

1 Kings 12:25-14:20

Limits of the Text

1 Kings 12:25-14:20 is a complete literary unit, though at first reading it appears to be two literary units, one within the other. The story of the unnamed man of God is interjected in the middle of Jeroboam's story, but because the author specifically tied it to Jeroboam's sin, I believe that it is part of Jeroboam's story. This unit begins with Jeroboam's sin and ends with his judgment.

Plot

My initial reaction to reading this text was to have two plots, one about Jeroboam and one about the unnamed man of God. But as I studied, it became clearer that the prophecy and death of the man of God was a warning to Jeroboam that could have resolved the crisis of his idolatry. When Jeroboam would not repent, then God judged him. Thus I believe this is one story with one plot but two resolutions.

- Background – Jeroboam worried about spiritual unity (1 Ki 12:25-27).
- Crisis – Jeroboam made golden calves (1 Ki 12:28-33).
- Resolution #1 – God warned Jeroboam (1 Ki 13:1-32).
- Conclusion #1 – Jeroboam did not turn from his evil ways (1 Ki 13:33-34).
- Resolution #2 – God judged Jeroboam (1 Ki 14:1-16).
- Conclusion #2 – Jeroboam's child died (1 Ki 14:17-20).

Towards Authorial Intent

The **plot** of the story is all about disobedience and judgment. The crisis of the story is the idolatry that Jeroboam introduced to Israel. The first resolution was a pair of warnings to Jeroboam, the prophecy and the death of the man of God, warnings that should have caused Jeroboam to repent. The second was the judgment of Jeroboam.

The **pace** of the story slows down the most in the conversation between Jeroboam's wife and Ahijah. God's prophet recounts in detail Jeroboam's sin and delineates exactly God's coming punishment.

There is a lot of **dialogue** in this text, and much of it is about sin and judgment. The man of God said he would not go with Jeroboam or the lying prophet because God commanded him not to. When the man of God relented and went with the lying prophet, the prophet said, "You have disobeyed the word of the Lord." Ahijah told Jeroboam's wife that her husband had not done what God had commanded, and therefore God would bring harm upon him.

External Context

This continues the section on the divided kingdom, focusing on disobedience and judgment. As God judged Solomon for his sin, so God judged Jeroboam and the unnamed man of God for their sin. The next unit will do the same for Rehoboam.

Interpretation

25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. 26 And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. 27 If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah."¹

This introduction to the story reveals Jeroboam's heart: He was worried about losing his newfound kingdom. His first reaction was to fortify a couple cities, Shechem, his capital, and Penuel, "a fortress east of the Jordan River, probably to protect Israel from invasion from the east by the Gileadites."²

His second reaction was to worry about the temple. He didn't want the unified system of worship that Solomon instituted to turn the hearts of the ten tribes back to following Solomon's son. Rehoboam believed that the worship of God would unify the people of God. "This fear amounts to a lack of faith, since surely the God who brought him to power can protect him from harm. God had promised him a dynasty as enduring as David's if he would keep God's commandments (1 Kgs 11:38). But Jeroboam does not find the Lord's pledge sufficient for his life needs."³ "Jeroboam's musings reveal an evil heart of unbelief."⁴ "It is this inability to trust that is his downfall, for he must now strive for security by himself."⁵ Surely this is a dangerous place for God's people to be. Everything in the story goes downhill from here.

28 So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." 29 And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. 30 Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. 31 He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. 32 And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. 33 He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

¹ ESV.

² Walvoord, 1:512.

³ House, 184.

⁴ Carson, 1 Ki 12:26.

⁵ Provan, 109.

Davis writes, “If you cannot trust God, you will use religion,”⁶ and that’s exactly what Jeroboam did. Rather than concentrate on obeying God and letting him protect his kingdom, Jeroboam created a pair of idols as a substitute for worshipping Yahweh. Some commentators have suggested that Jeroboam’s actions weren’t all that bad; they claim he didn’t create new gods, but rather aids for worshipping God, since many Near Eastern gods were depicted riding on the back of bulls.⁷ I find this position difficult to believe. First, Jeroboam’s words, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” were nearly identical to the people’s words after Aaron had created golden calves to worship at Mt Sinai; the parallel gods and words are too close to be an accident. Davis even suggests that Jeroboam chose golden calves specifically because they were a part of Israel’s heritage.⁸ Second, Jeroboam knew exactly why he was king: Because Solomon fell into idolatry. As one of Solomon’s officials (1 Ki 11:28) he had seen the true worship of Solomon’s younger days and then false worship of his latter years; he knew exactly what idolatry looked like. Third, Jeroboam had lived in Egypt (1 Ki 11:40); he had seen many gods depicted in idol forms, including bull gods. Fourth, he intentionally created other forms of false worship, new temples, new priests, and a new festival. Fifth and finally, God specifically said that Jeroboam had created other gods in 14:9, “You have done evil above all who were before you and have gone and made for yourself other gods and metal images.” Jeroboam knew exactly what he was doing. But even if by some stretch of the imagination Jeroboam wasn’t trying to promote idol worship, that’s exactly what happened anyway; the writer of Kings said these calves became a sin (1 Ki 12:30). “The king’s ‘reforms’ all involved religious apostasy. This is why he was such an evil influence in Israel. His changes struck at the heart of Israel’s strength, her relationship with God. They polluted Israel for generations.”⁹

