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## **The Revenge of the Man of God: Conflict and Resolution in The Rise and Fall of the Divided Monarchies**

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### ***Abstract***

*Using narrative criticism and the analysis of the plot development in 1 Kings 12:25-13:34, this paper shows that the two stories involving the anonymous man of God in 1 Kings 13 play vital roles in the development of the larger plot of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel symbolized with the reign of Jeroboam and the rise of the southern kingdom under the revival of Josiah. The man of God becomes symbolic of the obedience and disobedience of the monarchy. Conflict arises in the plot between Yahweh spoken through the man of God and the altar at Bethel. The surface conflicts between the human characters become symbolic of the deeper conflict between Yahweh and other gods. The theme of obedience or disobedience to the divine word emerges from this deeper plot. This conflict between God's command to worship only Him and the Israel's worship of foreign gods will finally be resolved in the destruction of the pagan shrines by Josiah 330 years later, described in 2 Kings 23. The man of God serves as an example of both obedience and disobedience to the divine word.*

*Keywords: conflict resolution; revenge; man of God*

## INTRODUCTION

Most scholars recognize literary problems in the two stories about the man of God found in 1 Kings 13. For example, what is the significance of the mention of Josiah in 13:2? Why is the second episode (13:11-32) placed in a context dealing with the downfall of Jeroboam, appearing to be unrelated to what comes before or after? Is there a reason why the story line is broken in 2 Kings 23:16-18 with a flashback of the events in 1 Kings 13? Why does the fate of the man of God take such a drastic turn in the second episode?

Inconsistencies such as these have led Old Testament scholars to question the integrity of the text.<sup>1</sup> The older school of literary criticism has asked what redactional layers might be present, whether a prophetic source or redaction stands behind this story or a prophetic legend has been transformed by the Deuteronomist. These older literary approaches have led scholars to focus on such topics as false and true prophecy (Crenshaw), prophetic authority (De Vries), or divine election (Barth).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literary approaches, such as that of W. Gross, offer new interpretative possibilities and provide fresh insights into the literary structure of this chapter and its context. By examining the development of plot in 1 Kings 12:25-13:34, we will be able to determine that the episodes involving the man of God play vital roles in the development of the larger plot of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel with Jeroboam and the rise of the southern kingdom with Josiah. Moreover, we will be able to see that the man of God becomes symbolic of the obedience and disobedience of the monarchy.

The story of the man of God in 1 Kings 13 has been carefully crafted into a two-sided plot. One scene is positive, the other negative. Carefully examining the facets of the story necessitates exploring the conflict between the key characters. Conflict is an important element to a plot. Conflict can occur *first*, within one character, *second*, between a character and society, and/or *third*, between two characters, each trying to impose his or her will on another.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the plot of 1

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, ed. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 290; Martin Noth, *Könige* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins,

1968), 291; John Gray, *I and II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 293.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1960), 33.

Kings moves with a purpose.

As the *Dictionary of World Literary Terms* states, “The elements of plot are a beginning that presumes further action, a middle that presumes both previous and succeeding action, and an end that requires the preceding events but no succeeding action.”<sup>3</sup> The type of narrative in this chapter would be what Robert Culley calls “a movement from complication to resolution.” He writes, “This movement starts from an initial, incomplete or abnormal situation which implies or holds out the possibility of further action and passes on to a state of relative completeness or normality which suggests that the action begun as a result of the earlier state is over.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, there is a significant conflict in this plot which is not resolved by the end of the chapter but in 2 Kings 23. This conflict occurs between the word of Yahweh spoken through the man of God and the altar at Bethel. The surface conflicts between the human characters become symbolic of the deeper conflict between Yahweh and other gods. The theme of obedience or disobedience to the divine word emerges from this plot.

