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THE MAN OF GOD OUT OF JUDAH

(1 Kings 13)

R. NORTH

Human nature would sympathise with the man of God out of Judah, who was seduced from the pathway of obedience by the old prophet in Bethel, and who died under the chastening hand of the Lord. We may also mourn over him, saying 'Alas, my brother,' and still fail to read the lessons so largely written in this portion of the sacred writings. Perhaps the greatest lesson inculcated throughout the Scriptures is the lesson of obedience, which, for the man of God, always connotes obedience to God. Few histories teach this more forcefully than the history under review.

Saul was rejected from being king over Israel because of his disobedience to the commandment of the Lord, Who sought him 'a man after His own heart.' In spite of David's grievous sins, it is not difficult to understand why he should be so described. Before he died, David solemnly charged Solomon his son to 'keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes and His commandments, and His judgements, and His testimonies' (1 Kings 2:3, 4); but, when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods. His kingdom was therefore rent in the days of his son Rehoboam, 10 of the tribes being given to Jeroboam.

Jeroboam reasoned that, if the people continued to go up to Jerusalem, to sacrifice in the house of the Lord, Jerusalem would remain the centre of unity for all the 12 tribes, and sooner or later the kingdom would return to the house of David. Instead of trusting God to establish him in the kingdom He had given him, and remembering the terms of his appointment (1 Kings 11:29-38), Jeroboam took counsel and made two calves of gold under the specious plea of seeking the welfare of the people (1 Kings 12:28). He displayed his astuteness by setting one in Bethel and the other in Dan. Surely Bethel, the house of God, where Jacob built an altar unto the God that appeared to him when he fled from the face of Esau his brother (Gen. 35:1), must be acceptable as a place of worship? A system of worship had

been set up in Dan in the days of the Judges (chap. 18). Jeroboam might also have assumed that many of the priests and Levites in his kingdom would be willing to remain and identify themselves with the new form of worship, but in this he was again mistaken. If Jeroboam imitated Aaron in making golden calves, and saying, 'Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt,' the Levites followed the example of the sons of Levi who were 'on the Lord's side' and gathered themselves together unto Moses (Ex. 32:26). They left their suburbs and their possessions, and came to Judah and Jerusalem; and after them out of all the tribes of Israel such as set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel. Jeroboam, therefore, made priests of the lowest of the people which were not of the sons of Levi. He also appears to have changed the time of the feast of tabernacles from the 15th of the 7th month to the 15th of the 8th month, a month which he devised out of his own heart. Finally, he went up to the altar and burnt incense. In all these institutions he was governed by human wisdom, and by human expediency, instead of being governed by the word of God.

The commission of the man of God

out of Judah was two-fold: (1) to cry against the altar in Bethel (v. 2)—a prophecy which was fulfilled more than three centuries later; and (2) to have no fellowship in that place (v. 9, 17). We can understand the king's anger that a man of God should come out of Judah, and that he should dare to cry against the altar. It was a public declaration of Jehovah's displeasure with the whole religious system which Jeroboam had set up, and that at its inception. The new form of worship was denounced, not at Jerusalem but at Bethel, in the presence of its originator and his followers. Without waiting to see whether the sign which the Lord had spoken (v. 3) would be fulfilled, Jeroboam put forth his hand from the altar, saying 'Lay hold on him;' but his hand dried up so that he could not pull it in to him again. The altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out, according to the sign given.

It is evident that this double miracle, of the rending of the altar and the stiffening of this outstretched arm, did not lead

the king to repentance. Nor did the restoration of his arm (cp. Rom. 2:4); nor the confirmation of the words of the man of God by the old prophet in Bethel (v. 31-34). He simply desired that his hand might be restored to him again. As Moses besought the Lord his God for the children of Israel, after they had sacrificed unto the golden calf, so the man of God besought the Lord for the king; and the hand that had been stretched out against him was restored as before. So our Lord teaches us to 'Pray for them which persecute you, and despitefully use you; that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven' (Matt. 5:44, 45).

To cry against the altar was only part of his commission. He was also charged by the word of the Lord to 'Eat no bread, nor drink water there, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest' (v. 9, 17). This was no arbitrary command: an important principle was involved. Eating and drinking together is universally recognised as a token of fellowship; and God could have no fellowship with the altar at Bethel.

The temptations of the man of God

were three-fold. His first temptation was to shrink from delivering his message for fear of the consequences. He went to Bethel with his life in his hands; but he delivered his message faithfully and fearlessly, not fearing the wrath of the king. God has not given us a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7). If we have a spirit of cowardice, we certainly did not receive it from God.

His second temptation was to accept the king's hospitality and offer of a reward (v. 7). No doubt the king was grateful for the restoration of his hand; but it is highly probable that his ulterior motive was to neutralise the testimony of one whom he could not crush by his power. Besides being an act of disobedience to the word of the Lord, to eat and to drink at Bethel would have destroyed the power of his testimony and have weakened its effect upon the minds of the people. To his credit let it be said that the man of God stood out as firmly against the king's profession of friendliness as he had braved the king's anger. The devil's tactics still move along the same broad lines. He will put down by force if he can; and, if that fails, he will seek to win

by professing friendship. Church history, and the spiritual history of many a child of God, bear witness to the fact that the wiles of the devil have succeeded where the roar of the lion has failed.

