

CHAPTER 26

The God Who Acts

AT the start of the monarchy, Israel could already look back to a rich body of traditions and national memories, the material transmitted to us in the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Joshua and Judges in particular. In all their history they could see God had been at work. He had created the universe and man upon it; he had brought Abraham out of Mesopotamia, led him to Canaan and covenanted with him to give his offspring the Promised Land; he had raised up Moses, led the Israelites out of Egypt, and constituted them a nation at Sinai; he had led them into Canaan and given them victory in Joshua's day; he had repeatedly given them deliverers during the exigencies of the era of the Judges. All this and more besides was common knowledge among the Israelites of Samuel's day; their history was already clearly *Heilsgeschichte*, "salvation-history". The recognition of God as "saviour" long antedated the New Testament pages.

But Israel's history did not end with the Judges, of course, and by the same token neither did God's activity in history, for those with eyes to see it. There were many events of the period of the monarchy which proved to be full of theological significance. An obvious example is the history of Jerusalem, which is today for three faiths "the Holy City"; in Samuel's lifetime it was still just one Canaanite city, neither more or less (in spite of Abraham's visit to it long centuries before). It was David's capture of the city, and his subsequent re-creation of it as capital, royal city, and central sanctuary, which transformed all its future history, and gave it all its theological significance for Jew, Muslim and Christian alike.

We must go back earlier than the capture of Jerusalem, however, for the first significant event of our period of history; the creation of a monarchy was in itself of primary importance, both historically

and theologically. The day that Saul became king inaugurated a new and formative era for Israel. A strong, centralized government was a political necessity, in view of the Philistine aggression; but what sort of government was it to be, and what sort of rôle would the king fulfil? In our day, such questions would be purely political; but in ancient Israel, such questions were just as much religious ones. Israel's polity was already a theocratic one; Yahweh was the King of Israel, and the existing political institutions and laws were divinely ordained. How would a human monarch fit into this pattern? It is clear that the new institution was capable of breaching the old; 1 Samuel 8:7 reports that Yahweh told Samuel, "Listen to the people and all that they are saying; they have not rejected you, it is I whom they have rejected, I whom they will not have to be their king." Nevertheless, Yahweh through the prophet did put Saul on the throne, while David had the full and unambiguous blessing of God in becoming king.

