

The Hebrew Corner

In the Tanach, we often find passages that are difficult to understand at first reading, and only through diligent study and the guidance of the Holy Spirit can we achieve a higher level of understanding of the passage. Here we will consider a passage that may be the most difficult of all to discern.

In 1 Kings we have the story of a prophet of God who was given a message to the northern kingdom of Israel (also known as Samaria) and to its king, Jeroboam (1 Kings 13:1-6):

“And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the LORD unto Bethel, and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. And he cried against the altar in the word of the LORD, and said, O altar, altar, thus saith the LORD; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign which the LORD hath spoken; Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes upon it shall be poured out. And it came to pass, when king Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God, which had cried against the altar in Bethel, that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him. The altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the LORD. And the king answered and said unto the man of God, Intreat now the face of the LORD thy God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored me again. And the man

of God besought the LORD, and the king's hand was restored him again, and became as it was before.”

The Hebrew word translated in the passage as altar is mizbeach (מִזְבֵּחַ, miz-BAY-ahch). The altar that Jeroboam ordered sacrifices on was not ordained of God. From 1 Kings 2:33, it is evident that these offerings were according to the will of Jeroboam, as they were performed in a month, the eighth month of the year, the 15th day, which was not an appointed feast time. The prophet was a vessel that God used to communicate his displeasure with his altar. The man of God gave a prophecy that was intended for immediate fulfillment, the destruction of the altar and pouring out of the ashes, and one to be fulfilled at a later date concerning an offering to be made by Josiah.

In 1 Kings 13:7-10 more detail is given about the specific instructions that God gave to the prophet:

“And the king said unto the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh thyself, and I will give thee a reward. And the man of God said unto the king, If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place: For so was it charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest. So he went another way, and returned not by the way that he came to Bethel.”

The man of God was carefully following the instructions that God had given him, even to the point of refusing the hospitality of the king of Samaria. The place name Bethel, in Hebrew, is Beit-El (בֵּית-אֵל, bayt-EHL), which means house of God. However during Jeroboam's rule it became a place of idolatrous worship.

Next in the passage there is the story of two prophets: the one who prophesied to Jeroboam, and an old prophet of Samaria. Both prophets behave in a manner that cannot logically be explained (1 Kings 13:11-19):

“Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel; and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel: the words which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father. And their father said unto them, What way went he? For his sons had seen what way the man of God went, which came from Judah. And he said unto his sons, Saddle me the ass. So they saddled him the ass: and he rode thereon, And went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak: and he said unto him, Art thou the man of God that camest from Judah? And he said, I am. Then he said unto him, Come home with me, and eat bread. And he said, I may not return with thee, nor go in with thee: neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place: For it was said to me by the word of the LORD, Thou shalt eat no bread nor drink water there, nor turn again to go by the way that thou camest. He said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him. So he went back with him, and did eat bread in his house, and drank water.”

The old prophet deceived the younger prophet into coming back to his house with him. Clearly he had not heard from God, but simply desired the company of the man of God. After turning down the king's invitation, the prophet accepts the old prophet's offer, perhaps because he wanted to receive some wisdom from the old prophet. The passage continues with God executing judgment upon

the younger prophet, using the old prophet to deliver the message (1 Kings 13:20-32):

“And it came to pass, as they sat at the table, that the word of the LORD came unto the prophet that brought him back: And he cried unto the man of God that came from Judah, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the LORD, and hast not kept the commandment which the LORD thy God commanded thee, But camest back, and hast eaten bread and drunk water in the place, of the which the LORD did say to thee, Eat no bread, and drink no water; thy carcase shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers. And it came to pass, after he had eaten bread, and after he had drunk, that he saddled for him the ass, to wit, for the prophet whom he had brought back. And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him: and his carcase was cast in the way, and the ass stood by it, the lion also stood by the carcase. And, behold, men passed by, and saw the carcase cast in the way, and the lion standing by the carcase: and they came and told it in the city where the old prophet dwelt. And when the prophet that brought him back from the way heard thereof, he said, It is the man of God, who was disobedient unto the word of the LORD: therefore the LORD hath delivered him unto the lion, which hath torn him, and slain him, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake unto him. And he spake to his sons, saying, Saddle me the ass. And they saddled him. And he went and found his carcase cast in the way, and the ass and the lion standing by the carcase: the lion had not eaten the carcase, nor torn the ass. And the prophet took up the carcase of the man of God, and laid it upon the ass, and brought it back: and the old prophet came to the city, to mourn and to bury him. And he laid his carcase in his own grave;

and they mourned over him, saying, Alas, my brother! And it came to pass, after he had buried him, that he spake to his sons, saying, When I am dead, then bury me in the sepulchre wherein the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones: For the saying which he cried by the word of the LORD against the altar in Bethel, and against all the houses of the high places which are in the cities of Samaria, shall surely come to pass.”

Many questions arise from this passage. Why did God not also pass judgment on the old prophet, for lying to the young prophet? Was God testing the faithfulness of the young prophet, by instructing the old prophet to lie to him? Why did the lion slay the man if God, and then not eat him but instead just stand by him? Why did the lion not attack the donkey? Why did both animals stand by the carcass of the young prophet, until the old prophet arrived?

Some of the answers are apparent. God does not instruct people to lie. The story is very similar to the deception of Eve by the serpent in the garden of Eden. The old prophet tricked the young prophet by leading him to question the word that God had given him. The young prophet fell for the deception, and apparently weary from travel, accepted the offer of the old prophet. As to why God chose to judge the young prophet and not the old prophet, it may be that God considered the slaying of the young man to make more of an impact, and thus deliver a more serious message to the onlookers, than the slaying of an old man. The lion and donkey standing peacefully by the carcass may have been to call attention to the fact that an act of God had taken place. These are some suggestions, but surely not adequate to describe the symbolism of this passage.

The conclusion of this story is not given until we are presented with the following in 2 Kings 23:15-18:

“Moreover the altar that was at Bethel, and the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, had made, both that altar and the high place he brake down, and burned the high place, and stamped it small to powder, and burned the grove. And as Josiah turned himself, he spied the sepulchres that were there in the mount, and sent, and took the bones out of the sepulchres, and burned them upon the altar, and polluted it, according to the word of the LORD which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these words. Then he said, What title is that that I see? And the men of the city told him, It is the sepulchre of the man of God, which came from Judah, and proclaimed these things that thou hast done against the altar of Bethel. And he said, Let him alone; let no man move his bones. So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet that came out of Samaria.”

The word bone translated in Hebrew is etzem (עצם, EH-tsehm), which can also be translated as skeleton. The events described in 1 Kings 13 preceded the events of the 2 Kings 23 passage by about 300 years, after the fall of Samaria, but preceding the Babylonian captivity of Judah. It is fitting that the last good king of Judah discovered the bones of these two prophets, prior to being killed in battle at Megiddo a few years later.

May you have a pleasant month, and God's blessings to all.