His third temptation came from an unexpected quarter, when resistance was at a low ebb. It was probably not very difficult to decline the invitation of the impious king, but it is to be noted that the man of God was not so uncompromising in his reply to the old prophet from Bethel: compare his words 'I *may* not return with thee' in v. 17 with his words to the king in v. 8. As, however, he was firm in his refusal, the old prophet 'lied unto him;' as the result of which the man of God went back with him. Where the king had failed, the old prophet succeeded. The man of God, who so boldly withstood the king, and refused his offers of friendliness, first showed signs of weakness before the old prophet and eventually yielded. No doubt he was influenced by the fact that he *was* a prophet, an *old* prophet, whose office and years he respected, and he believed his lie.

Who was the old prophet? Like the man of God his name is not recorded. Why should he have wished to bring back the man of God? We are not informed. He would naturally be desirous of seeing the man who had made such a stir in Bethel; but his deepest motive may have been jealousy of the man whom God had used instead of himself. How much better if, instead of lying to him, he had strengthened his hand in God!

The chastening of the man of God

Having yielded to the seductive voice of the old prophet, the man of God was led into disobedience; consequently he suffered under the chastening hand of the Lord. It seems almost ironical that his seducer should be made to pronounce the judgement (v. 20-22). It may be thought that the man of God was more sinned against than sinning; that his punishment was out of all proportion to the gravity of his offence. It is true he was deceived, but he knew what God had said to him and by going back he plainly disobeyed the word of the Lord. He failed to complete his commission.

It is said that a lion will not attack a man when it has other prey, and that an ass is choice food to a lion. It is certain that a lion kills to eat. The natural instinct of the lion would be to devour or carry off the body. Yet here the passers-by were arrested by the sight of the lion standing by the body, along with the ass. The circumstances were so extraordinary that they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived. The lion allowed him to take the body, lay it upon the ass, and then went away as one whose mission was fully accomplished. It is a sobering thought that the winds and the waves obey him; the beasts that are upon the face of the earth, and the fish of the sea, are under His control; yet man, who has the capacity to render loving and intelligent obedience, so often fails. Kings ordained by God, prophets sent from God, may fail to render complete obedience; but it was apparent to all the witnesses then, and it is plain for all the readers of the history to see today, that the natural instincts of the lion and the ass were under Divine control.

Public success is no guarantee against private failure. At the time when kings go forth to battle, David tarried at Jerusalem and fell into grievous sin (2 Sam. 11). After the mighty victory at Carmel, Elijah fled for his life, and sat down under a juniper tree, and requested for himself that he might die (1 Kings 19:4). The man of God was brave in public. He delivered his message faithfully. He resisted what is often harder to resist than the anger of a king—his offer of refreshment and reward. It was while he was on his way home, tired and weary after his exacting experiences, feeling he could safely relax after a duty well done, that he sat alone under a terebinth tree, and the tempter came. And he who fearlessly confronted a king and a nation yielded to the seduction of an old prophet who lied to him. It is easy to excuse him, and in so doing to excuse ourselves for our own failures. It is easy to sympathise with him, to say that he was deceived, that the old prophet pretended he had a new word from God. Yes: but the man of God had received a word direct from God himself, and he ought to have obeyed that. Someone has said that we are never nearer a fall than when we have done well: it is then that we are liable to be caught off our guard.

The old prophet at Bethel is not a character to admire. He was not a man of courage to stand against the evil. Unwilling or unable to be present at the Bethel ceremony himself, he allowed his sons to go, rendering any effective testimony on his part impossible. He was guilty of a very common sin: he told a lie with intent to deceive, and drag the man of God down to his own level.

We are not all called upon to stand before kings. We may not have any great mission in public. But, 'putting away lying,' we can 'speak every man truth with his neighbour' (Eph. 4:25). In public and in private we are constant targets for the enemy. None of us is too lowly or obscure to escape his notice. To eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to eat and drink in Bethel, may seem trivial and insignificant matters in themselves, especially to those who know not God. But it was the word of God that was being assailed as it is today. Let us be loyal to Him, cost what it may, and refuse to be turned aside from that which we know to be God's word to us.

'THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION'

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON, D.D.

'Ye were in time past Gentiles in the flesh . . . without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel . . . having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ . . . *For HE is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us . . . that He might reconcile us to God*' (Ephesians 2:11-16). That is, the intervening wall which formed the barrier between Jew and Gentile—metaphorically. To understand the metaphor we must know something of the construction of the Temple in St Paul's day, wherein the Jews worshipped. The temple area which had been enclosed by Herod the Great was very large. It consisted of court within court, and innermost of all the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. There were varying degrees of sanctity in these sacred