

1ST KINGS

Week 23, chapter 13

We concluded our last lesson as the deluded Jeroboam was proudly standing at the altar of the golden calf that he had erected in Beit-El. Acting somewhat like the Pope, one can imagine the eyes of the thousands of his people who were fixed on him as he regally made his way up the ramp to the smoking fire pit in order to inaugurate this new holiday in the 8th month of the year where one had not existed before (a kind of anti-Sukkot); he had created it in honor of his two golden calf gods. Just as people today will venture substantial distances to witness the presence of a high head of state so it was in that era when to get a close-up glimpse of the king usually required a journey and some persistence.

It was now time for the most important and solemn part of the service; the king would offer incense to the calf god; but suddenly the hush of the crowd and the impact of the event is interrupted when a voice from the throngs shouts something to King Jeroboam. The crowd freezes in shock and the King throws a deadly glare at this man. Let's read about this startling moment in 1st Kings 13.

READ 1ST KINGS 13 all

This man who dared to confront Jeroboam at this most reverent moment was a stranger to the people of the northern tribes of Israel. No doubt his accent gave him away that he was not one of them but rather was a Judahite. And of course being a member of their enemy tribe made his presence all the more unsettling and confusing. Was he here simply to disrupt and embarrass? We are told that this fellow was a man of God, an *ish elohim*, and that he had come to the ceremony upon "a word from Yehoveh". An *ish elohim* no doubt was some kind of prophet, but it seems that at least to the people of that era there was a subtle distinction between someone called an *ish elohim* and the more typical biblical prophet that they called a *navi* in Hebrew. Try as scholars might, they've not really been able to identify the nature of the distinction between the two titles; so perhaps in practice there was none.

Now the Rabbis have an explanation for the use of these two different terms for a prophet and I must admit that it is a compelling argument. In the part of our narrative where this **ish elohim** from Judah interacts with a **navi** from Beit-El, the purpose for using these two different terms is to distinguish between the genuine prophet (the **ish elohim**) and the false prophet (the **navi**). And that is backed-up by the fact that neither prophet is referred to by name so if both unnamed prophets in the story were called **navi**, it would be an insult to the genuine one or even make the story hard to follow. However if we look at 2nd Chronicles 9:29 and 12:15 we do find mention of a prophet named **Ye'do** or **Iddo** who was a seer and he interacted with both Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

^{CJB} **2 Chronicles 9:29** *Other activities of Shlomo, from beginning to end, are written in the records of Natan the prophet, in the prophecy of Achiyah of Shiloh and in the visions of Ye'do the seer concerning Yarov'am the son of N'vat.*

^{CJB} **2 Chronicles 12:15** *The activities of Rechav'am from beginning to end are written in the genealogically organized histories of Sh'ma'yah the prophet and 'Iddo the seer. But there were continual wars between Rechav'am and Yarov'am.*

So apparently our **ish elohim** was named **Ye-do or Iddo** and the false prophet has remained anonymous to history.

Notice that we're STILL in the first verse of chapter 13 and there is another interesting phrase not to be easily stepped over. In Hebrew it is **ish elohim va miyhuda bidbar Yehoveh**. In English it is "a man of God from Judah came by a word of Yehoveh". The key phrase is "a word of Yehoveh". Many translations make it "because of a word from Yehoveh" or "by the word of Yehoveh" or some such rendering. But the grammar demands "by a word of Yehoveh". The reason I focus on this is because the intent is to say that the man came not because he made a decision to come, or simply because he was a prophet it was his job to deliver God's word to Jeroboam, but because the inherent power in God's word to him virtually lifted him into action and brought him to Beit-El. The **ish elohim** from Judah as the bearer of the word was in a sense powerless to do anything else but to go and deliver God's oracle; and we of course see the power of God's word go to work on **Yarov'am**.