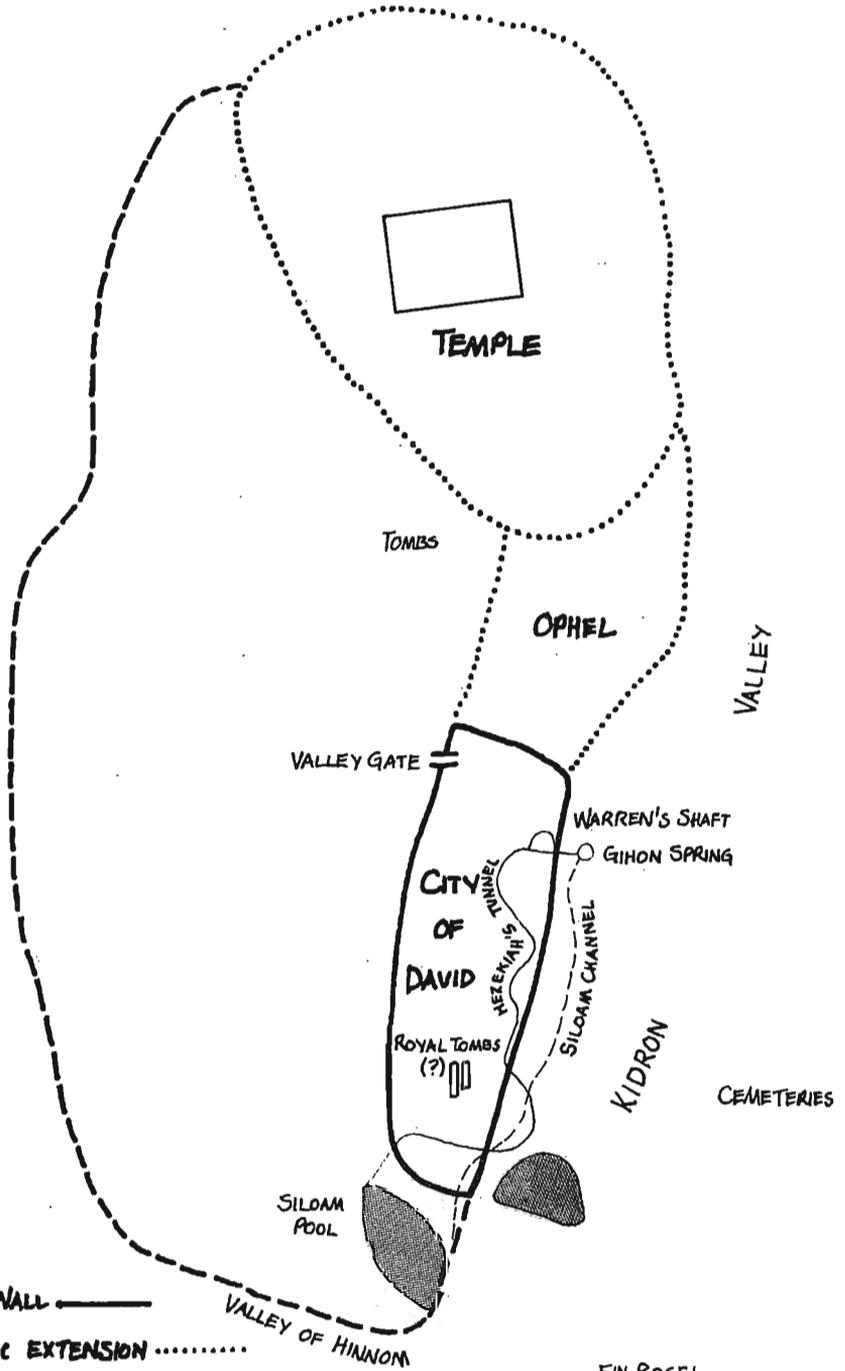
Monarchs may gain their authority from a variety of sources. Many have usurped a throne by military conquest; others hold it constitutionally and by the right of hereditary succession; some have been elected to the throne; others again, in the ancient world, became king by some religious right or guarantee. In Egypt, the reigning king was indeed held to be a god; while in Babylon the kings had a semi-divine status, to which they were thought to be appointed by the gods in order to maintain the rule of the gods in Babylonia. What of Israel? Saul was popularly acclaimed king, and David fought for his throne; but neither dared become king without having his reign guaranteed by Yahweh. The wording of the royal psalms sometimes suggests that the Davidic king had a sort of semi-divine status conferred on him; the king was the "son" of Yahweh (Psalm 2:7), and it is not impossible that the king could be actually addressed as "God". Such, at any rate, is the most natural interpretation of Psalm 45:6, "Your throne, O God, stands for ever and ever" (NAB).¹

The lofty position of Israel's king was however one of subser-vience where Yahweh was concerned. Firstly, the divine choice was necessary; Samuel, guided by Yahweh, chose Saul to be king; in the Northern Kingdom we find prophets choosing Jeroboam and Jehu; and in David's case, exceptionally, it stands recorded that Yahweh chose not only the man but his family to succeed him (2 Samuel 7:8-16). (Jeroboam's successors in the north tried to establish the dynastic principle, when they did not capture the throne by a military coup, but history testifies to their large degree of failure.) In the case of Saul and David, Yahweh's spirit visibly marked out the

1. The NEB and RSV, however, offer a different translation which transfers the divinity from the king to his throne.



Jerusalem during the Monarchy



men of his choice, moreover (cf. 1 Samuel 11:6; 16:13f.). In all these ways the king stood under Yahweh's authority. Especially significant was the rite of anointing, performed at the coronation ceremony by a prophet or a priest of Yahweh. We know that anointing was by no means unique to Israel; in particular, the Canaanite kings were anointed, as is clear from Jotham's fable in Judges 9:7-15, for which the background can only have been local kings in Palestine. From extra-biblical evidence, it is clear that the Canaanite vassal kings were anointed on the authority of their overlord, the king of Egypt, who had his own Egyptian officials similarly anointed, but who did not himself submit to the rite. In other words, the original symbolism of anointing was to confer a high-ranking but subordinate status. All the kings of Israel and Judah were anointed, therefore, as Yahweh's vassals, his "local-rulers", so to speak. Nevertheless his authority was thereby conferred upon them, so that the royal person became sacrosanct. David recognized this when he said to his men regarding Saul, "God forbid that I should harm my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift a finger against him; he is the LORD's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6).

