

# 1 Kings 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     1 Kings chapter 13. And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord and said, O altar, altar, thus says the Lord. Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign that the Lord has spoken. Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out. And when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, Seize him. And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord. And the king said to the man of God, Entreat now the favour of the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me. And the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and became as it was before. And the king said to the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward. And the man of God said to the king, If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you, and I will not eat bread or drink water in this place. For so was it commanded me by the word of the Lord, saying, You shall neither eat bread nor drink water, nor return by the way that you came. So he went another way, and did not return by the way that he came to

Bethel. Now an old prophet lived in Bethel, and his sons came, and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. They also told to their father the words that he had spoken to the king, and their father said to them, Which way did he go? And his sons showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone. And he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me. So they saddled the donkey for him, and he mounted it. And he went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak.

And he said to him, Are you the man of God who came from Judah? And he said, I am. Then he said to him, Come home with me, and eat bread. And he said, I may not return with you, or go in with you, neither will I eat bread, nor drink water with you in this place. For it was said to me by the word of the Lord, You shall neither eat bread, nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came.

And he said to him, I also am a prophet as you are. And an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with you into your house, that he may eat bread, and drink water. But he lied to him. So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house, and drank water. And as they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back. And he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, Thus says the Lord, Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord, and have not kept the command that the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back, and have eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, Eat no bread, and drink no water.

Your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers. And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back. And as he went away, a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it. The lion also stood beside the body. And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, and the lion standing by the body. And they came, and told it in the city where the old prophet lived.

[ 3 : 37 ] And when the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the Lord. Therefore the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word that the Lord spoke to him. And he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me. And they saddled it. And he went and found his body thrown in the road. And the donkey and the lion standing beside the body. The lion had not eaten the body or torn the donkey. And the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey, and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him. And he laid the body in his own grave. And they mourned over him, saying, Alas, my brother. And after he had buried him, he said to his sons, When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried. Lay my bones beside his bones. For the saying that he called out by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel, and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria, shall surely come to pass. After this thing, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth. 1 Kings chapter 13 is an extremely strange story, one of the strangest stories in the whole of scripture. This is a good sign that we should pay closer attention. There are several details that invite questions on various levels of analysis, not least when we consider parallels with other parts of the book. Peculiar details are usually things that should invite us to pay closer attention. In addition to this, we see structures within the text that show that it is not just a random story. There is great design in the way that this is laid out. Although we may not be able to understand the full meaning of the text, we can get a sense of the fact that there is a deep message that it bears, if only we had the eyes to see it. Much has been written about this chapter, but many of the commentators are not particularly helpful. Peter Lighthouse's comments on this chapter are particularly probing and illuminating, and present one of the more promising ways to understand it. I will be leaning heavily upon some of his observations in what follows. Chapter 13 needs to be related to the section that precedes it, about Jeroboam's establishment of idolatrous worship. However, while chapter 13 needs to be read in the light of what has happened before, there is a suddenness to the beginning of the narrative.

The coming of the man of God from Judah is sudden and surprising, like the coming of Elijah later on in the book. To understand a text like this, we need to first pay attention to a number of the features.

There is the characterization of the figures. Most are not named in the narrative. After verse 1, Jeroboam is not spoken of by name. He is the king. Then there's the man of God, the prophet.

The locations from which they come are the things that are most prominent in the characterization. The man of God is from Judah. The old prophet is someone who lives in Bethel. The second thing to notice are the key literary connections. There's the tearing of the garment of the kingdom from Solomon, and then the tearing of Jeroboam's altar. There's the hand by which Jeroboam took the kingdom in chapter 11, and then that becomes withered in this chapter. There are human bones mentioned at the beginning of the narrative, and human bones mentioned at the end. Later on in the story of the kings, this narrative is hearkened back to in 2 Kings chapter 23 verse 15 to 18, as the prophecy of the man of God is fulfilled.

Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place he pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust.

[ 7 : 20 ] He also burned the Asherah, and as Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount. And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord that the man of God proclaimed, who had predicted these things.

Then he said, What is that monument that I see? And the men of the city told him, It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah, and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel. And he said, Let him be, let no man move his bones. So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet who came out of Samaria. We should also observe themes and motifs that are explored elsewhere in the books of the kings. There's lying prophecy, there's a lion killing a disobedient prophet, something we see again in 1 Kings chapter 20. The end of the chapter that speaks of Jeroboam's failure to learn from this thing might suggest that there was some symbolic character to the events, that what occurred was a sign. Literary structure is also important in understanding such texts. The literary structure of biblical passages can be like the shape of puzzle pieces that help us to see where they fit together. Here, for instance, we can see that there are two confrontations. There's one at the beginning, and another at the end. The man of God confronts the king, and then the old prophet confronts the man of God at the end. There are two temptations. There's the king's unsuccessful temptation, and the old prophet's successful one.