In verse 2 the man of God unleashes a curse upon the golden calf altar. Yes, not upon

Jeroboam per se but upon the altar. The Sages say that he said the word “altar” twice (altar, altar) because this was alluding to the two altars in Dan and Beit-El that Jeroboam had built. Why was the altar cursed? Because that altar kept the people from going to Solomon’s authorized Temple in Jerusalem and thus the false altar was a cause for God’s wrath to fall upon the people of the 10 northern tribes. As part of the curse a prophecy was uttered that some years into the future a son would be born to the Davidic dynasty (meaning this descendant would be a king from David’s line) and the king would desecrate this heathen altar and kill the wicked priests (who weren’t of the Levite line) who rendered it service.

Part of the desecration was to be that human bones would be burned on the altar instead of animal bones; and the implication is that the human bones would be of those who had paid homage to this altar, especially the priests. This prophecy was fulfilled by David’s descendant Josiah (**Yoshiyahu**) during his reign over Judah from 641 to 609 B.C.

^{CJB} **2 Kings 23:16** *Then, as Yoshiyahu was turning around, he noticed the burial caves that were there on the mountain; so he sent and had the bones taken out of the burial caves and burned them on the altar, thus desecrating it, in keeping with the word of ADONAI which the man of God had proclaimed, foretelling that these things would happen.*

Thus we see that even those who were long dead had their bones removed from their bone boxes (call ossuaries) in the burial caves and then burned up to ash on the pagan altars that Jeroboam first ordained. It is believed that the bones of the dead were probably those of the false priests. Why burn up their bones? Because proper burial was terribly important in the Israelite death cult and in some unexplained way the memory of the dead was in their skeletal remains. And if the memory remained, then in an ethereal and hazy way they lived on. This burning up to destruction of their bones was symbolic of a final, complete end to their existence on any level. Does that have a ring to it that is familiar to modern day Christians?

Rev 20:11-15 CJB

¹¹ *Next I saw a great white throne and the One sitting on it. Earth and heaven fled from*

his presence, and no place was found for them.

¹² And I saw the dead, both great and small, standing in front of the throne. Books were opened; and another book was opened, the Book of Life; and the dead were judged from what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

¹³ The sea gave up the dead in it; and Death and Sh'ol gave up the dead in them; and they were judged, each according to what he had done.

¹⁴ Then Death and Sh'ol were hurled into the lake of fire. This is the second death- the lake of fire.

¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the Book of Life was hurled into the lake of fire.

The parallel is too close not to see a pattern. The dead are only dead physically; some essence of the dead lives on (we call it the soul or the spirit). Josiah opened the graves of the already dead and took their bones that were representative of their ongoing life essence and burned them up on the pagan altar where they worshipped false gods. At the end of human history the Lord is going to open up the graves of the already dead and take the remaining life essence of those who are not found in the Book of Life (meaning the unrighteous dead), and together with the Evil one (whom they worshipped by denying God) will burn them up to final destruction whereby no essence of them on any level remains.

After the man of God had cursed the altar with a prophetic curse he then offered a sign or a proof that what he had said was from God and it was a sealed promise that was unalterable. He says in verse 3 that the altar will split and the fat-filled ashes (in Hebrew the ***deshen***) from the sacrifices will spill onto the ground and be scattered. The splitting of the altar symbolized its future destruction and the ashes falling to the dirt were representative of those priests who had served this altar over the centuries and whose remains would be exhumed and burned up to unclean ashes.

An interesting question arises here for us to ponder; it is one that Christian denominations (and Rabbis and Sages for that matter) have differing viewpoints on and even at times brings about the establishment of inflexible doctrines to explain it. It is the matter of God's foreknowledge versus mankind's free will. That is, now that the Lord had issued this prophecy was Jeroboam's path set in concrete? Now that the Lord had decreed it, was Jeroboam virtually unable to repent and change course? Unlike so many of the oracles we have read about in the Bible thus far that were essentially warnings and threats of dire consequences IF someone didn't change their ways, there is none of that present here. There was no real or implied call

for Jeroboam to repent from his idolatry and thus avert personal and national disaster; it is assumed that he will not. The **ish elohim** presented the oracle as a fact already established in heaven; it is a closed matter and therefore one that has no alternative but to play out on earth.

