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The man of Judah and the lying prophet of Bethel. The discipline of sons.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Kings 13. And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings.

And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar! Thus says the Lord, Behold, 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 make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign that the Lord has spoken.

Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out. And when the king heard the saying of the man of God which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, Seize him! And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. 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.

And the king said to the man of God, Entreat now the favour of the Lord your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me. And the man of God entreated the Lord, and the king's hand was restored to him, and became as it was before. And the king said to the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward.

And the man of God said to the king, If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you, and I will not eat bread or drink water in this place. For so was it commanded me by the word of the Lord, saying, You shall neither eat bread nor drink water nor return by the way that you came. So he went another way, and did not return by the way that he came to Bethel.

Now an old prophet lived in Bethel, and his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. They also told to their father the words that he had spoken to the king. And their father said to them, Which way did he go? And his son showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone.

And he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me. So they saddled the donkey for him, and he mounted it. And he went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak.

And he said to him, Are you the man of God who came from Judah? And he said, I am. Then he said to him, Come home with me and eat bread. And he said, I may not return with you, or go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place.

For it was said to me by the word of the Lord, You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came. And he said to him, I also am a prophet as you are. And an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with you into your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.

But he lied to him. So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house, and drank water. And as they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back.

And he cried 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 command that the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back, and have 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. And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back.

And as he went away, a lion met him on the road and killed him, and his body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it, the lion also stood beside the body.

And behold men passed by and saw the body thrown in the road, and the lion standing by the body. And they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived.

And 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. And he said to his sons, Saddle the donkey for me, and they saddled it. And he went and found his body thrown in the road, and the donkey and the lion standing beside the body.

The lion had not eaten the body or torn the donkey. And the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey, and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him. And he laid the body in his own grave, and they mourned over him, saying, Alas, my brother! And 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. For the saying that he called out 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. After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people.

Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing 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 chapter 13 is an extremely strange story, one of the strangest stories in the whole of scripture.

This is a good sign that we should pay closer attention. There are several details that invite questions on various levels of analysis, not least when we consider parallels with other parts of the book. Peculiar details are usually things that should invite us to pay closer attention.

In addition to this, we see structures within the text that show that it is not just a random story. There is great design in the way that this is laid out. Although we may not be able to understand the full meaning of the text, we can get a sense of the fact that there is a deep message that it bears.

If only we had the eyes to see it. Much has been written about this chapter, but many of the commentators are not particularly helpful. Peter Lighthouse's comments on this chapter are particularly probing and illuminating, and present one of the more promising ways to understand it.

I will be leaning heavily upon some of his observations in what follows. Chapter 13 needs to be related to the section that precedes it, about Jeroboam's establishment of idolatrous worship. However, while chapter 13 needs to be read in the light of what has

happened before, there is a suddenness to the beginning of the narrative.

The coming of the man of God from Judah is sudden and surprising, like the coming of Elijah later on in the book. To understand a text like this, we need to first pay attention to a number of the features. There is the characterization of the figures.

Most are not named in the narrative. After verse 1, Jeroboam is not spoken of by name. He is the king.

Then there's the man of God. The Prophet. The locations from which they come are the things that are most prominent in the characterization.

The man of God is from Judah. The old prophet is someone who lives in Bethel. The second thing to notice are the key literary connections.

There's the tearing of the garment of the kingdom from Solomon, and then the tearing of Jeroboam's altar. There's the hand by which Jeroboam took the kingdom in chapter 11, and then that becomes withered in this chapter. There are human bones mentioned at the beginning of the narrative, and human bones mentioned at the end.

Later on in the story of the kings, this narrative is hearkened back to in 2 Kings 23, verse 15 to 18, as the prophecy of the man of God is fulfilled. Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place he pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust. He also burned the Asherah, and as Jeziel turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount.

And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord that the man of God proclaimed, who had predicted these things. Then he said, What is that monument that I see? And the men of the city told him, It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah, and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel. And he said, Let him be, let no man move his bones.