Such was the Davidic covenant, whereby Yahweh both permitted and blessed the Davidic king. He was to be the channel of the divine blessing to others, the protector and upholder of the divine laws for the people of Yahweh. Even after a succession of weak, wicked and incompetent monarchs, the writer of the Book of Lamentations could describe the Davidic king thus: "The LORD's anointed, the breath of life to us . . . we had thought to live among the nations, safe under his protection" (Lamentations 4:20). Indeed, for all the faults and follies of the Hebrew kings, they did at least transform a loose grouping of tribes into a nation (or must we say two nations?); and that people was never to lose its identity and sense of brotherhood, even in days of exile and dispersion. The kings had their vital place in Israel's history; and the Israelites of the day did not doubt that God had acted in history when he first provided a king and established a dynasty for them.

David was not only given royal status by divine decree, he was enabled by the God of Israel to master an empire which extended "from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates". These words are taken from the record of God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18). It has been argued that this covenant originally promised Abraham no more than a limited territory in the south of Palestine, and that the words of the promise were expanded in the light of David's conquests.² Other writers would prefer to view the full description of the Promised Land as original. The disagreement makes no difference to the theological motif; Yahweh had

2. Cf. R. E. Clements, *Abraham and David* (SBT ii, 5: London, 1967), pp. 21f.

made startling, even incredible, promises to Abraham, which were fulfilled to some degree in Joshua's time, but which in David's time came to even greater and more wonderful fulfilment. The erstwhile slaves of Egypt, the erstwhile vassals of Philistia, were now unchallenged rulers of their own land, and exercised lordship over several other nations.

In Solomon's day the frontiers began to retract, and after his reign the empire collapsed; but God had once acted, and his people never forgot. God had given them wide horizons. Jerusalem, so recently acquired by David, could now be viewed as the capital of an international realm. Against this Davidic king and that, "the kings of the earth stood ready, the rulers conspired together, and determined to break the Israelite fetters, to throw off their chains" — thus we may adapt Psalm 2:2f. But they had no chance of success against Yahweh, the God of all the earth, so long as it was his will to make these peoples subject to a king in Jerusalem. The psalm continues, with Yahweh addressing his anointed:

. . . I have enthroned my king
 . . . on Zion my holy mountain . . .
 I will give you nations as your inheritance,
 the ends of the earth as your possession.

We may now revert to Jerusalem, the capture of which falls here into its correct chronological setting. It was one of David's conquests, and he made it the religious centre of his kingdom; his son went on to build a magnificent temple there. Other sanctuaries continued to exist till Josiah's time, but none captured the imagination as did Jerusalem. As N. W. Porteous has written, "No city has stirred emotion at a deeper level than the strange, enigmatic city of Jerusalem. There was something of the beauty of Athens about it; for did not a psalmist once describe it as God's 'holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, the joy of all the earth'? There was something of Rome about it too; for a prophet made the prediction that 'out of Zion shall go forth the law' and that the city on the Judaeen hills would be the centre of a peaceful world."³

Jerusalem's proud theological position was bound up with the twin fact that it functioned as the capital of the king God has chosen, and that it was the final home of the ark, the symbol of God's presence. Psalm 132 recalls Yahweh's oath to David: "A prince of your own line will I set upon your throne" (verse 11); and goes on to add "For the LORD has chosen Zion and desired it for his home: 'This is my resting-place for ever, here will I make my home, for such is my desire' " (verses 13f.). Jerusalem, that is to say, was as

3. N. W. Porteous, *Living the mystery: collected essays* (Oxford, 1967), p. 93. The Old Testament references are to Psalm 48:3, Isaiah 2:3f. and Micah 4:2f.

clearly "elected" by Yahweh as were David and his dynasty. It was "the city of the Great King" as well as "the city of David". From that conception grew the Judæan conviction of the inviolability of Jerusalem; God, Yahweh himself, dwelt in Jerusalem, and he could not permit any human agent to molest it, certainly not the "uncircumcised" and the "unclean" invader. We have already observed something of the part played by this view-point in the arguments of the prophets true and false.

