



First Kings - Chapter Thirteen

II 1 Kings 12:1-14:31 - The Kingdom Is Divided (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Jeroboam stands at the altar of his new temple in Bethel as Solomon had stood at his altar in Jerusalem, ready to dedicate it to his gods; but since this temple has no legitimacy, he does not get a chance to speak. For at that time a prophet came from Judah and prophesied that a future king Josiah would bring down the false priesthood and this altar. Jeroboam's hand withered as he tried to have the prophet seized but it was restored when Jeroboam pleaded with the prophet, who refused to accept any gift or hospitality from the king.

When an elderly prophet in Bethel heard of this prophet from Judah he went to meet him on the road and invited him to return to Bethel to dine with him. However, the Judæan prophet said he was forbidden by God to return. The elderly prophet then lied that he had been instructed by the Lord to bring him back and when he did so he was then informed of the trick and that the Lord would punish him for disobeying the initial command. The prophet from Judah was killed by a lion on his way and the elderly prophet then retrieved the body, burying it in his own tomb, and instructing his sons to bury him also with his brother prophet when the time came.

Jeroboam, however, did not heed the warning he had been given, continued his wicked ways and thus his house was destined to be destroyed.

II.b 1 Kings 13:1-34 - A Man of God from Judah

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ While Jeroboam was standing by the altar to offer incense, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel ² and proclaimed against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, 'O

altar, altar, thus says the Lord: “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 offer incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.””

1 Kings 13:1-2

While Jeroboam was standing by the altar to offer incense. This is either a further indication that Jeroboam acted both as priest and king, or is simply a continuation from Chapter 12.

A man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Apparently, there were no qualified messengers within the northern kingdom of Israel, something seen also in later times: <<*but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom*>> (Amos 7:13). This is a sad commentary on the spiritual state of Jeroboam’s kingdom. This anonymous man of God was used in an important way. He demonstrates that one does not need to be famous to be significantly used by God.

Another key element not specified in this account was that if Jeroboam would not permit God’s chosen priesthood to minister in Israel then he would send him his prophets to warn him of the consequences of his apostasy.

A son shall be born to the house of David. The son referenced here would be a good king in Judah but the term can also be taken to the ultimate Son of David: <<*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6), and: <<*When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus*>> (Mark 10:47-50). When the Son of David calls people everywhere should react as the blind man did that day.

This is a remarkable prophecy that would be precisely fulfilled 340 years later. The prophetic words about the future king Josiah point forward to a time when all the northern Israelite dynasties have come to an end, and only the house of David remains to take action against Bethel; refer to 2 Kings 22:1-23:30.

This was more than a pronouncement of judgement against the altar; it also announced that the judgement would come through a ruler of Judah, i.e. the house of David. This was a special rebuke and source of concern to Jeroboam, who was always aware of the threat from his neighbour to the south as noted in

1 Kings 12:27. It is known that this did not happen for some 340 years, but Jeroboam did not know that in advance. He went to his grave worried about the fulfilment of this prophecy, which was a form of immediate judgement on Jeroboam as he knew little personal peace during his time as king.

³ He gave a sign the same day, saying, ‘This is the sign that the Lord has spoken: “The altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.”’ ⁴ When the king heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, ‘Seize him!’ But the hand that he stretched out against him withered so that he could not draw it back to himself. ⁵ 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.

1 Kings 13:3-5

He gave a sign the same day. Since Josiah’s reign is still a long way off, a sign is also described and then enacted, indicating that the prophecy is true: the altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar. This demonstration of God’s power strikingly illustrates the truth that God is not under Jeroboam’s control just because he has invented a new worship system, any more than God’s prophet is under royal control when the king’s hand stretches out to capture him, and the king experiences an immediate judgement from God: he could not draw it back to himself.

Such judgements by God often come swiftly, for example: <<*When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous*>> (Numbers 12:10), and: <<*Immediately the sentence was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven away from human society, ate grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers and his nails became like birds’ claws*>> (Daniel 4:33).

Signs were also an important part of Jesus’ ministry to help his disciples comprehend who he was: <<*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*>> (John 2:11), and to demonstrate his authenticity to others.

Seize him! Jeroboam’s reaction was immediate - he sought to silence the messenger rather than respond to the message. The prophecy from the man of God was like almost every message of coming judgement - an implicit invitation to repentance. Jeroboam obviously did not accept this invitation.

It appears that the Lord acted in this way for three reasons. Firstly, he chastised Jeroboam for offering violence towards and the captivity of God's prophet; secondly, to secure the prophet from any future harm by the king; and thirdly, to demonstrate how highly he regards his true servants and is offended by the way they are treated by others.

