al* in Yahweh worship reminds us that the major battle with Canaanite religion was fought during the monarchic era, and hence the descriptions given of Yahweh in the writings of the period often have some bearing on this conflict. Sometimes it was important to stress that Yahweh was quite different from Baal; at other times it was necessary to emphasize that Yahweh did no less for his worshippers than Baal did for his, and then descriptions similar to those used in Canaanite worship were considered appropriate. It has been observed that especially in the Psalter there are descriptions of Yahweh strikingly comparable with the language used of Baal in the Ras Shamra texts. In Psalm 68:4, for instance, the God of Israel is depicted as the One "who rides upon the clouds";⁷ an almost identical phrase occurs in the Ras Shamra literature, but is there applied to Baal. Baal was especially associated with the skies; very well, then Israel must be reminded that Yahweh, not Baal, ruled the weather. The Canaanites believed that Baal by giving rain brought fertility to the ground; another Psalm therefore addressed Yahweh in worship thus:

Thou dost visit the earth and give it abundance,
 as often as thou dost enrich it
 with the waters of heaven, brimming in their channels,
 providing rain for men.

(Psalm 65:9)

Every ancient pantheon had its creator god; Israel's God was no less, as is made clear from early Genesis to the incomparable passage in Isaiah 40:12-31, and in many a Psalm. Many pantheons named one deity as "King"; we have already seen how the god Marduk became king in the Babylonian pantheon,⁸ while nearer Israel there were deities worshipped under the name "king" — Milcom, Molech, Melqart. In Israel, then, worshippers were reminded in the

7. RSV, cf. JB. The Hebrew could also mean "deserts", cf. NEB.

8. See above, pp. 194f.

liturgy that "The LORD is King; he is clothed in majesty" (Psalm 93:1). King over whom? Over his people, to be sure; but lest anyone should suppose that anyone could rival his lordship in heaven, Psalm 95:3 declares, "The LORD is a great God, a great King over all gods". This is not the language of a systematic monotheism, clearly; it is the language of religious polemic.

Thus one can see how rôle after rôle attributed outside Israel to a variety of gods and goddesses were all brought together and seen as fitting designations and descriptions of Yahweh. There was not unnaturally a certain polarity in some of the descriptions; the Song of Hannah, for example, recognizes that

The LORD kills and he gives life,
 he sends down to Sheol, he can bring the dead up again.
 The LORD makes a man poor, he makes him rich,
 he brings down and he raises up.

(1 Samuel 2:6f.)

A well-known feature of this polarity is the characterization of God as both love and wrath. So often this contrast has been postulated as distinguishing the Old Testament from the New; but in fact the same polarity can be seen in both Testaments. There is scarcely a more common noun in the Old Testament than the Hebrew *chesed*, a word difficult to translate precisely ("lovingkindness", or "kindness" or "mercy" in the Authorized Version as a rule), but indicative time and time again of God's abiding and faithful love for his people and mercy towards them. His wrath, on the other hand, far from being a whimsical exercise of irrational irritability, is particularly associated with his "zeal". Here again, English has no exact equivalent of the Hebrew terms, which at one and the same time denote both "zeal" and "jealousy". God's zeal on behalf of his people was inseparable from his claim to exclusive lordship over them. Baal shared his worshippers with Dagon and Ashtoreth and the rest; Yahweh shared his people with no other deity, not even a consort. The mercy and wrath of Yahweh were established for Israel long before the monarchy began, of course; but the prophets stressed both facets of the divine character more than other Old Testament writers. Among the prophets, Hosea's picture of the stern yet aching heart of Yahweh for his people is unique.

A striking epithet for Yahweh is the thrice-repeated adjective we encounter in Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts". The Hebrew adjective (*qadosh*) and its equivalents in other ancient Semitic languages had been in use for many centuries before Isaiah's time, to designate deities and objects or personnel devoted to cultic use and service. Whatever the word's original significance, it had come to mean "sacred" or "religious" in most contexts; even

prostitutes of the Canaanite sanctuaries were "holy" (*qadesh*, feminine *qedeshah*) in this sense. Some such prostitutes were even attached to Yahweh sanctuaries during the monarchy, except when eradicated by reforming kings like Hezekiah and Josiah. The prophets of the eighth century, however, recognized that God's own holiness was of such a character as to be incompatible with "holy" prostitution. Isaiah's immediate reaction to the revelation of Yahweh's holiness was to confess the uncleanness of himself and his fellow-citizens. The holiness of God was a frightening thing to all Israelites, something to be shunned and feared; had not Uzzah died, in David's time, for venturing to set profane hands on the sacred ark (2 Samuel 6)? A Phoenician woman expressed a similar thought when she blamed Elijah's very presence in her home for bringing her son to death's door (1 Kings 17:17f.). But Isaiah put his finger on what constituted the holiness of God: "By *righteousness* the holy God shows himself holy" (Isaiah 5:16).

"Righteousness" (Hebrew *tsedeq* or *tsedaqah*) primarily denotes correspondence to a standard or norm, and such a description of Yahweh serves to differentiate him from the capricious deities that were in truth the religious norm of the ancient Near East. It must have required a real faith to enable the prophets to see God working to norms; the ambiguity of events and the apparent shapelessness of history and of life more readily lend themselves to the outlook of the ancient polytheists, who saw a medley of gods of differing and conflicting attributes and wishes and actions. With their total disregard for other gods, the prophets were compelled to see in Yahweh the author of *all* the varied and conflicting phenomena of the universe. This they did unhesitatingly; but they still maintained that Yahweh followed undeviating standards of moral perfection, and hence required equal standards from his people, whom he had constituted "holy".

God's holiness and righteousness, therefore, could only be seen revealed in history; and of all ancient peoples Israel seems to have the clearest awareness of the march of history. The Hebrew language had no word for "history", or we may be sure that the Old Testament would frequently have designated Yahweh "the lord of history". The nearest equivalents we find are "the everlasting God" and "the living God". The former is a reminder that Yahweh had created the world and set human history afoot, and continued unchanged and unchanging in his control of both. This is a timeless, possibly static, description; but the other term, "the living God", is a dynamic one, stressing the power of Yahweh and his intervention in human affairs. We may note how Elijah predicted the three-year drought by taking an oath on the "life of Yahweh" (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah's mockery of the Baal prophets is instructive, too; they could utter a triumphant cultic acclamation to their god,

“Victorious Baal lives!”⁹ in which Baal’s annual victory over the god Mot (“death”) seems to have been recalled. The signs of spring do show themselves annually, even when adversely affected by drought conditions; but Baal could at times absent himself, deep in thought, engaged, journeying, or even asleep, said Elijah (1 Kings 18:27). But the God of Israel answered by fire — for he neither slumbers nor sleeps.

The more one studies the character of Yahweh depicted in the Old Testament, the more one comes to appreciate that it is bound up with human history; “pure”, abstract theology is strikingly absent from the Old Testament. We cannot content ourselves, therefore, with a consideration of the God “who is” or the God “who speaks”; above all, the Old Testament presents us with a God who acts.

9. A phrase found in the Ras Shamra texts. The selection of texts about Baal in *DOTT* (pp. 129 ff.) offers many parallels to Old Testament language about Yahweh.