## THE FALL OF THE MONARCHY WITH JEROBOAM

### The Beginning of the Plot with Jeroboam’s “Sin” (1 Kings 12:25-33)

The context for the story of the man of God begins after Jeroboam had been crowned king of the new kingdom of Israel (12:20). After having fortified Shechem followed by Peniel (vv. 20, 25), Jeroboam begins a monologue which, according to Cohn, displays the king’s inner insecurity. In this monologue, Jeroboam “reveals to us, but not to the people, that the real motivation for his subsequent actions is his fear of the people’s defection (v. 27).”<sup>5</sup> His actions result from a fear of a loss of authority. Underneath his statement stands the people’s advice (v. 28a) and their approval (v. 30b). Jeroboam’s erection of golden calves at Bethel and Dan was not a solitary act. By extension, behind any subsequent act of Jeroboam stands the people’s approval.<sup>6</sup>

The downfall of Jeroboam begins in v. 26 and continues on through v. 33. In vv. 28-33 Jeroboam makes two golden

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph T Shipley, *Dictionary of World Literary Terms* (Boston: The Writer, 1970), 240.

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Culley, *Punishment Stories in the Legends of the Prophets*, ed. Richard A. Spence (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 168-169.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Cohn, *Literary Technique in the Jeroboam Narrative* *Zeitschrift für Die Alt Testamentliche Wissenschaft* 97, 1985, 30.

<sup>6</sup> This idea echoes Israel’s request for a king and Samuel’s response in 1 Sam 8.

caves, one for Bethel and another for Dan, builds shrines and appoints high priests, offers his own sacrifices, and by doing all this violates Deuteronomic law at a number of points.<sup>7</sup> The verb *asah* (“he made”) occurs nine times between vv. 28-33.

Concerning this, Cohn offers that “the narrator depicts Jeroboam’s acts as self-willed and self-serving.”<sup>8</sup> This point in the narrative marks the nadir of the monarchy which remains until the reforms of Josiah in 2 Kings 23. In all of this, the shrine at Bethel becomes symbolic of the abandonment of Yahweh.<sup>9</sup> With respect to ch. 13, Jeroboam’s actions serve to create the need for Yahweh to act. Conflict begins in this action.

### **The Episode of the Man of God versus Jeroboam**

After Jeroboam’s cultic activities

in Bethel and Dan, an anonymous man of God.<sup>10</sup> from Judah appears on the scene in 13:1 “by the word of the Lord.” This “word of the Lord” arises as a result of Jeroboam’s actions described in 12:28-33. The man of God not only comes “by the word of the Lord” but also speaks “by the word of the Lord” (v. 2). The phrase *bidbar Yahweh* is a critical motif in this chapter and ties the two sections together. The plot revolves around obedience to this “word of Yahweh.” The key characters, Jeroboam and the man of God, are judged by their obedience or disobedience to the command of Yahweh. Conflict results in the plot if one disobeys the word of Yahweh. This key phrase occurs in verses 1, 2, 5, 9, 17, 18, and 32. All of these occurrences, except v. 18, occur in relation to the man of God receiving a command or message from the Lord. In v. 18, the prophet from Bethel says that he received a message “by the word of the Lord,” but

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomic laws which Jeroboam violates include offering a non-centralized sacrifice (Deut 12:5-7; 2 Sam 7; 1 Kings 2:3, etc.), image worship (Deut 9:8-21; on the golden calves, see 2 Kings 10:29; 17:16), non-Levitical priests (Deut 18:1-18), Feast of Booths in the wrong month (Deut 16:13-17), polytheism (Deut 5:7), and having local high places (Deut 12:11-14).

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, *Literary Technique in the Jeroboam Narrative*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Werner E. Lemke, “The Way of Obedience: 1 Kings 13 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God.*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke (Garden City:

Doubleday, 1976), 312.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus identifies this prophet by the name of Yadon (Ant. VIII, 9.1). Gray suggests that this name could be linked, by metathesis, to the ‘iddoof 2 Chron 13:22. It could also be linked to the common noun ‘oded meaning “soothsayer” or “prophet” 295-96. and others and others James L. Crenshaw, *Suggest Links With A Similar Story In Amos Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 41-42 For a further discussion on the identification of this man of God, see James S. Alexander, “A Note on the Identity of the ‘Man of God’ of 1 Kgs. XIII in Gesta Coll. Carthag. 3. 258,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (April 1977): 109-112.

he actually was telling a lie. By including this phrase, the author has provided the man of God the necessary authority to condemn Jeroboam's actions at Bethel.<sup>11</sup>