⁶ The king said to the man of God, 'Entreat now the favour of the Lord your God, and pray for me, so that my hand may be restored to me.' So the man of God entreated the Lord; and the king's hand was restored to him, and became as it was before.

1 Kings 13:6

Entreat now the favour of the Lord your God, and pray for me, so that my hand may be restored to me. Under the evident judgement of God, Jeroboam had no use for golden calves or their altars. He knew that his only hope was in the Lord and in his representative. As the subsequent chapters will show, Jeroboam did not really repent here; or if he did, it was only for a moment. Wanting to receive something from God is not the same as repentance. This is clear from the way he refers to Yahweh as the Lord your God and not the Lord *my* God.

So the man of God entreated the Lord; and the king's hand was restored to him. To his credit, the man of God showed great grace to Jeroboam. He quickly moved from being under arrest to being an intercessor for his persecutor. This was great mercy from the man of God, and especially from God who answered his prayer. It seems likely that God did this, partly, to assure him that the stroke was from God; partly, because he repented of that violence which he intended against the prophet, for which God inflicted it; and partly, that the goodness of God to him might have led him to repentance; or if he continued impenitent, leave him without all excuse.

Such intercession is a major feature of the Kingdom of God, from the earliest of times and continues today: <<Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours>> (Genesis 20:7), <<But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated>> (Numbers 11:2), <<King Zedekiah sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah to the prophet Jeremiah saying, 'Please pray for us to the Lord our God'>> (Jeremiah 37:3), <<Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you[a] have said may happen to me'>> (Acts 8:24), and: <<Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us>> (Romans 8:34).

Introduction to 1 Kings 13:7-32

Jeroboam's invitation to the man of God to dine and receive a reward is best understood as an attempt to buy his loyalty, perhaps hoping for the curse on the altar to be reversed. The invitation from the old prophet living in Bethel is best understood in the same way (v.15), as an attempt to stave off the destruction of Bethel and the desecration of his own tomb that he knows must follow the Judæan's words of v.2. No doubt concern about the possibility of such a corruption of the man of God lay behind the detailed instructions given to him about his journey – that he should go directly to Bethel and come directly back, not even stopping to eat and drink; and that he should vary his route so that he could not be easily found and prevented from completing his mission. Disobedience leads him to an unfortunate end: a lion meets him on the road and kills him – a lion ordained by God and behaving quite out of character for it did not eat the prophet or his donkey but stood guard over it. True prophecy will bring forth the judgement it promises. Even prophets cannot escape if they are disobedient. Bethel will indeed be destroyed (v.32), and by extension all the other houses of the high places in Samaria, for which Bethel provides the focal point. The name Samaria is used here by extension for the territory of which the city of Samaria became the capital under Omri, the father of Ahab, in 1 Kings 16:24.

⁷ Then the king said to the man of God, 'Come home with me and dine, and I will give you a gift.' ⁸ But the man of God said to the king, 'If you give me half your kingdom, I will not go in with you; nor will I eat food or drink water in this place.' ⁹ For thus I was commanded by the word of the Lord: You shall not eat food, or drink water, or return by the way that you came.' ¹⁰ So he went another way, and did not return by the way that he had come to Bethel.

1 Kings 13:7-10

I will give you a gift. Jeroboam quickly - and naturally, given the circumstances - embraced the man of God as a friend. He wanted to feed and reward him, without any repentance from the sin the man of God had denounced. It was normal practice for those seeking the help of a man of God to give him a gift as was seen when Saul first encountered Samuel: <<*Then Saul replied to the boy, 'But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What have we?'*>> (1 Samuel 9:7).

If you give me half your kingdom, I will not go in with you; nor will I eat food or drink water in this place. The man of God refused the invitation, based on a prior warning from God. To accept Jeroboam's invitation would demonstrate fellowship with his idolatry. Balaam rejected Balak's offer of a gift in a similar way: <<*But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Although Balak were to give me his*

house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God, to do less or more’>> (Numbers 22:18).

¹¹ Now there lived an old prophet in Bethel. One of his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel; the words also that he had spoken to the king, they told to their father. ¹² 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. ¹³ Then he said to his sons, ‘Saddle a donkey for me.’ So they saddled a donkey for him, and he mounted it. ¹⁴ He went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak tree. He said to him, ‘Are you the man of God who came from Judah?’ He answered, ‘I am.’ ¹⁵ Then he said to him, ‘Come home with me and eat some food.’ ¹⁶ But he said, ‘I cannot return with you, or go in with you; nor will I eat food or drink water with you in this place; ¹⁷ for it was said to me by the word of the Lord: You shall not eat food or drink water there, or return by the way that you came.’

1 Kings 13:11-17

Now there lived an old prophet in Bethel. It seems that this was once a faithful prophet to the Lord although his initial actions and lies do not show him in a good light. This demonstrates that not every godly person left Israel for Judah; some still remained behind. It seems in this case that he may have remained for this very purpose as God speaks through him at least once more.

