

Study Eleven: The Man of God

A Holy Man in Times of Apostasy

The story is found in I Kings 13, and its sequence in 11 Kings 23:15-20, and II Kings 17:21-23. Jeroboam who had wrenched away the ten tribes of Israel-apart from Judah and Benjamin-from King Rehoboam, Son of Solomon, is now intent on making two altars at which the Israelites will worship, one at Dan and one at Bethel. Bethel had, of course, great patriarchal associations. The king is about to authenticate the altar with significant sacrifices and so keep the ten tribes away from Jerusalem, the only true place of worship. An unknown person of Judah, a prophet called by God, prophesies against the altar whilst Jeroboam is about to initiate it, and predicts that the bones of the priests attending the altar will one day be burnt upon the altar, thus defiling it. Also, as a sign, God will now split the altar and pour out its ashes. Jeroboam commands the people to lay hold of the prophet, and as he points, the king's hand is withered, and the altar breaks, spilling its ashes. Terrified the king asks mercy in the restoration of his hand, and this the prophet does. The king then invites the man of Judah to return with him to the palace and be fed and rewarded. This the prophet refuses, and departs., saying God has commanded him not to eat or drink until he arrives in Judah.

As he is going on his way an old prophet of Bethel apprehends him and telling him a lie persuades the prophet to come home with him. Whilst they are eating and drinking the old prophet receives a message from the Lord that the prophet of Judah has been disobedient and will be killed as he returns home. This happens when a lion kills him but does not eat him. The ass on which the man was riding stood stock still beside the corpse and so did the lion. Hearing a report of this the old prophet saddles up and is assisted in bringing back the prophet whom he lays in his own tomb, commanding that when the day comes he too-the old prophet-should be laid beside the man of Judah. In 11 Kings 23:15-20 the prophecy of the bones being burnt on the altar is fulfilled. In II Kings 17:21-23 there is a summary of Jeroboam's awful deeds.

The Disobedience of Holiness

Prophets were understood to be holy people, and to receive the message of God and deliver it to others. In fact God spoke immediately through them on the prophetic occasion. Obviously the prophet was sent as God's protest against the raising of a false altar and ordaining priests who were not of the lineage of Levi. Jeroboam's raising of the altar was political, designed to keep his people in their own regions. Jeroboam had no right to offer sacrifices, and certainly not to raise an altar. The sending of a person from Judah, and one who did not belong to the prophetic school was God's word to Jeroboam. This was certified by the prophecy against the altar, the withering of Jeroboam's hand and the healing of it by God through the prophet.

What has puzzled many is

- (i) how the prophet was deceived by another prophet,
- (ii) why the old prophet should deceive the man from Judah, and
- (iii) why punishment should come to one who had been obedient and had simply been beguiled by a fellow prophet.

In our modern mores we would have perhaps chastised the beguiled prophet but would not have wished to see him punished by death.

The Reason for the Death of the Prophet

There can be no question about the claim of the man of Judah to be sent by God. The matter was that of the wrongful raising of an altar. The old prophet was out to see whether the prophecy was authentic, and perhaps even, to prove it was so. The man of Judah had said God has told him to return without eating or drinking in Israel. If he were really a prophet and disobeyed the order, then he would be punished by God. This happened, and so the old prophet was convinced the man was a true prophet. He commanded that his body be laid alongside that of the prophet of Judah. Also he mourned for the man, saying over, 'Alas, my brother!' He had sorrow for the death of his fellow-prophet, but both the prophecy and the prophet were proved to be true. This principle is the heart of the story.

The Lesson of the Disobedient Prophet

In I Samuel 15:22 God has told Saul, 'To obey is better than to sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.' The prophet of Judah should have trusted no one but God, and not even another prophet. He failed to obey and was punished. That does not mean he was lost forever, but simply chastised. The prophet lives close to God and should know the mind of God, even in the face a fellow prophet, no matter how old. His sin was not asking God directly.

What of the man of Judah's ministry? Was that lost? No: it was not lost. In a way it was proved. The loss of a man's life in proving the truth is a small price which has to be paid. The point was now made strongly with Jeroboam and his people. They would be judged because of the light given to them, even by the death of the prophet of Judah. Does this authenticate his disobedience as being acceptable? No: no one's disobedience is ever authenticated. At the same time it did not dissolve the ministry he had had. The act of his death remains as a fearful warning to those who would first obey and then disobey. It may well be that the prior ministry of a person who has ministered well may not be lost, but that is God's business. So we are warned against making nothing of a person's ministry because later he falls, and we are warned against presumption in any ministry. We remember that Balaam was a prophet and yet sought to make money through his prophecy, **but God denied** him a prophecy which could harm Israel. Ultimately Balaam tried to destroy Israel by idolatry and fornication with the Moabites. Disobedience leads to judgement and to deterioration of a proper ministry.