This authority can be seen in the discourse in vv. 1-3 in which speech is given on three different levels. The first speech is the commissioning by Yahweh of the man of God to go to Bethel and prophesy against the altar. This is assumed from the words spoken in the third level of speech below. The second level occurs when the man of God cries out against the Bethelite altar: "O altar, altar!" Finally, the third level involves the words of Yahweh spoken through the mouth of the man of God: "Behold, a son will be born to the house of David whose name will be Josiah. He will sacrifice on you [the altar] priests of the high places who will make offerings on you and human bones will be burned on you" (v. 2), and "Behold, the altar will be split apart and the ash which is in it will be poured out" (v. 3). The reader knows that the words coming from the mouth of the man of God actually are the very words of God with God's own authority.

The discourse "by the word of the Lord" focuses upon the Bethel altar.

Jeroboam is not explicitly condemned in these verses. His reaction to the prophecy, however, implicitly shows his contempt for the man of God. There is no indication that Jeroboam understands the words to have come from Yahweh Himself. Jeroboam speaks against the man of God who has just spoken with the authority of Yahweh. By doing this, Jeroboam has taken on the authority of Yahweh in combat. This is a conflict he loses, though. The incidents of the shriveling of Jeroboam's hands (v. 4) and the splitting apart of the altar (v. 5) serve to validate the words spoken against the altar.

This explains Jeroboam's reaction in v. 6: "Intercede before the Lord your God and pray for me so that my hands can be restored." It has taken such drastic signs as these to convince Jeroboam of the authenticity of the prophecy. After v. 6, the surface conflict appears to have been resolved between Jeroboam and the representative authority from Yahweh, the man of God. Yet, one is left wondering about the deeper conflict between Yahweh and the Bethelite altar. The sin of the northern kingdom becomes symbolized in this shrine at Bethel. Even after the collapse of the northern kingdom, Bethel

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<sup>11</sup> Werner E. Lemke, "The Way of Obedience: 1 Kings 13 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," *Magnalia Dei, The*

*Mighty Acts of God.*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 314.

remained a problem (2 Kings 17:24-33).

This conflict between God's command to worship only Him and the service to foreign gods will finally be resolved in the destruction of the pagan shrines by Josiah 330 years later, described in 2 Kings 23. The resolution of this critical conflict is foreshadowed in v. 2 with the man of God's prophecy against the altar. Josiah is mentioned as the agent of fulfillment for this prophecy. Cohn states, "Naming Josiah as the distant agent of the desecration of the altar, the oracle sends a trajectory far out into the future, setting the best king against the worst and points to the ultimate triumph of good over evil."<sup>12</sup> Within a few short verses, the reader is given the essential issues that govern the fall of the monarchy under Jeroboam and its rise under Josiah. The key characters are given, the conditions determined, and the conflict begun. All that remains for the plot is to see how the conflicts are played out between Jeroboam and the man of God, between Jeroboam and the divine word, and between Yahweh and the altar at Bethel.

After the cleansing of Jeroboam's shriveled hand, the relationship between Jeroboam and the man of God experiences further conflict when Jeroboam invites the

man of God home to eat something (v. 7). The conflict essentially occurs at a deeper level. This invitation is a test of the faithfulness of the man of God to his divine commission. He has been commanded to eat nothing but go straight home. If he deviates from this, he will be disobedient to the word of Yahweh (v. 9). Almost the same test of the faithfulness of the man of God occurs in vv. 15-17 where a Bethelite prophet also invites him home, this time for food (vv. 15-17). In the first test, he obeys, but in the second, he disobeys.