So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet who came out of Samaria. We should also observe themes and motifs that are explored elsewhere in the books of the kings. There's lying prophecy, there's a lion killing a disobedient prophet, something we see again in 1 Kings chapter 20.

The end of the chapter that speaks of Jeroboam's failure to learn from this thing might suggest that there was some symbolic character to the events, that what occurred was a sign. Literary structure is also important in understanding such texts. The literary structure of biblical passages can be like the shape of puzzle pieces that help us to see where they fit together.

Here for instance we can see that there are two confrontations, there's one at the

beginning and another at the end. The man of God confronts the king, and then the old prophet confronts the man of God at the end. There are two temptations, there's the king's unsuccessful temptation, and the old prophet's successful one.

There are also four scenes, and here we see a more elaborate structure emerging. The first one is Jeroboam confronted by the man of God, the second is the old prophet hearing of and then tempting the man of God, and then the third is the old prophet confronting the man of God, and then the fulfilment of the judgement upon the man of God, and finally there is the old prophet hearing about the death of the man of God and bringing him back. Scenes 1 and 3, and 2 and 4 are parallel to each other.

James Mead observes this in detail. Scene 1 begins with Jeroboam standing by the altar in verse 1, and then in verse 20 you have the old prophet and the man of God sitting at the table, calling against the altar in verse 2, calling against the man of God in verse 21, thus says the Lord, followed by the message in verse 2, thus says the Lord, followed by a message in verse 21. A sign, the altar will be torn down in verse 4, a sign, the man of God will not be buried with his ancestors in verse 22, the altar torn down in verse 5, the man of God's body being thrown by the way in verse 24, threefold repetition of by the way in verses 9 to 10, and then threefold repetition of by the way in verses 24 to 25.

The parallels between scenes 2 and 4 are even more arresting perhaps. It begins in verse 11, the old prophet who lives in Bethel, and then in verse 25, in the town where the old prophet lived. The old prophet hears about the man of God in verse 11, and then again in verse 26.

He instructs his sons, saddle for me the donkey, so they saddled the donkey in verse 13, and then again in verse 27. The old prophet goes and finds the man of God in verse 14, and then again in verse 28. The old man persuades the man of God to return in verse 15 and following, and then he brings back the corpse of the man of God in verse 29.

The old man gives a speech to the man of God in verses 15 to 18, and then a speech to his sons in verses 31 to 32. There are other noteworthy details, such as the significance of the donkey and the lion. The man of God is instructed to refrain from eating, and fails to do so, whereas the lion as the agent of judgment, in a miraculous way does not eat.

The donkey, while seemingly incidental, actually plays a rather large part in the story. The old prophet saddles him to bring back the man of God, then the old prophet lends him to the man of God, then the donkey stands beside the body, and then the body of the man of God is brought back upon the donkey. We might well wonder what the donkey represents.

Similar questions could be asked about the lion. The story begins with a word of prophecy accompanied by a sign. A Davidic king will desecrate the altar.

The sign of the altar splitting and the ashes being poured out is a sign given to confirm that message. The breaking of the altar might also remind us of the breaking of the tablets, a judgment in response to the sin of Aaron and the people concerning the golden calf. Now there is another golden calf, and another significant breaking of a stone object in judgment.

Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, has characteristics that might remind us of Moses and Aaron. In response to the pharaonic rule of Rehoboam and Solomon his father who had placed the people of Israel under harsh labour, he asks for them to be let go. He has characteristics of Joseph and Moses and David in various ways as he goes down to Egypt before returning to the land.

However, he follows the sin of Aaron, he establishes these golden calves for the people, and then he also calls his sons Nadab and Abijah, reminding us of the unfaithful sons of Aaron that were killed by the Lord, Nadab and Abihu. Jeroboam's hand is withered by the Lord as he reaches out to instruct his men to seize the prophet, yet he is immediately healed by the Lord as he entreats the prophet to pray for him. When we consider the characterization of the man of God and the prophet, we begin to see that the places that they are associated with are the most important things about them.

The man of God is associated with Judah, and the old prophet is associated with Bethel and the northern kingdom. This, I believe, helps us to understand some of the other details. The two men stand for the two kingdoms.