I think it is fair to ask where Jeroboam's free will comes into play in this matter. Where is the free will of the many generations of false priests who will arise to serve the altar of this cult of which Jeroboam is its founder? Are the fates of unborn generations of priests therefore already determined for them in advance? Or are we merely getting an expression not of God essentially hardening Jeroboam's heart as He did with Pharaoh and thus assuring Egypt's destruction, but rather of God foreknowing how all would play out? That is, a man makes his choices and the consequences inevitably flow from the course he chooses. It is my belief that this was not the removal of Jeroboam's or the future priests' free will by the Lord but instead this prophetic utterance was the Lord saying that Jeroboam had already hardened his own heart and committed himself to follow a path that would ensnare an order of false priests who would follow their natures to their destructive end.

Truly this is one of the great mysteries of our God. How He can look to the future, determine an end result and yet simultaneously permit each of us to operate in our own free wills that wind up bringing about the very thing He has ordained centuries earlier, boggles the mind. Yet it is so. That said I think it is probably better to resist establishing theological labels and fixed doctrines that purport to have full understanding of not only the Lord's mind on this issue, but how He makes His determinations and brings it about.

King Jeroboam responded about like one would think he might: deeply offended he stopped what he was doing, raised his arm and pointing at the **ish elohim** from Judah ordered the man to be arrested. Instantly Jeroboam's arm froze in position. In complete paralysis **Yarov'am** was unable to retract his arm from being outstretched. At that moment the altar where he stood split and the ashes fell. There is no mention of an earthquake; what happened was purely supernatural. **Yarov'am** instantly understood the source of these twin disasters and humbled spoke to the **ish elohim** and asked that his God would allow his arm to function from its humiliating condition. It should be noticed that Jeroboam spoke of Yehoveh as the **ish elohim's** God, and not as his own. Whether he meant that fully literally is doubtful; he likely intended it in the sense of the man of God being Yehoveh's prophet so he had the position and the right to beseech the Lord in prayer on Jeroboam's behalf. And yet what man who trusted the Lord would refer to Him as "your God"? Jeroboam was now a lost soul and separated on every level from Yehoveh. He had not misplaced or "lost" his relationship with God; he had willingly renounced it in exchange for chasing after gods created in his own mind. The man of God prayed and Jeroboam's arm was restored.

In verses 7 and 8 the King decided he would try to flatter the **ish elohim** and just ignore the prophecy of doom. In typical Eastern thought the King ascribed the power that caused the altar to split and his arm to wither to the man of God from Judah. So by offering the most gracious hospitality that only a King could, the hope was that not only would the prophecy be annulled but he might even receive the reward of a blessing!

But contained in that dialogue are specific instructions to the man of God about what he is prohibited from and those include 1) not eating food, 2) not drinking water, 3) and not taking the same route back to Judah that he took going up to Beit-El. And, when he was in the presence of the King and then departed Beit-El, he followed those instructions. Why not eat the food and drink the water? Because Beit-El was now under the ban. It was off-limits in every aspect to Yehoveh's followers. The uncleanness of idol worship was so thorough that even the food and water supply of Beit-El was now spiritually impure. Why not return home by the same road? Even the way by which this special messenger had come was consecrated and the unholy dust that was now on his sandals would pollute the pathway.

Now however, we see another side of this **ish elohim** that is not so flattering. In verse 11 an old prophet (a **zaqen navi**) who lived in Beit-El heard from his sons about this great flap at the altar between Jeroboam and the man of God from Judah. It piqued his interest and he determined that he must talk with the **ish elohim**.