One interesting feature of the Old Testament references to Jerusalem is its description as a mountain. Isaiah 31:4, for example, speaks of "Mount Zion and her high summit". The altitude of the city is considerable, and its hilly contours gave it reasonable natural defences on three sides; but the biblical language clearly suggests something more than merely a defensible city in a mountainous area. Or should we put it down to mere poetic adornment? Psalm 48:2 offers a better clue, even though the verse is puzzling at first sight. Jerusalem is extolled as the city of God: "His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the Great King" (RSV). We might put down the phrase "the joy of all the earth" as poetic exaggeration, but from what possible standpoint is Jerusalem to be described as "in the far north"? Once again we may turn to the Ras Shamra texts for elucidation; near the ancient city of Ugarit (Ras Shamra is the present day name of the site) was a mountain bearing the name Zaphon, the same word as the Hebrew "north",⁴ and in the Canaanite mythology it functioned in the same way as the Mount Olympus of the Greeks, the traditional abode of the gods. Thus it seems that the Psalmist was in effect calling Jerusalem "Mount Olympus" — the true home of the true God. Nothing therefore could compare with it for beauty, elevation and holiness. At a more prosaic level, everything possible was done in Solomon's Jerusalem to make the city beautiful to the beholder.

God had acted in giving his people David and Jerusalem and all that they stood for; but still the march of history continued, and soon the high promise gave way to a shabby and shoddy new reality. Israel and Judah separated and lost their power, while new nations rose to power and inflicted crushing blows upon the people of Yahweh. How was this unhappy development to be explained? Ultimately the answer was to be given its definitive canonical form in the Books of Kings; but before then Yahweh acted once more, in raising up the great prophets of Israel. To them fell the task of explaining to their contemporaries that Israel and Judah's lowly position was as much in the control of Yahweh the Lord of history as

4. Cf. NEB margin.

their earlier days of glory had been. The newly-found recognition that God elected David and his dynasty had been allowed to overshadow the fact that the older covenant at Sinai had never been abrogated by God. Clearly the covenant laws were being ignored by kings and neglected by their officers of state, with disastrous results for the poorer classes. Greed and rapacity, to say nothing of idolatry, had become the order of the day; and the prophets denounced these ugly national characteristics, and pronounced not only that the present political weakness was Yahweh's will, but also that he purposed even greater disasters for the future. Moreover, against the wider political horizons which David's career had opened, the prophets came to recognize more clearly than earlier generations that Yahweh controlled other nations just as much as he did Israel and Judah. He was not only "the God of Israel", true in a special way though that was, but the God of the nations. And so we find that foreign oracles became a natural part of the teachings of the prophets.

The prophetic ministry laid a sound basis for Judah to come to terms with the collapse of her sister kingdom. Israel's fall vindicated the prophetic analysis and the prophetic warnings, and it is no doubt precisely because of this vindication that the prophetic word was carefully preserved in writing, later to be brought into the Canon of Scripture. Judah went her own way towards a similar (but not identical) fate, but the prophetic ministry regarding Samaria's fall exercised a continuing influence during the dark days of Manasseh and his ilk. The "remnant" spoken of by Elijah and Isaiah had already come into being, and on it were the prophetic hopes for the future based.

Josiah's reform was encouraged by Yahweh, or so it seemed; yet twelve years later God allowed that godly king to fall in battle, after which Judah lost again its new-found independence. These events gave fresh pause for thought; indeed, some scholars have suggested that Josiah's unexpected death at Megiddo in 609 B.C. is greeted in the Old Testament by a "resounding silence". Good, reforming kings ought not to perish in this way; however, Jeremiah at least had never seen a panacea for all ills in the reform programme, and he for one was enabled to develop a strongly spiritual sense of religion, divorced from externals. It was the same sense which inspired the Psalmist to write, "Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire . . . Burnt offering and sin offering thou hast not required" (Psalm 40:6, RSV). It was no new insight in Jeremiah's day, certainly; Samuel had told Israel's first king that "obedience is better than sacrifice, and to listen to him than the fat of rams. Defiance of him is sinful as witchcraft, yielding to men as evil as idolatry", as 1 Samuel 15:22f. records. It was however a desperately needed new emphasis at a time when Judah faced the imminent loss

of all it had treasured most dearly — Jerusalem and its temple, the ark of the covenant, and the line of David.