Why did Jeroboam put these idols at Bethel and Dan? One possible explanation was location; Bethel was at the southern end of his kingdom and Dan the northern end. Wherever one lived in Israel, he didn’t have too far to travel to worship; they were certainly closer than going all the way to Jerusalem. Davis, however, suggests that traditions and associations were more important. Abraham had built an altar at Bethel (Ge 12:8), and Jacob saw God in a dream there (Ge 28:10-19); Moses’ grandson was a priest at Dan (Jud 18:30). Jeroboam was nothing if not clever; he associated the past with the present to make his changes more palatable to the people.

Jeroboam’s other changes, the temples, priests, and festival, finished what the golden calves started: Israel had a new religion. Along with a new king and a new capital, the split between north and south was now complete.¹⁰

⁶ Davis, 138.

⁷ Carson, 1 Ki 12:25.

⁸ Davis, 140-141.

⁹ Walvoord, 1:512.

¹⁰ House, 185.

As this point we have reached the crisis of the story, which Provan expresses well: “For the moment we are left with a question: if Solomon’s eventual apostasy lost him the kingdom, what will Jeroboam’s much quicker departure from the Lord’s commandments cost him?”¹¹

At this point the story takes an unexpected turn. God did not immediately zap Jeroboam, but did something else instead.

13:1 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. 2 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.’ ” 3 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.’ ” 4 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. 5 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. 6 And the king said to the man of God, “Entreat now the favor 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. 7 And the king said to the man of God, “Come home with me, and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward.” 8 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, 9 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.’ ” 10 So he went another way and did not return by the way that he came to Bethel.

One day Jeroboam was busily worshipping one of his false gods at Bethel when a man of God showed up. Little is known about him, except that he lived in Judah under the Davidic king. He denounced the altar, a place of idolatry and an alternative to the temple, and prophesied its demise. In fact, he prophesied the exact name of the king who would despoil it; Josiah would not arrive on the scene for nearly 300 years, yet he would do exactly what was foretold (2 Ki 23:15-20).

To prove the validity of his prophecy, the man of God gave a sign: The altar would be torn down and the ashes poured out; perhaps a better translation would be that the altar would split open. Jeroboam attempted to bully the prophet, but God had his prophet’s back, and Jeroboam’s hand withered. And then the altar split and the ashes poured out, fulfilling the sign.

¹¹ Provan, 111.

Faced with this double demonstration of God's power, Jeroboam backed down and asked for help. Here God demonstrated his grace and mercy and willingness to forgive; and if Jeroboam would repent of his idolatry as well, he could experience more of God's grace. But Jeroboam's words betrayed his heart: "Entreat now the favor of the Lord *your* God."

Jeroboam then attempted to reward the prophet, but he had been warned by God and refused. Why did he refuse? It may have been that Jeroboam's hospitality was little more than an attempt at bribery. Other texts in the Old Testament describe true prophets as free from obligation to other people and thus free to speak God's word; false prophets are beholden to their master and thus speak only what they want to hear.¹² So Jeroboam's offer may have been "an attempt to buy the Judean's loyalty. If the prophet can reverse God's judgment in the small matter of the hand, perhaps he can also exchange the curse on the altar for a blessing."¹³ But it may have been that the man of God was an object lesson for Jeroboam; "his resolute obedience was to be a further sign to the king, a reminder of the obedience that should have characterized his own life and reign."¹⁴

"So far the prophet has been obedient. He has heard God's word, opposed the king, and rebuffed Jeroboam's not-so-subtle bribe. Therefore he embodies the ideal of a prophet who stands for truth against those who pervert it."¹⁵

11 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. 12 And their father said to them, "Which way did he go?" And his sons showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone. 13 And he said to his sons, "Saddle the donkey for me." So they saddled the donkey for him and he mounted it. 14 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." 15 Then he said to him, "Come home with me and eat bread." 16 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, 17 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.' " 18 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. 19 So he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water.