He went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak tree. The man was probably resting in the heat of the day. He was also likely to have been weak because he seemed not to have had any food or water - perhaps he was fasting as he was undertaking the Lord’s commission.

Come home with me and eat some food. This prophet from Bethel invited the unnamed man of God to his home, just as Jeroboam had invited him. The man of God refused, under the same reason he refused Jeroboam - that God had specifically told him to return to Judah without accepting hospitality, and to return by a different route (v.10).

¹⁸ Then the other said to him, ‘I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord: Bring him back with you into your house so that he may eat food and drink water.’ But he was deceiving him. ¹⁹ Then the man of God went back with him, and ate food and drank water in his house.

1 Kings 13:18-19

But he was deceiving him. The prophet from Bethel gave a false word from God, trying to persuade the man of God from Judah to change his course from doing exactly what God told him. In this action the elderly prophet was not only lying to his brother prophet, he was taking the name of the Lord in vain, contrary to the law: <<*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*>> (Exodus 20:7).

An angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord. Perhaps this was true, and perhaps it was a deceiving angel. Satan and his messengers can appear as angels of light according to Paul: <<*And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds*>> (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).

Then the man of God went back with him, and ate food and drank water in his house. The man of God from Judah listened to the lie from the prophet of Bethel. He did this for several reasons. The prophet from Bethel:

- Was probably older and had the respect of the man of God.
- Identified with the man of God (I also am a prophet as you are).
- Claimed a spectacular experience (an angel spoke to me).
- Claimed to speak for the Lord (by the word of the Lord).
- Did not seem to be an idolater who should be shunned (Bring him back with you into your house).
- Offered no reward, other than simple food, i.e. he may eat bread and drink water.

No matter how natural and seductive this enticement was, it was the duty of the man of God to resist it. He had a word from God to guide his actions, and should receive no other word accept through dramatic and direct confirmation by God's Spirit. His failure at this point ended his usefulness as a man of God.

²⁰ As they were sitting at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back; ²¹ and he proclaimed 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 commandment that the Lord your God commanded you, ²² but have come back and have eaten food and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, "Eat no food, and drink no water", your body shall not come to your ancestral tomb.'

1 Kings 13:20-22

The word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back. This prophet from Bethel spoke a lie in the name of the Lord in v.18. Now he received a true prophecy while the man of God from Judah ate at his table.

Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord. God promised great judgement against the man of God from Judah for his disobedience. This was a hard test, but he failed it. He should have kept the commandment that the Lord your God commanded him, no matter how subtle and innocent the temptation was to disobey.

Your body shall not come to your ancestral tomb. In Israelite culture to be left unburied was a curse and to be buried among strangers was considered to be a disgrace to the family. God judged the man of God from Judah far more strictly than he judged Jeroboam or the prophet from Bethel. It would seem that they were guilty of worse sins, such as leading national idolatry and a deliberate lying prophecy, yet the man of God received worse judgement.

This is an example of an important principle of the way God works. Many think that strict judgement should begin among the most ungodly, but often God begins strict judgement among his own people: *<<For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?>>* (1 Peter 4:17). Usually this is because God knows that the world will not be reached when his people live in compromise and disobedience. In this case the prophet from Judah committed a sin that leads to death; refer to 1 John 5:16-17. However, this does not mean that God did not care for his soul.

²³ After the man of God had eaten food and had drunk, they saddled for him a donkey belonging to the prophet who had brought him back.

²⁴ Then as he went away, a lion met him on the road and killed him. His body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it; the lion also stood beside the body. ²⁵ People passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, with the lion standing by the body. And they came and told it in the town where the old prophet lived.

1 Kings 13:23-25

A lion met him on the road and killed him. The word - the second word - of the prophet from Bethel was fulfilled. He did not say that the man of God would perish by a lion, but that he would not be buried in the tomb of his fathers. Lions were known to have lived in the region until at least the 13th Century AD.

This fate is curiously reminiscent of the death of another unnamed prophet during the reign of King Ahab: <<At the command of the Lord a certain member of a company of prophets said to another, 'Strike me!' But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, 'Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, as soon as you have left me, a lion will kill you.' And when he had left him, a lion met him and killed him>> (1 Kings 20:35-36).

People passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, with the lion standing by the body. This demonstrates that this was no mere accident, but something unique from God. The lion did not attack the donkey, i.e. the donkey stood beside it, nor did he attack the people who passed by. This lion was on a special mission of judgement from God, and seems to be more obedient than the man of God from Judah was. This made the sight remarkable and therefore they came and told it in the town where the old prophet lived.