The prophets, then, first and last, saw God active in the events of political history, and sought to instil this belief into their contemporaries. But one of the last acts of God in the monarchic period was of a different, indeed a unique character. In the year 621 B.C. a lost document was accidentally found by workmen engaged in the repair of the temple; but neither the high priest Hilkiah nor the king, Josiah, had the slightest doubt that this discovery was ordained by God. The scroll played an important role in the short-lived reform Josiah instituted; and it was to play an even more important role in the future, if indeed it was an edition of the book we know as Deuteronomy.⁵

Standing under the authority of Moses, and promulgated by the king himself, Deuteronomy had a great deal to say to those with ears to hear. In the first place it reminded the people that all the benefits they had enjoyed so long were God's gifts to them — their land, their leaders, their Law, and their claim on God himself. All these things they treasured were unmerited favours, and betokened God's love for his people. All too long, however, Israel and Judah had taken these things for granted, accepting the gifts without accepting the responsibilities, which were to love and obey God, and to act justly and kindly towards their fellows. These responsibilities are all stressed in Deuteronomy. Their importance is obvious when we consider that within a generation or so of Josiah's reform the disasters that befell Judah were of such a kind that she could easily have lost her faith in Yahweh along with her temple, and her sense of brotherhood along with her nationhood (which in a real sense was taken from them by exile and by the fall of the royal house).

Far from decrying cultic ritual, Deuteronomy insists that it must be properly executed, and in fact rules out every sanctuary but one for it (cf. Deuteronomy 12:5f.). This centralization of the cult had never been practised (since pre-Conquest days, at any rate), and Josiah found himself unable to enforce it. Nevertheless the emphasis in Deuteronomy on a single sanctuary highlighted the degree of false and idolatrous worship to be found outside Jerusalem, and gave an impetus for the Jews to codify their faith, to purify and protect it. Moreover, the fall of the Jerusalem temple so soon after the promulgation of Deuteronomy had the effect of spiritualizing that faith, and making it less dependent on externals. It is to the Book of Deuteronomy that we owe that most inward and demanding of commandments, which our Lord himself endorsed as the greatest of them all: "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul and strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5; cf. Matthew 22:36ff.).

5. See above, p. 119.

There were other insights in Deuteronomy which proved invaluable for Josiah's era. In a way, it functioned to demote the king and the ark of the covenant, so soon to be swept away, and to promote the prophet. The prophet had all too often been persecuted and ignored; but Deuteronomy taught that Moses himself had foretold the succession of prophets like himself. This is the primary intention of the divine promise in Deuteronomy 18:18f.: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you, one of their own race, and I will put my words into his mouth. He shall convey all my commands to them, and if anyone does not listen to the words which he will speak in my name I will require satisfaction from him."

The king, on the other hand, had by Josiah's time been placed on a pedestal, so to speak. The Davidic covenant had become a static dogma to the people of Judah, as though the very existence of a king of David's line guaranteed their well-being. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20, however, we find in effect a critique of Judah's and Israel's kings as they really were — not always chosen by God, not always even of Israelite birth, proud, avaricious, despotic, and often utterly heedless of the laws of Yahweh. Josiah, by now, was the exception to prove the rule.

As for the ark of the covenant, it had for too long been credited with what we would call magical powers. Enshrined in the Jerusalem temple for long centuries, it had long acquired a mystique, and was thought to guarantee the presence of Yahweh, and all that implied, in his temple and city. But in Deuteronomy 10:1-5 the ark is very casually treated, as the mere wooden box which housed the Ten Commandments. The ark would soon perish for ever; but the Law to which it pointed, when properly interpreted, would survive the holocaust the Babylonians were soon to bring upon Jerusalem.

Deuteronomy has its omissions, to be sure; no missionary message is to be discerned there, nor does it offer the hope of life beyond the grave. But Josiah's era was better served by a book which stressed the truths which would bind God's people together and keep them distinct from other nations, and which offered the basis for a national rather than a personal hope. It was the nation's grave which loomed largest at the time, even if few were capable of perceiving the fact.