¹² Provan, 114.

¹³ Provan, 114.

¹⁴ Carson, 1 Ki 12:33.

¹⁵ House, 189.

Provan argued that the man of God was to return home by a different route “so that he cannot easily be found and prevented from completing his mission,” and he cites the different route of the wise men in Mt 2:12 as another such example. Someone, however, did see his route home and reported to their father, an old prophet living in Bethel. Note the deliberate distinction: The man of God was from Judah, but the old prophet lived in Bethel. One lived under the Davidic king and in the land where the temple and true worship was still possible; the other lived in the heart of the false religion of idolatry. The Bible Knowledge Commentary describes him as complacent;¹⁶ I would call him compromising.

The old prophet went after the man of God and lied in order to convince him to return home. This paragraph leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Why did he go after him? Why did he want him to come back to Bethel? Why was the man of God sitting down? Why did the old prophet lie in order to persuade him? The text doesn't answer our questions. There are, of course, good answers to these question, but whatever they are they were unimportant to the main idea of the story, since the author of kings decided not to include them. What is important is that the man of God disobeyed his God and returned to Bethel with the prophet.

20 And as they sat at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet who had brought him back. 21 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, 22 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.’ ” 23 And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back. 24 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. 25 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.

He may have been complacent and compromising and old, but the prophet was indeed a prophet, and the word of God came to him. He prophesied that the man of God would be killed for his disobedience. And thus it happened.

The story continues to leave us with more unanswered questions. Why did God's word come to this lying prophet? Why didn't the man of God argue or at least complain about the prophet's duplicity? And why did the lion act so weird? While the author doesn't answer these questions either, he does make it “clear that God requires complete and radical obedience to his command.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Walvoord, 1:515.

¹⁷ Provan, 114.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary is helpful in understanding the severity of the man of God's punishment:

"The severity of God's judgment on this man, compared with His dealings with the older prophet who was also disobedient, seems unfair. But the severity of God's judgment was proportionate to the importance of the younger man's mission. All Israel would have heard about his prophecy of God's judgment on Jeroboam for his disobedience to the word of the Lord through Moses. If God had not judged His own prophet for his disobedience to the word given him by God and which he had announced publicly, doubt would have been cast on his prophecy and on God's credibility."¹⁸

26 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." 27 And he said to his sons, "Saddle the donkey for me." And they saddled it. 28 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. 29 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. 30 And he laid the body in his own grave. And they mourned over him, saying, "Alas, my brother!" 31 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. 32 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."

The old prophet was compassionate and buried his "brother" prophet. But the key point here is that being a prophet and having seen God's prophetic word come true against the man of God, the old prophet was absolutely certain that the man of God's prophetic word against the altar would come true. This ends the first resolution of the story.

33 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. 34 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.

Lest we are tempted to think he was rambling, the writer of Kings tied this story back to Jeroboam. The prophecy against the altar and the death of the man of God were intended to turn Jeroboam from his evil way. If the man of God could not escape the judgment of God, then neither would the king.¹⁹ Regrettably the conclusion of the story is that Jeroboam did the opposite, proliferating priests and high places. Jeroboam's

¹⁸ Walvoord, 1:515.

¹⁹ Provan, 115.

refusal to repent at God's warning guaranteed the destruction of his house and his nation,²⁰ which will be the second resolution of the story.

14:1 At that time Abijah the son of Jeroboam fell sick. 2 And Jeroboam said to his wife, "Arise, and disguise yourself, that it not be known that you are the wife of Jeroboam, and go to Shiloh. Behold, Ahijah the prophet is there, who said of me that I should be king over this people. 3 Take with you ten loaves, some cakes, and a jar of honey, and go to him. He will tell you what shall happen to the child."

4 Jeroboam's wife did so. She arose and went to Shiloh and came to the house of Ahijah. Now Ahijah could not see, for his eyes were dim because of his age. 5 And the Lord said to Ahijah, "Behold, the wife of Jeroboam is coming to inquire of you concerning her son, for he is sick. Thus and thus shall you say to her."