Now this old **navi** from Beit-El was essentially a false prophet. In fact, he was likely a prophet of Ba'al because in 2nd Kings 23 we're told that he was from Shomron (Samaria) which was a Ba'al stronghold at that time.

2Kings 23:17-18 CJB

¹⁷ Then he asked, "This monument here that I'm looking at, what is it?" The men of the city told him, "It marks the burial cave of the man of God who came from Y'hudah and foretold the very things you have done to the altar of Beit-El."

¹⁸ He replied, "Let him be; no one is to move his bones." So they left his bones undisturbed, along with the bones of the prophet who had come from Shomron.

So anxious was the *navi* to visit with the man of God that he immediately got onto his donkey and rode down the pathway by which the man of God was returning home. In verse 14 he catches up with him and coaxes him into coming back to Beit-El to be shown hospitality. He says, "Come home with me and have a meal". The *ish elohim* replies that the Lord has directly told him that he cannot do that and repeats word for word to the *navi* the instructions God had given to him. The *navi* from Beit-El brushes it all aside and says that he too is a prophet. In other words he says that they are colleagues of the same profession so they must have much in common.

But then in verse 18 this *navi* proceeds to lie to the man of God from Judah, and explains that a *malach* (a messenger, an angel) came to him and essentially overturned everything that God had instructed the *ish elohim*. For some inexplicable reason the man of God believes him and follows the *navi* to his home. Let me pause for a moment and say that what he did was as wrong as the false prophet who lied to get him to come. In fact we see that the *ish elohim* behaved in the way of another infamous prophet that we read about long ago: Balaam. Recall the story in Numbers of Balaam, the pagan seer who was called first by the King of Moab to curse Israel but wound up blessing them after Yehoveh confronted him. Balaam was what we might today call a deist; he definitely believed in Yehoveh, but he also believed in all gods. He would answer the call of most any god in order to please them.

So like Balaam, this man of God from Judah wasn't all that dedicated or loyal to Yehoveh. Rather he was like a container for hire. He was like an MP3 player or a blank CD disk; he would willingly deliver whatever he was filled up with; the content and the source were irrelevant. It brings to mind the true sense of the word "legalistic". He would mechanically accept and recite whatever he felt he was told without regard for the content or its trustworthiness. Have you not heard recently of the growing number of even mainstream Christian leaders and denominations who say they respect all faiths and all religions? It doesn't matter what anyone believes as long as they have faith in something; trust in a being greater than themselves is what's important regardless of that spiritual being's name or the culture that honors him. That is essentially the state of mind of the *ish elohim* from Judah.

Then as the two men are dining, the prophet from Beit-El suddenly receives a true word from Yehoveh! Yes, this prophet who had lied to the man of God from Judah, and who likely was a completely pagan prophet, is visited by the God of Israel and given an oracle to say to his guest. So, we see that both the *navi* and the *ish elohim* operated in the manner of Balaam. And the message is the ultimate irony; from the mouth of the liar now came the word that because the man of God believed him and came to his home in Beit-El and ate and drank in rebellion to Yehoveh, he would die and his corpse would not lie with his ancestors.

What are we to take from this contorted situation? For one thing it again draws a spotlight on one of my pet peeves: people who say they have a word from the Lord for you. And often this word contradicts what up to now you felt the Lord was telling you to do or not do. So one element of this story shows us that we are personally responsible to carry out what God tells us to carry out, and if He wants that changed (highly unlikely) he'll tell you personally and it won't be coming from someone else.