Both tests have almost identical wording. According to Nelson, vv. 8-9 and vv. 16-17 form a chiasm with the word of God in their center:

*A* I will not go

*B* I will not eat bread or drink water

*C* by the word of the Lord

*B'* you shall neither eat bread nor drink water

*A'* nor return by the way that you came (vv. 8-9)

*A* I may not return with you, or go

*B* neither will I eat bread nor drink water

*C* by the word of the Lord

*B'* you shall neither eat bread nor

<sup>12</sup> Cohn, *Literary Technique in the*

*Jeroboam Narrative*, 32.

drink water there,

*A'* nor return by the way you came  
(vv. 16-17).<sup>13</sup>

This chiasm highlights that the crucial issue for the man of God is obedience to the command of the word of Yahweh. After successfully passing the test with Jeroboam, the man of God leaves Bethel (v. 10), and the first episode comes to an end. The conflict between Jeroboam and the man of God has been resolved but the conflict centering around the altar at Bethel will not be resolved until Josiah's reforms in 2 Kings 23. The prophetic word against the altar has yet to be fulfilled. The tension between the prophetic word and lack of obedience to this word continues to be illustrated in the second episode.

### **Episode of the Man of God versus the Prophet from Bethel**

The man of God experiences another conflict in the second major section of this chapter. This scene has the same essential underlying theme as the first episode: Yahweh demands obedience and faithfulness to His commands. Verses 11 and 12 serve to introduce the major antagonist—an anonymous old prophet of

Bethel. On the surface, the only link with the previous section appears to be the central character of the anonymous man of God. As Nelson's chiasm implies, however, the author may intend some link between the two scenes.

This section opens with the sons of the old prophet telling what the man of God had done to Jeroboam in Bethel and the prophecy they had heard against the altar. Their report perks the interest of their father who then chases after the man of God finding him under an oak tree. Then ensues the second test of the man of God. The man of God gives essentially the same response to the prophet as he gave to Jeroboam. But a twist in the narrative occurs when the prophet responds, "I also am a prophet like you, and an angel said to me, *by the word of the Lord*, 'Bring him back with you to your house so he can eat bread and drink water'" (v. 18, italics added). The reader knows that the prophet is lying, but the man of God does not know. The prophet ascribes his message to an angel which relieves God of direct responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Or, as Gross adds, "It is not a demonic YHWH but a lying *nabi* who puts the man of God to the test."<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 85.

<sup>14</sup> James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings*

(Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1951), 261.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Gross, *Lying Prophet and Disobedient Man of God in 1 Kings 13: Role Analysis as an Instrument of Theological*

place of “by the word of the Lord” in this verse is difficult to assess in light of the lying prophet. Gross solves the problem by suggesting that the issue is not false prophecy or the motivation of the prophet, but rather, “The lie is only of interest because and to the degree that it is suited to move the plot forward.”<sup>16</sup> The text is silent about punishment of the lying prophet. The test of the man of God, however, receives a great deal of attention.

The man of God believes the old prophet’s mediated words more than his direct commission from God, indicated by how he accepted the invitation and followed the prophet home (v. 20). As a consequence, the prophet cries out against the man of God: “Thus the Lord says, ‘Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord and have not kept the commandment which the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back and 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.’” This time the prophet speaks the direct words of God and not the mediated words of an angel (“thus Yahweh says”). The conflict

between the man of God and the prophet becomes a conflict between the man of God and Yahweh.

In the first scene, Jeroboam does not recognize the divine word spoken through the man of God and so ignores it. In this scene, the man of God does not recognize the purported and false “word of the Lord” spoken through the prophet and does not ignore it but obeys it. In both situations, the characters disobey the divine word, and both reap the consequences of their disobedience even if they did not recognize it. The text emphasizes that each should have recognized the divine word. Jeroboam received the divine word as “thus says Yahweh.” The man of God received his commission sometime during or before the events of ch. 13. When a character comes in conflict with the word of Yahweh, the character always loses, and the word of Yahweh always wins. In the case of Jeroboam, the word of Yahweh wins by the shriveling of Jeroboam’s hand. In the case of the man of God, the word of Yahweh wins when the man of God is killed by a lion on his way home (v. 24). Both conflicts end in punishment.

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*Interpretation of an OT Narrative Text*,” (Semeia: 15, 1979), 110.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 123 Lemke states, “The demand for obedience to the divine command occupies a

prominent place in the Deuteronomic literature” (312). He refers to Deut 5:32-33; 11:13-17; 30:1-10, 15-20; 31:27-29; Josh 1:7-8; Judg 6:7-10; 1 Sam 7:3-4; 1 Kings 3:14; 9:4-5; 12:21-24; 2 Kings 21:7-8.