Lying prophets are found throughout the books of the kings. In chapter 18 verse 19 there are 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah who are gathered to Mount Carmel. In chapter 22 there are 400 lying prophets of Ahab.

Despite being explicitly warned by Micaiah that the prophets were lying to him, Ahab follows the lying prophets to his doom, Jehoshaphat the king of the southern kingdom of Judah following him into battle. In the man of God from Judah then, we might have a sign of the southern kingdom and its duty. They must speak against the idolatry of the northern kingdom, without being seduced to follow the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat who causes Israel to sin.

Although they may resist the way of Jeroboam in various respects, they may end up being seduced by the lying prophets of the north, suffering judgement as a result. Judah must not follow the lead of Israel. If they do, they will be judged.

However, the possibility of salvation for the northern kingdom may be held out as they associate themselves with the southern kingdom of Judah, even in their judgement. James Walsh writes, The individuals mirror their kingdoms, and their tragedy portends the tragic destiny awaiting Israel and Judah. Israel has become unfaithful.

Judah can speak the word that Israel needs to hear. But if Judah too follows Israel's lead, compromises its worship, as history shows it will do, then both are doomed to overcome their separation only in death. Judah will be buried in an alien land, and Israel will be saved only so far as it is joined to Judah.

The wish of the old prophet that he be buried with the man of God suggests the reunion of the brotherhood of the people in the grave of exile. This story then is a sign of the history that will follow, a divinely given sign of the destinies of these two unfaithful peoples as they will work out in the rest of the books of the kings. A question to consider, what role do you think the donkey and the lion play in this story? Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1-17 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.

For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children, and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we have respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them.

But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. That no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. Following the great list

of the forerunners in the faith in chapter 11, chapter 12 points us to the one in whom the entire story of faith reaches its climax, Jesus Christ, the pioneer and the perfecter of faith. He does not just run the way of faith himself, he also trailblazes the way to its heavenly destination.

He is both our example and our deliverer. He both leads the way and clears the way. He opens our way to approach God here and now, but is also the high priest who establishes our final and complete access to God's presence.

The way of faithfulness is most perfectly exemplified in him, but he is also the one to whom our faith looks as its object. Without the salvation of Christ, faith would be in vain. The promise and the deliverance to which it looks would not be realized.

In this respect, Christ is both like and unlike those who live by faith. He faithfully obeys and perseveres through suffering, but while his people must depend upon his work by faith to have a way to God, he is the one who creates this way for them, as the faithful son. He does not need this way himself, rather he takes flesh and suffers so that he might furnish a way for others.

The author of Hebrews paints a picture for his hearers of a race before a vast audience, but not just of mere spectators. This is like a relay race of faith, with each generation passing on the baton to the generation succeeding them. We saw this relay race in the preceding chapter, where generation after generation the people of faith passed on the torch of faith to those after them.

Now these persons who have completed their leg of the uncompleted race are watching us run ours. They exemplify what faithfulness looks like, and we look forward to Jesus who has blazed the trail ahead of everyone to the finish line. He has brought the entire race of faith to its glorious completion.

In him we see an example of faithfulness in extreme suffering, and an example of one who overcame through suffering. He endured the shame of the cross, a death that was ignominious and humiliating, but also a death in which he bore the shame of mankind, the sin by which man lacks integrity and is cut off from God's face. He entered into our condition and bore our condition, and he did so for the joy that was set before him.

The shame of the cross is set over against the joy that is awaited beyond it, and here we have a similar contrast to that which is drawn in 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 verses 17 to 18. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Christ is the one who can look beyond the shame of his death.

He can look beyond and see the power and the promises of God, and as a result can

persevere through suffering. In this respect he is the example to all who would follow. The author of Hebrews wants his hearers to consider the example of Christ, lest they become weary and faint-hearted.

Compared to the sufferings of Christ, their sufferings have been relatively minor. They've not yet had to shed their blood, they've not experienced the same degree of shame or of hostility from others. In chapter 4 verse 15 he had written, For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The author of Hebrews does not think of temptation as all the little sins that might tempt us on the way. Rather he sees it as the more fundamental temptation of turning back or turning aside from the path that God has set before us. In this respect Christ is our great example to follow.