Josiah, we have said, "promulgated" Deuteronomy. Book publication as we know it was in the nature of things impossible, but Josiah did the next best thing. He "sent and called all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem together, and went up to the house of the LORD; he took with him the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets, the whole population, high and low. There he read out to them all the book of the covenant discovered in the house of the LORD; and then, standing on the dais,

the king made a covenant before the LORD to obey him and keep his commandments, his testimonies, and his statutes, with all his heart and soul, and so fulfil the terms of the covenant written in this book. And all the people pledged themselves to the covenant" (2 Kings 23:1ff.). Thus "the whole population" was introduced to the book, and obliged to subscribe to its teaching, not only by personal pledge but also in the activities which the king proceeded to instigate and enforce, which culminated in a joyous Passover celebration, kept in accordance with the prescriptions of Deuteronomy. Those rules (see Deuteronomy 16) make the festival very much a family affair, as it has continued to be in Judaism till this day. We may be sure that then, as now, youngsters were educated, in the context of the festal celebrations, as to the purpose and function and history of their faith.

Covenant documents were no new invention of Josiah's era, far from it; but there was nevertheless something new about the covenant to which his citizens pledged themselves. The norm was for a covenant document to record and bear witness to a covenant; in other words, the covenant itself preceded the document. On this occasion, however, the document came first, and the covenant was made on the basis of the document. Thus in the eyes of the king and all who treated his reforms seriously, Deuteronomy was a much more important document than any other; it was accepted as the unique basis of their faith and practice. With Josiah's promulgation of Deuteronomy, accordingly, we may fairly say that the story of the Canon of Scripture begins. We must emphasize again that parts of Scripture had of course been in existence long before the seventh century; but never before had a biblical document been used in such a fashion, and given such a position in the constitution of the faith. Josiah's promulgation of Deuteronomy can therefore fairly be compared with Luther's "rediscovery" of the Epistle of the Romans, and the subsequent creation of the Protestant churches on the basis of *sola Scriptura*.

Deuteronomy did not long remain the only book in the Old Testament Canon (a contradiction in terms!). It gave the signal and the impetus to bring together all "the words of God" then known to God's people, perhaps especially in the dark days of exile that so soon followed Josiah's reformation. Deuteronomy thus inspired the task of writing and recording, editing and collecting, copying and re-copying. It was a task which was to continue into New Testament times, so that both Jews and Christians were one day to be known as "the people of the Book".

Apart from this general impetus which Deuteronomy's promulgation provided, there was another, more specific, consequence of no little importance. The Book of Deuteronomy offered its students a clear philosophy of history. Moses, Deuteronomy records, had

advised Israel before ever they moved into the Promised Land, that their well-being in Canaan and their very tenure of it would be dependent upon their fidelity to the unadulterated worship of Yahweh and to his laws as embodied in the book. Apostasy would bring political disaster, as faithfulness would bring prosperity in its train.⁶

Whether or not such a philosophy of history appeals to twentieth century historians, it undoubtedly had a powerful and timely effect upon devout and thoughtful men in the Judah of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. As the era of the Hebrew monarchies came to its sad and sorry end, such men took stock of their situation and of their nation's history, and it is to them that we owe the primary source material for this book — in other words, the Books of Samuel and Kings, and perhaps Joshua and Judges too. Much written material was available to them, of course, but the final editing of these books is "Deuteronomic", that is to say, dependent upon the teaching and even the language of the Book of Deuteronomy. For that reason, it has nowadays become commonplace to refer to Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings comprehensively as "the Deuteronomic history".⁷

It would seem, then, that we today are indebted to an accidental discovery by some ancient Judaeen workmen for a substantial part of our Bible, if not for the whole concept of a Bible. A mere accident? Those of us who believe that God inspired the Bible's authors in the first place may well believe that he further acted in history in the case of its editors, scribes and transmitters of every kind, including thoughtful carpenters and pious kings.

The discovery and promulgation of Deuteronomy, then, had very profound and long-lasting effects for which we may still be grateful. In its own more immediate historical context, its importance was this: "It did not rescue Israel from the peril of political defeat and ruin, but it pointed to that realm of faith and of the spirit, where love and obedience mattered more than passing success or failure."⁸

6. Cf. Deuteronomy 4, in particular. The Books of Chronicles were written later, in rather different circumstances.

7. Both Ruth and Chronicles are separated from "the Deuteronomic history" in the Hebrew Old Testament.

8. R. E. Clements, *God's chosen people: a theological interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy* (London, 1968), p. 119.