On the one hand, disobedience to the divine command brings punishment. Culley comments,

The mention of a prohibition holds out the possibility of transgression of that prohibition, thus creating a wrong which must be punished. . . . The “wrong” element is thus divided into two components very closely related to each other—a prohibition and its transgression. Furthermore, the movement from prohibition to transgression is made possible by an act of deception. . . . The “wrong punished” element involves a declaration of guilt (“because you rebelled”) followed by an announcement of punishment (“your corpse shall not go into the grave of your fathers”).<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, restoration comes only with recognition of the divine word and obedience to it. Jeroboam’s hand shrivels as a punishment and is restored only when he recognizes the divine word. The man of God dies as a punishment. The fate of the restoration of the man of God rests in his prophetic word against the Bethel altar. The only way he can be “restored” or vindicated since he is dead is for his words against the altar to come true.

Obedience to the word of the Lord is emphasized once again in the prophet’s reaction to the news that the man of God had been killed. The prophet identifies the

anonymous man of God as “he who disobeyed the command of Yahweh” (v. 26). The man of God receives punishment “according to the word of Yahweh which he had said to him.” Even after the death and burial of the man of God, the conflict between him and God is not completely resolved.

The man of God functions as the bearer of the prophecy against the Bethel altar, and until that prophecy is fulfilled, the man of God cannot rest in peace. Significant in this regard is the concluding remarks of the prophet: “For the message which he cried out by the word of the Lord against the altar of Bethel and all of the shrines of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria will come true” (v. 32). Disobedience to the word of the Lord brings punishment. For the man of God, it brought death and burial away from his home. For Jeroboam and the rest of the nation, this disobedience will bring destruction to the symbol of their disobedience the Bethel altar. As Nelson points out, the motivation for each character’s action lacks in this narrative. No moral enigma exists, rather, as we have seen, the issue becomes obedience to the word of Yahweh.<sup>18</sup>

This incident is a foreshadowing or

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<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Culley, *Punishment Stories in the Legends of the Prophets*, (Pittsburgh:

Pickwick) 174.

<sup>18</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second*

warning of things to come because of Jeroboam's rebellion and disobedience. In fact, the text hints that the events of the fall of the man of God should have caused Jeroboam to turn from his evil way. Verse 33 begins, "*After this event, Jeroboam did not change from his evil way*" (italics added). Jeroboam did not turn *to* God but rather *away from* God, evidenced by his appointing anyone who wished as priest to his high places (v. 33). The word *shub* ("return") occurs many times in this passage: 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 26, 29, and 33. Lemke suggests four uses in this passage: 1) to return an object to its former position or state (4, 6), 2) to go back in the direction from which one came (9, 10, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 20); 3) to repeat or continue an action (33); 4) in a transferred sense to depart from a course of action or mode of behavior (33).<sup>19</sup>

In all of these uses, the possibility of returning to a given state is maintained. In reference to the command of God, not returning to the state of obedience brings punishment. The only occurrence in this chapter of avoidance of punishment comes when the man of God

obeys the command of God by not accepting Jeroboam's invitation (vv. 7-10).

In 1 Kings 13, the word of God spoken against Bethel gains authority through the fulfillment of prophecy against the man of God who disobeys Yahweh's word by going home with the prophet. The conflict between the man of God and the prophet of Bethel is resolved by the prophet's desire for his bones to be buried by those of the man of God (v. 31). This aligns both men together against the altar at Bethel (v. 32). Left unresolved, then, is the conflict between the word of God spoken through the man of God and the Bethel altar. The destiny of the man of God becomes symbolic of this conflict, a conflict which is not resolved until Josiah's reform in 2 Kings 23.

## THE RISE OF THE MONARCHY WITH JOSIAH

In 13:34, the final evaluation of Jeroboam's refusal to return to obedience to God's commands is that the shrine at Bethel "became sin to the house of Jeroboam" with the consequence that his

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*Kings*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 89.