He has faced the full onslaught of the devil's temptation to turn back or to turn aside, and persevered through suffering and difficulty and tribulation the like of which we will never experience, in order to obtain the glory and the joy that was set before him by the Father. He quotes from Proverbs chapter 3 verses 11 to 12, a passage about fatherly instruction. Christ learned obedience through what he suffered.

Hebrews chapter 5 verses 7 to 8, In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Christ's heavenly exaltation came through the path of earthly obedience.

As human beings we grow in strength and character through suffering. Our mettle is tested and proved in such times. Christ is the Son who directs our attention to the Father, and he is the model and pattern of our obedience.

He learned obedience through his suffering, and this is a model of sonship, and the model that we must follow ourselves. Sonship is learned through suffering. We could think of the example of Job for instance.

It is precisely on account of God's special regard for Job, his servant, that he is subject to the sort of suffering that he experiences. Suffering is a mark of legitimacy. The suffering in view is not merely or even primarily punitive.

It can be punitive on occasions, but much of the time, and primarily, it is for the purpose of growth through testing. In Romans chapter 8 verses 13 to 19 we have a similar point. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the Spirit

of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. God forms us in the character of sonship through suffering.

Rather than drawing back from suffering then, suffering should be welcomed as a sign and proof of sonship, a sign of God's fatherly concern for our well-being and growth in character. We submitted to earthly fathers, how much more to our heavenly father? If we trusted our earthly fathers to develop character in us by following their instructions, how much more the instructions of God. Discipline has a purpose and its value is seen in its fruit, in the character that it produces in those who have been trained by it.

Suffering is educative throughout scripture so that people might mature through testing. This consideration should spur us to redoubled efforts. What undermines people is not suffering so much as meaningless suffering.

When we truly grasp the end and purpose of our suffering, it ceases to undermine us and actually can spur us to growth. We can think of the hand from which we are receiving suffering. The story of Job shows that it is not ultimately Satan who brings suffering to Job, but God.

God has a purpose in the suffering that Job experiences. He wants Job to grow through the experience of suffering so that he might enter into a fuller experience of what it means to be a son of God. If we know and trust God as our heavenly father, we will receive suffering from his hand, knowing that whatever purpose he has in it, it is a good one.

We have a birthright as sons and daughters of God and we must not squander it. Peace and holiness are essential. Indeed, without holiness no one will see the Lord.

We are charged to undertake a collective pursuit here. We are striving for peace and holiness together. It's one of the reasons why meeting together is so imperative.

We must look out for each other, ensuring that no one falls short. And the author of Hebrews alludes to the covenant warning of Deuteronomy chapter 29 verses 14 to 20 here. This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.

The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. Esau is put forward as a particular example of such a person who fell short and squandered his birthright and

blessing. Esau is a negative example in contrast to the positive examples of the preceding chapter.

The danger of such persons is that they will infect others, that their pattern of unbelief and unfaithfulness will be taken up by others. Esau is described as sexually immoral and unholy. There is debate in the commentators about whether that term should be translated as sexually immoral.

However, it seems appropriate to the story of Esau. Esau was a man who squandered the great blessings that he had received. He gave up the invaluable gift of the birthright of the covenant, of being the one who would carry on the legacy of Isaac for just a small meal.

He devalued these things out of his sexual desire, marrying Canaanite women when he should have been faithful to the covenant. His desires were entirely for this world and what is seen. He could not live in terms of the unseen, and his final end was tragic and as a result cautionary.

He could not undo what he had done in selling the birthright and losing his blessing. He had set his course by his behaviour. He may have mourned his loss, but he never seemed to truly repent of his sin.

There is a real danger of apostasy and the author of Hebrews is concerned to drive this home to his readers and hearers. Do not throw away what you have received. Learn from the positive example of the people of faith and learn also from the cautionary example of people like Esau.

A question to consider, much of the book of Hebrews is devoted to the consideration of examples of faith and unbelief. How can we make more and better use of the examples of others in the path of faith, both positive and negative?