Another aspect is the use of religious lingo to manipulate. I often say that the Church has its own language that I call Christian-eze. It's a language that few outsiders even understand. These two men in our story held a common bond, common profession and thus spoke a common language: they spoke prophet-eze. They understood one another like few others could and they walked in an exclusive circle of a handful of other prophets and seers. So when the old prophet from Beit-El was so very thirsty to have fellowship and conversation with a colleague, he used the familiar lingo of prophets to get what he wanted. No doubt his mind was not on evil; he just told a small white fib using prophet lingo that he knew would disarm the other prophet: an angel had come to him and told the other prophet to forget all that the Lord had told him. After all what could possibly be harmful in accepting hospitality from another godly man? He had no intent on causing harm. So today when we end a conversation by saying "I'll pray for you", we don't always mean it literally. When we confirm that the Lord wants what the other person says they want, is that really true or are we merely being kind in a Christian way? When we say, "I have a word from the Lord for you", is it perhaps just a personal thought that we have that makes us feel pious or we hope will make the other person feel good? Maybe we think they need what seems to us to be Godly advice and so we tell them that God want us to tell them something. It all sounds so gracious and wonderful; but our story of these two prophets demonstrates the darker side of such careless talk.

But there are also some other principles that flow to the surface. First, the Word of God does not contradict itself. Second, we cannot break God' scriptural commandments in the name of supposedly following or pleasing God. Third, God's direct commandment to us is not amendable by someone else. On the surface these sound so basic; yet many of us routinely violate these principles to our (or someone else's) detriment and are blind to it just as were the two prophets of our story; and that is because it feels so comfortable and customary.

After the meal the prophet from Judah leaves his new friend and on his way back a lion attacks and kills him. The prophecy of the prophet from Beit-El was true. But in further proof that in reality this death was at the hand of God, the lion not only doesn't mutilate or eat the corpse, but also doesn't attack the donkey. Even more the lion stands next to the corpse along with the donkey! None of this would be the natural way that either a lion or donkey would behave. People passing by saw this befuddling sight and when some of them arrived in Beit-El they of course couldn't wait to tell everyone about what they had witnessed. The story circulated and

soon reached the ears of the old prophet of Beit-El and he knew immediately who the victim was; it was the fulfillment of God's oracle to him.

Still behaving as a colleague, the old prophet travels by donkey to the place the corpse is lying and finds the lion still standing guard; he fetches the body and brings it home. The old prophet had such great respect for the *ish elohim* (and probably felt some measure of responsibility for what had happened) that he buried him in his family grave plot and mourned over him. Not only that, he ordered that when he died he should be buried side-by-side with this man. He also told his sons that there was no longer any doubt in him that the curse that the dead prophet had issued against the golden calf altar (and by extension upon Jeroboam) was certain to come to pass. Those two things are actually tied together because that old prophet of Ba'al knew that in time his own bones might be exhumed and burnt up on the altar by this mysterious future descendant of David. So he figured that if he was buried along with the remains of the man of God from Judah who had been the conveyer of God's curse that perhaps his bones would escape the same fate. And of course the outcome is what the old *navi* had hoped for and we read about it a few minutes ago in 2nd Kings 23.

Verse 33 says that after this event Jeroboam still didn't change his ways. In other words, King *Yarov'am* who had his arm withered by God, was present as his wicked altar was cracked and broken, heard the prophet's message from God loud and clear, was told of the prophet's death, the lion that killed him and stood guard over the body, how the old *navi* from Beit-El had prophesied it all and still the King refused to repent. He went right back to appointing unqualified priests to the pagan altars he erected. Nothing, it seems, would cause Jeroboam to cease his spiritual rebellion, and of course it doomed his monarchy and his dynasty.

The final verse of chapter 13 sums up this tragedy. What began with such promise that the Lord was willing to give Jeroboam an enduring dynasty on condition of obedience ended in the worst possible condemnation of him. His successors failed to stop Israel's tailspin into idolatry and degradation and within little more than 130 years the 10 northern tribes were exiled by the Assyrians from their lush and fertile territory and the legend of the 10 lost tribes of Israel was born. Those 10 tribes' exile has lasted for 2700 years, and only today has Ezekiel's prophecy of their restoration to the land begun in earnest.

Bad leadership, especially ungodly leadership, can be devastating to a nation for generations, not just to the next election.