<sup>19</sup> Lemke, "*The Way of Obedience: 1 Kings 13 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History*," *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God*., 310 For a thorough look at the word *shub*, see

William L. Holladay, *The Root Subh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958). H. W. Wolff has pointed out the key position of *shub* in the Deuteronomistic History in "Das Kerygma des .

house would be cut off and destroyed from the face of the earth. Jeroboam's sin becomes a symbol for the disobedience of the northern kings who come after him. All the kings of Israel are judged poorly; five from Judah receive some approval, and Hezekiah and Josiah receive high approval. Jeroboam receives the negative evaluation that he had committed more evil than anyone before him (14:9). Josiah is one of four characters in the Deuteronomistic history who receives the corresponding positive evaluation of total obedience to the law of God (2 Kings 23:25).<sup>20</sup>

### **The Development of Plot in 2 Kings 22-23**

By the time we reach 2 Kings 22, hope has run out for Judah like it ran out for Israel. Both had disobeyed God's command for complete loyalty to Him. Yet, each king had the personal choice of rejecting or accepting Yahweh's commands. The reign of Josiah is summed up in 22:2: "he did what was right in the

eyes of Yahweh, and walked in the all the ways of David his father, and he did not turn to the right or to the left." This high evaluation of Josiah is based upon his reaction to the discovery of the book of the law which prompts him to begin reformation and do penitence (11-13). Disaster cannot be averted, but disobedience can be reversed.<sup>21</sup> The conflict begun with Jeroboam's apostasy at Bethel between Yahweh and the altar with its resolution in punishment remains in effect for Josiah and his people (22:13).

Upon the discovery of the book of the law, Josiah tears his clothes, symbolizing repentance of wrong (v. 11; cf. 19). He sends an entourage to inquire of the Lord who then answers through the prophetess Huldah.

Her response proves interesting for our study. In vv. 16-17, the prophetic word states that punishment is immanent because Judah has forsaken God and burned incense to other gods, a violation of Deut. 28:15 and 45. This time, the Lord's anger will not be quenched. The narrative takes a turn in vv. 18-19 with Josiah's obedience to the commands of the

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<sup>20</sup> The other three are Moses (Deut 34:10), Solomon (1 Kings 3:12), and Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:15). Gerald Knoppers writes, "Whereas each of these leaders is commended by Dtr for their unparalleled achievements, Jeroboam is decried for his unparalleled apostasy" Gerald Knoppers, *What Share Have We in David?': The Division of*

*the Kingdom in Kings and Chronicles*. (Harvard: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1988), 277.

<sup>21</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 255.

Lord found in the book of the law. Because of Josiah's repentance, humility, and obedience, he will die in peace and not see all the evil coming (v. 20). Unlike Jeroboam who did not head the divine word spoken through and verified by the man of God, Josiah does return to Yahweh.

### **Resolving the Conflict between Yahweh and the Altar**

Chapter 23 tells of Josiah's reformation and renewal of covenant (23:2-3). The text emphasizes keeping the commands of Yahweh written in the book of the law. After Josiah reads from the book, he covenants before the Lord to keep the commands which he has just read. The terms of the covenant are to follow after Yahweh, to keep His commands, regulations, and decrees with all the heart and soul, and to confirm the words of the covenant. In v. 4 Josiah begins his zealous and ruthless rampage and cleansing of the land of any hint of the worship of any god except Yahweh. He corrects the cultic deviances attributed to the kings, first in the South (vv. 10-13) and

then in the North (vv. 15-20a). Burke Long says, "This enumeration of defilements amounts to reporting how Josiah removes or otherwise repairs his predecessors' brazen and apostate misdeeds."<sup>22</sup> Over three hundred years of disobedience comes to an end through Josiah's defilement of the cultic centers. According to Menahem Haran, this defilement was irreversible through the burning of human bones on the altars. By defiling the shrines, Josiah ruled out any possibility in the future of purification.<sup>23</sup> Josiah is seen as the ideal, obedient king (22:2) after the pattern established in Deut. 17:18-20. So esteemed is Josiah that the author says, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did" (23:25a). Josiah's obedience to the word of Yahweh through his reforms will correct the disobedience of Jeroboam through the erection of the Bethel altar.

### **The Revenge of the Man of God**

In v. 15, Josiah turns his attention to the altar at Bethel, the infamous instrument of Jeroboam's sin (*hatah*).

