



# I

## THE INVISIBLE KING

What do a provincial capital in western Canada, a state in south-eastern Australia, the greatest lake and the most spectacular waterfall in Africa, and the main railway station of the biggest city in India, have in common?

The Indian city is Mumbai – Bombay, the British called it when they were building its country's railways – and the answer to the question is the name 'Victoria'. In all these places it commemorates the little old lady who at the beginning of the twentieth century ruled from London the largest empire the world has ever seen. Imagine yourself as one of her millions of loyal subjects in those palmy days. As she dies and is followed on the throne by her son Edward, the poet William Watson will write of you all, in his high-flown style, as a people

*who stretch one hand on Huron's bearded pines,  
And one on Kashmir's snowy shoulders lay,  
And round the streaming of whose raiment shines  
The iris of the Australasian spray.*



Which is one way of saying that a hundred years ago you would have had an idea of kingship (and queenship) rather different from the one that most of us have today. To wear a monarch's crown could mean, and in this case did mean, real power and authority and influence and worldwide fame.

Kings and queens in our day are not like that; and there were others in other periods of history whose monarchies were different again. Not all the rulers of Bible times were rulers of great empires, though some were. Certainly none was what we should call a constitutional monarch. Many, especially in earlier Old Testament days, were of a third kind: they were *little* kings.

Not physically, of course. In fact when the Israelites, migrating northwards after four hundred years in Egypt, first encountered the peoples who lived in and around the land of Canaan, they were impressed by their size: 'So big that we seemed like grasshoppers beside them,' they said. Og, the king of Bashan, was famously tall. Eglon, the king of Moab, was famously fat. And the fortifications of their towns were awesome too. It took a miracle to bring the walls of Jericho tumbling down.

All the same, Jericho was just a town, and we might be surprised to find that it had a king. Even if its territory included the nearby villages and the surrounding countryside it made a very small kingdom. We should be inclined to call the person who ruled such a community a chief rather than a king. In some cases he would have been more like the commander of a garrison. But the Bible uses the language of royalty for kings great and small, and the history of the Israelite kingdoms will gradually unfold the reason for this.

Perhaps we can already begin to see why the boundaries drawn on the maps of Bible lands in those times, about the twelfth century B.C., seem so uncertain. Yahweh, the

God of the Israelites, had promised them the whole land of Canaan, and they did eventually occupy most of it, more or less. Much Canaanite territory they captured and kept. But other areas were not conquered for many years. Still others changed hands more than once, at one time taken by Israel and then at a later time regained by a local king or alliance of kings.

So any map we might try to make would be a patchwork, dominated here by Israelites and there by Canaanites, with shifting, ill-defined boundary lines. And whatever colours we might use for those two nations, we should be needing more. A third one for the Philistines, for example. Their settlements were coastal ones, extending northwards from Egypt about a third of the way up the eastern Mediterranean seaboard. 'Palestine', a useful label for most of the area covered by our map, comes from their name.

They occupied these territories some time after Israel's arrival from Egypt, being part of the big migration of the 'Sea Peoples', as their contemporaries called them, driven from their original homes in the islands and coastlands of the Aegean Sea by political upheavals in the regions we think of as Turkey and Greece. It might seem at first as though their rulers, like those of the Canaanites, were kings of towns. Gath, for instance, was a Philistine town, and it had a king, Achish, who will figure in the story of David. But the Philistines' government was not quite on the Canaanite model. Five of their settlements were each governed by a *seren*, a 'lord', and the nation was ruled by the five 'lords of the Philistines' in a much more unified way than the Canaanites were by their numerous kings. Even so, the frontiers between Philistines and Israelites were not marked by anything like today's border controls. The edges are blurred. We know from the story of Samson in the book of Judges how frequent, and how easy, the coming and going between the two communities could be.

The map would want a fourth colour for the nations to the south-east of Israel. Beyond the River Jordan and the Dead Sea lay the lands of Edom, Moab, and Ammon, three peoples related to the Israelites. Each of these had organized itself into a kingdom which was rather more like a modern nation-state than the others mentioned so far. North of them were the similar kingdoms of the Amorites (not to be confused with the Ammonites; these were unrelated to Israel, and its constant enemies). The gigantic Og was an Amorite king. A fifth colour there, then; and yet another for the Midianites, though they could scarcely be called inhabitants of Palestine. Their home territory was far to the south, but they were mobile semi-nomadic people, who ignored frontiers altogether. In the days of Gideon, raised up to rescue Israel from them, they had joined with like-minded nations from regions away to the east in order to overrun Canaan repeatedly like plagues of locusts, fast-moving camel-mounted hordes intent simply on plunder at harvest time.

They too had their kings. In fact the Israelites were practically the only nation in that place and time which did not. So was Israel what we today might call a republic? Our map would show that the land Yahweh had promised to his people was parcelled out between their tribes, in theory at any rate, in twelve clearly-defined territories, so that perhaps the 'United States of Israel' might be a good name for them. But where was their government? And who presided over it?

The answer had to do with religion, which coloured everyone's life in those days. And for some nations in the ancient world, it was belief in their gods, not the rule of a king, which was the political glue that held them together. A central shrine where the god was worshipped was, as it were, their 'capital', and their daily lives were guided and governed by his priests. That was more or less the case with

Israel, though in some respects the pattern does not quite fit. The Israelites did not have one particular holy place, since their God had had them make a movable shrine to represent his presence among them as they travelled from Egypt to Canaan. At the time we are concerned with, the 'ark of the covenant' (as it was called) happened to be in the little town of Shiloh, but it had several other homes in its long life. The priestly tribe of Levi, too, was not restricted to one place, but dispersed throughout the rest of the tribes.

During Israel's first centuries in Canaan, the guidance of its priests and the laws that God had given it through Moses were all the government it needed in normal times. When a crisis arose, and one or other of the surrounding nations became troublesome, a leader would emerge, a person chosen and equipped by God for the needs of the hour. These were the 'judges' or 'saviours' of Israel. They were not kings; 'in those days there was no king in Israel.'

These words strike one of the keynotes of the book of Judges. They can be taken in more ways than one. By the time they were written, the Israelites had found how good it was to live under the rule of kings who were not only strong and efficient, but also concerned to please God and to care for his people. They might have been forgiven for thinking that the dreadful things that happened all too often in the days of the judges were due simply to the lack of the right sort of government. But they would have been wrong. There were times of peace and prosperity - 'the land had rest for forty years,' 'the land had rest for eighty years,' and the story of Ruth describes life in one such period - when Israel managed quite happily without a king; though the lack of one certainly made it easier for everybody to do 'what was right in his own eyes' (the words that round off the book), and to get away with a great deal of wickedness or folly.



## In the Days of the Kings

However, to those in Israel at the time who thought it would be a good idea, for whatever reason, to have the sort of king that all the other nations had, a very wise word had been spoken by one of the judges. Gideon was offered the kingship after his great military victories. His response was: 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; *the Lord* will rule over you.' True, there was not in the usual sense any king in Israel. But the writer of Judges was not necessarily bewailing the fact, merely stating it. The nation did have a king, and always would have. The alternative to the kind of monarchies that then surrounded God's nation was not a republic. Israel was never a democracy, with 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' Like its neighbours, it was a monarchy, but with a ruler far greater than any of theirs: the Lord, Yahweh, was its invisible King.