²⁶ 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.'²⁷ Then he said to his sons, 'Saddle a donkey for me.' So they saddled one,²⁸ and he went and found the body thrown in the road, with the donkey and the lion standing beside the body. The lion had not eaten the body or attacked the donkey.²⁹ The prophet took up the body of the man of God, laid it on the donkey, and brought it back to the city, to mourn and to bury him.³⁰ He laid the body in his own grave; and they mourned over him, saying, 'Alas, my brother!'³¹ 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.'³² For the saying that he proclaimed 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.'

1 Kings 13:26-32

The prophet took up the body and brought it back to the city, to mourn and to bury him. The old prophet from Bethel was sympathetic to the man of God from Judah, even in his disobedience and resulting judgement. The prophet from Bethel was not a particularly righteous man or good prophet, having used a lying prophecy to lead the man of God into sin and judgement. He recognised the common weakness of this fellow servant of God. How strange it was for the old prophet to look upon the carcass of the dead prophet, and to realise, "My sin was worse than

his.” The ways of God’s judgement are sometimes past understanding, and will only be understandable from eternity.

He laid the body in his own grave and not in the tomb of the man of God from Judah’s ancestors, in fulfilment of the previous prophecy. The reader may see similarities here with the actions of Joseph of Arimathea, who had Jesus laid in his own tomb: *<<They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid>>* (John 19:40-41).

Alas, my brother! The elderly prophet recognised the bond the two men had in life by being called to serve God. He wanted that bond to continue beyond death.

When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones. Although he had lied to him, led him into sin, and prophesied judgement against him, the prophet from Bethel still respected the man of God from Judah. Perhaps he understood that the word he spoke against Jeroboam required a courage he personally did not have; therefore he confirmed the word of the man of God against Jeroboam and the altar at Bethel.

³³ Even after this event Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people; any who wanted to be priests he consecrated for the high places. ³⁴ This matter 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 13:33-34

Even after this event Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way. He should have repented, but he did not. God’s dealing with the man of God from Judah was warning enough to Jeroboam, but it was another warning that he ignored. The Hebrew is literally ‘did not return from his evil way, but returned and made priests,’ playing on the verb *shub*, to return, earlier in the story, and particularly on the phrase *<<return by the way>>* in v.9, v.10, and v.17. The man of God was told not to retrace his steps at any point on his journey, but he did so in order to return to the prophet’s house. Because he allowed himself to be brought back alive, i.e. ‘returned’ by the Bethel-based prophet, he was eventually brought back dead (v.29), as God’s judgement fell upon him. In spite of this, Jeroboam also ‘retraces his steps,’ and this too will bring downfall and destruction.

Jeroboam had great opportunity, especially in light of the promise of God through Ahijah: *<<If you will listen to all that I command you, walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you, and will build you*

an enduring house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you>> (1 Kings 11:38). Jeroboam did not obey God and honour his commandments, and he never fulfilled his potential or promise: <<And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’ Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword’>> (Amos 7:8-9).

The same principle works in servants of God today. Christians are not called because of obedience, or used out of merit; but their disobedience hinders their potential for full use. Paul put it this way: *<<All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned [works of dishonour] will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work>> (2 Timothy 2:21); God uses vessels of honour, separation, usefulness, and preparation to their fullest potential.*

In his failure, Jeroboam became the prototype of the disobedient kings of Israel. The phrase: *<<He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, walking in the way of Jeroboam and in the sin that he caused Israel to commit>> or similar is used of many subsequent kings of Israel. These include:*

- Baasha (1 Kings 15:33-34).
- Omri (1 Kings 16:25-26).
- Ahaziah (1 Kings 22:51-52).
- Jehoram (2 Kings 3:1-3).
- Jehu (2 Kings 10:29-31).
- Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:1-2).
- Jehoash (2 Kings 13:10-11).
- Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23-24).
- Zechariah (2 Kings 15:8-9).
- Menahim (2 Kings 15:17-18).
- Pekahiah (2 Kings 15:23-24).
- Pekah (2 Kings 15:27-28).

One curious exception was Ahab, who was noted even as worse than Jeroboam: *<<Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him>> (1 Kings 16:30-31).*

Jeroboam had great opportunity, but instead became a great curse to every generation of the northern kingdom after that. Even at the end of the kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam’s sin was remembered: *<<When he had torn Israel from the*

house of David, they made Jeroboam son of Nebat king. Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel continued in all the sins that Jeroboam committed; they did not depart from them until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had foretold through all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day>> (2 Kings 17:21-23).

All in all, Jeroboam is an example of sinful failure. He failed:

- Despite great blessing and favour from God.
- For the sake of mere political advantage.
- And led an entire nation into idolatry.
- Despite specific warnings to repent.
- Despite specific judgement and deliverance from that judgement.
- Despite a clear message and example of integrity.