<sup>22</sup> Burke O. Long, "2 Kings, Forms of the Old Testament Literature," in *Vol. X* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 275.

<sup>23</sup> Haran adds, "To be sure, according to the priestly law, which is quite strict in its approach, even defilement through corpses is not

considered absolute and leaves a possibility of purification (Num 19:11-21; 31:19-24)" Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 138.

Several textual movements set this section off from the rest of the chapter. First, the repetition of “even the altar” in v. 15 emphasizes the importance of the altar at Bethel. Second, the mention of the prophecy of the man of God from 1 Kings 13 and its direct fulfillment in v. 16 draws one’s mind back to the issue of the divine word which will be fulfilled. Third, vv. 17 and 18 contain one of only two direct speeches by Josiah in this chapter, the other occurring in v. 21. This literary method draws the reader’s attention to the content of the dialogue which in this case is the man of God who prophesied three hundred years earlier what Josiah had just done. Fourth, as Long says, in this section, the “inverted word order and a series of appositional phrases that push up against the main subject add great intensity.”<sup>24</sup> Fifth, according to Nelson, vv. 16-18 function as a “flashback” to v. 15.<sup>25</sup> And sixth, v. 18 stands out as a strong antithesis to the desecration depicted in vv. 15-16.<sup>26</sup> These movements cause one to wonder about the significance of both the altar at Bethel and the man of God.

Once Josiah completes his desecration of Bethel, he moves on to the

towns of Samaria and does to them “as he did at Bethel” (vv. 19-20). Thus ends Josiah’s profanation of high places and cultic items. Long comments, “The archetypal evil king Jeroboam, who is the measure of apostasy for the kings of Israel and to a large extent even of Judah, meets his nemesis in retrospect, as Josiah reverses what Jeroboam created.”<sup>27</sup> Josiah brings to closure the legacy of Jeroboam. The conflict between Yahweh and the altar at Bethel ends. This should have brought to a closure the more significant conflict between God and the people of Israel and Judah, but it does not. The story continues us on to exile and possibly even further (i.e., the end of Kings).

The problem is deeper than just idols, altars, high places, and cultic items. The underlying issue all along has been obedience to God’s law. Bethel serves only as a symbol of the deeper problem of disobedience and rebellion.

## CONCLUSION

The man of God serves as an

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<sup>24</sup> Long, “2 Kings, Forms of the Old Testament Literature,” in Vol. X (Grand Rapids: Eedermans, 1991) 275.

<sup>25</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 258.

<sup>26</sup> Long, “2 Kings, Forms of the Old Testament Literature,” in Vol. X (Grand Rapids: Eedermans, 1991), 276.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

example of both obedience and disobedience to the divine word. Obedience results in well-being (1 Kings 13:1-10), but disobedience brings serious consequences (13:11-25). His prophecy against the altar, moreover, remains sure because it is itself based upon the word of the Lord. The human conflicts in 1 Kings 13 are resolved by the end of the chapter. Jeroboam's and the man of God's relationship ends in peace. The Bethelite prophet's and the man of God's relationship ends in death and burial. By the end of the chapter, however, the conflict between the man of God's prophecy and the altar remains unresolved. It remains unresolved for two reasons: *first*, the prophecy against the altar has not been fulfilled yet, and *second*, obedience to the divine word has not replaced disobedience. Josiah completes both of these. Through his obedience to the book of the law, Josiah begins reformation of Judah's cult. Through his fervor, Josiah fulfills the prophecy against the altar. By doing the latter, he revenges the man of God, or, as Nelson says, "Josiah posthumously rewards the conviction of the prophet."<sup>28</sup>

The divine word is powerful and will be fulfilled. Von Rad comments,

"There exists . . . an inter-relationship between the words of Jahweh and history in the sense that Jahweh's word, once uttered reaches its goal under all circumstances in history by virtue of the power inherent in it."<sup>29</sup> From a literary standpoint, the man of God plays a critical--and not incidental--role in the plot structure of 1 Kings 13 and 2 Kings 23. His life and death in 1 Kings 13 serve to authenticate the divine word. His revenge in 2 Kings 23 serves to validate the command for total obedience to the divine word.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Studies in*

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