Like the previous story, this episode leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Why did Jeroboam send his wife instead of going himself? Why didn't he want it known his wife was going to a prophet? Why did he think a disguise would fool a blind man? Was the food an attempt to bribe Ahijah? The author doesn't answer these questions, but he does make one thing clear: God's prophet cannot be fooled. "In the context of the story the motive for the disguise is not so important as the fact that a blind prophet could 'see through it'. Here, as in the previous chapter, we discover that God's prophets are not to be trifled with."²¹

When she came, she pretended to be another woman. 6 But when Ahijah heard the sound of her feet, as she came in at the door, he said, "Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be another? For I am charged with unbearable news for you. 7 Go, tell Jeroboam, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: "Because I exalted you from among the people and made you leader over my people Israel 8 and tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, and yet you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes, 9 but you have done evil above all who were before you and have gone and made for yourself other gods and metal images, provoking me to anger, and have cast me behind your back,

Ahijah's unbearable news began with God's grace. Listen to the verbs: God exalted you, made you leader, tore the kingdom, and gave it to you. God's grace to Jeroboam should have created great love and thankfulness that inspired obedience. But the opposite happened. More verbs: You have not been like David, have done evil, made other gods, provoked me to anger, and cast me behind your back. This sin against God's

²⁰ Note the irony: Jeroboam started idol worship to keep his kingdom, yet that's exactly what caused him to lose it. There is a way that seems right unto a man...

²¹ Carson, 1 Ki 14:1.

grace²² will bring God's judgment upon Jeroboam's son, Jeroboam's dynasty, and Jeroboam's nation.

10 therefore behold, I will bring harm upon the house of Jeroboam and will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free in Israel, and will burn up the house of Jeroboam, as a man burns up dung until it is all gone. 11 Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat, for the Lord has spoken it." ' 12 Arise therefore, go to your house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. 13 And all Israel shall mourn for him and bury him, for he only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something pleasing to the Lord, the God of Israel, in the house of Jeroboam. 14 Moreover, the Lord will raise up for himself a king over Israel who shall cut off the house of Jeroboam today. And henceforth, 15 the Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water, and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers and scatter them beyond the Euphrates, because they have made their Asherim, provoking the Lord to anger. 16 And he will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and made Israel to sin."

Because of Jeroboam's sin, Ahijah announced a three-part judgment. First, the Jeroboamic dynasty would come to a violent end. Second, Jeroboam's child would die as soon as Mrs. Jeroboam returned home. Third, Israel would be removed from the land. The second resolution of the story is now over; Jeroboam and Israel would pay a heavy price for his refusal to listen to God's warning.

17 Then Jeroboam's wife arose and departed and came to Tirzah. And as she came to the threshold of the house, the child died. 18 And all Israel buried him and mourned for him, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Ahijah the prophet.

All three of God's judgments came to pass. The second happened when Jeroboam's wife returned home. And if the first one came to pass so quickly and accurately, then they would have every reason to expect the others to happen as well. The first happened when Baasha ascended the throne (1 Ki 15:27-29) in 909 BC. (Jeroboam ruled from 931-910 BC.) The third happened when Assyria invaded (2 Ki 17) in 722 BC. "What the author wanted [his readers] to know was that sin caused the fall, that not even Josiah could save Jerusalem, and that the prophets spoke God's word, which was the truth, from the start of Israel's history."²³

19 Now the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, how he warred and how he reigned, behold, they are written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. 20 And the time that

²² Davis, 160.

²³ House, 192.

Jeroboam reigned was twenty-two years. And he slept with his fathers, and Nadab his son reigned in his place.

Here is another formulaic conclusion on the life and death of a king.²⁴ The author mentioned another one of his sources. How do we summarize his reign? According to the author of kings, what's important to know about Jeroboam is that he sinned horribly by instituting idol worship. Though God gave him a dramatic warning, he refused to repent, and ultimately the entire nation would be deported because of him. That's a pretty heavy summary of one's life.

²⁴ See 1 Ki 11:41-43 for Solomon.

Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story of a king who tried to secure his kingdom through idol worship.
2. National History – This is a story about the root cause of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God’s warnings and judgments upon his covenant people.

Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind’s **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We do not trust God like we should, and when we don’t trust God sometimes we try and accomplish our goals our own ways.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? God finds ways to warn us about our sin and offers us a chance to repent.

Outline

This outline is based upon the scenes of the story:

1. Jeroboam introduced idolatry to Israel (1 Ki 12:25-33).
2. God warned Jeroboam about his idolatry (1 Ki 13:1-34).
3. God judged Jeroboam for his idolatry (1 Ki 14:1-20).

Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 12:25-14:20 in order to teach exilic Jews that God punished Jeroboam’s sin after warning him.

Teaching Outline

Sometimes God warns his people before he punishes them, and I want you to recognize God’s warnings in your life and repent of your sins. From our text today in 1 Kings, we are going to see 4 truths about God’s warnings:

1. When God makes a promise, trust him (1 Ki 12:25-33).
2. When God warns through his word, repent (1 Ki 13:1-10).
3. When God warns by an example, repent (1 Ki 13:11-34).
4. When God’s warnings are ignored, expect punishment (1 Ki 14:1-20).

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