There are also four scenes, and here we see a more elaborate structure emerging. The first one is Jeroboam confronted by the man of God. The second is the old prophet hearing of, and then tempting the man of God. And then the third is the old prophet confronting the man of God, and then the fulfilment of the judgment upon the man of God. And finally, there is the old prophet hearing about the death of the man of God and bringing him back. Scenes 1 and 3, and 2 and 4, are parallel to each other. James Mead observes this in detail. Scene 1 begins with Jeroboam standing by the altar in verse 1, and then in verse 20 you have the old prophet and the man of God sitting at the table, calling against the altar in verse 2, calling against the man of God in verse 21. Thus says the Lord, followed by the message, in verse 2.

Thus says the Lord, followed by a message, in verse 21. A sign, the altar will be torn down, in verse 4. A sign, the man of God will not be buried with his ancestors, in verse 22. The altar torn down, in verse 5.

The man of God's body being thrown by the way, in verse 24. Threefold repetition of by the way, in verses 9 to 10. And then threefold repetition of by the way, in verses 24 to 25.

[ 10 : 01 ] The parallels between scenes 2 and 4 are even more arresting, perhaps. It begins in verse 11, the old prophet who lives in Bethel, and then in verse 25, in the town where the old prophet lived.

The old prophet hears about the man of God, in verse 11, and then again in verse 26. He instructs his sons, saddle for me the donkey, so they saddled the donkey, in verse 13, and then again in verse 27.

The old prophet goes and finds the man of God, in verse 14, and then again in verse 28. The old man persuades the man of God to return, in verse 15 and following, and then he brings back the corpse of the man of God, in verse 29. The old man gives a speech to the man of God, in verses 15 to 18, and then a speech to his sons, in verses 31 to 32. There are other noteworthy details, such as the significance of the donkey and the lion. The man of God is instructed to refrain from eating, and fails to do so, whereas the lion, as the agent of judgment, in a miraculous way does not eat. The donkey, while seemingly incidental, actually plays a rather large part in the story. The old prophet saddles him to bring back the man of God, then the old prophet lends him to the man of God, then the donkey stands beside the body, and then the body of the man of God is brought back upon the donkey. We might well wonder what the donkey represents. Similar questions could be asked about the lion. The story begins with a word of prophecy accompanied by a sign. A Davidic king will desecrate the altar. The sign of the altar splitting and the ashes being poured out is a sign given to confirm that message. The breaking of the altar might also remind us of the breaking of the tablets, a judgment in response to the sin of Aaron and the people concerning the golden calf. Now there is another golden calf, and another significant breaking of a stone object in judgment. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, has characteristics that might remind us of Moses and Aaron. In response to the pharaonic rule of Rehoboam and Solomon his father, who had placed the people of Israel under harsh labor, he asks for them to be let go. He has characteristics of Joseph and Moses and David in various ways, as he goes down to Egypt before returning to the land. However, he follows the sin of Aaron, he establishes these golden calves for the people, and then he also calls his sons Nadab and Abijah, reminding us of the unfaithful sons of Aaron that were killed by the Lord, Nadab and Abihu. Jeroboam's hand is withered by the Lord as he reaches out to instruct his men to seize the prophet, yet he is immediately healed by the Lord as he entreats the prophet to pray for him. When we consider the characterization of the man of God and the prophet, we begin to see that the places that they are associated with are the most important things about them. The man of God is associated with Judah, and the old prophet is associated with Bethel and the northern kingdom. This, I believe, helps us to understand some of the other details. The two men stand for the two kingdoms. Lying prophets are found throughout the books of the kings. In chapter 18 verse 19, there are 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah who are gathered to Mount Carmel.

In chapter 22, there are 400 lying prophets of Ahab. Despite being explicitly warned by Micaiah that the prophets were lying to him, Ahab follows the lying prophets to his doom. Jehoshaphat, the king of the southern kingdom of Judah, following him into battle. In the man of God from Judah then, we might have a sign of the southern kingdom and its duty. They must speak against the idolatry of the northern kingdom without being seduced to follow the way of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who causes Israel to sin. Although they may resist the way of Jeroboam in various respects, they may end up being seduced by the lying prophets of the north, suffering judgment as a result. Judah must not follow the lead of Israel. If they do, they will be judged. However, the possibility of salvation for the northern kingdom may be held out as they associate themselves with the southern kingdom of Judah, even in their judgment.

James Walsh writes, The individuals mirror their kingdoms, and their tragedy portends the tragic destiny awaiting Israel and Judah. Israel has become unfaithful. Judah can speak the word that Israel needs to hear. But if Judah too follows Israel's lead, compromises its worship, as history shows it will do, then both are doomed to overcome their separation only in death. Judah will be buried in an alien land, and Israel will be saved only so far as it is joined to Judah. The wish of the old prophet that he be buried with the man of God suggests the reunion of the brotherhood of the people in the grave of exile. This story then is a sign of the history that will follow, a divinely given sign of the destinies of these two unfaithful peoples, as they will work out in the rest of the books of the kings.

[15:00] A question to consider. What role do you think the donkey and the lion play in this story?