

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO MANHEE YOON'S BOOK

Manhee Yoon's book, *The Fate of the Man of God from Judah: A Literary and Theological Reading of 1 Kings 13*, is an in-depth exegetical and theological study of 1 Kings 13 and its immediate context, 1 Kings 11—14. These chapters of the Book of Kings describe a historic moment in the history of Israel, that is, the division of David's kingdom into two parts. Yoon's book delineates the transformation of Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, from the chosen instrument of God's will to the archetypal enemy of God.

1 Kings 13 is known as one of the most difficult stories to comprehend. It has provoked ethical and theological questions in the mind of readers. The man of God, who came from Judah, delivers the message of God against the altar at Bethel, which King Jeroboam had made. An old local prophet comes and lies to him, causing him to disobey the command that he had received from God. As a result, the man of God gets killed by a lion. To our surprise, instead of meeting a similar fate and being punished for the deception, the old prophet delivers God's word of judgment against the man of God. In addition to this, he is buried beside him, in the same grave, and his bones get saved from being burned at the time of King Josiah's reformation (2 Kings 23).

Yoon tackles the questions that have been raised by the interpreters of many generations: Why did the old prophet lie to the man of God? Was he a false prophet? If so, how and why would God speak through him? Is God, as portrayed in the story, a just God, having punished his own prophet who was innocently deceived and unknowingly disobeyed his command while letting the old prophet go unpunished? Why is the phrase "by the word of the LORD" repeated so many times throughout the story? What is the message that the narrator was trying to deliver to the implied reader? What does this story have to do with King Jeroboam? What is the role that this story plays in the broader context of the Jeroboam narrative, 1 Kings 11—14?

After answering these questions, Yoon takes a step further and elaborates the theological ideas that might have been intended by the narrator of the story. He argues that the man of God's death became both a warning and symbolic message for Jeroboam about the danger of disobeying the words of God. In this sense, the man of God preached God's message by his death even more powerfully than by the words he spoke while he was still alive. The story, therefore, does not suggest the mechanical, unethical relationship of the prophet to his message, as some scholars argue. On the contrary, it portrays the way in which God used his prophets to communicate his messages to Israel as well as the sacrifices that the prophets had to make as the bearers of the LORD.

Yoon's close reading of the story and exposition of the theological ideas of the chapters will interest those who want to study these interesting biblical texts by helping them to understand and appreciate the prophets' ministries in the Old Testament.

1. The problem of the old prophet's lying

The narrator's comment "He lied" (v. 18) is short but made the interpretation very difficult. But the narrator does not explain why the old prophet lied. Why is the narrator silent about the motive of the old prophet's lie? As for the motive of the lying, many interpreters speculated and used the speculations to build up their interpretations.

→ My argument is that the motive of the old prophet's lying may not be very important for the purpose of the narrator. From the narrator's point of view, the old prophet played his part, which was to test the man of God as to whether the man of God would remain obedient to the commandment ("do not eat; do not drink; do not go back by the same road") which was given to him "by the word of Yahweh."

2. Ethical/theological questions raised by scholars

What is the portrait of God as implied in this story? For many interpreters, what God did is not just and does not make sense. In other words, why did God show no sign of mercy to the man of God and killed him ruthlessly, when he was *deceived* by the old prophet, while God did not punish the old prophet who had led the man of God to disobedience by lying to him (using the phrase "by the word of Yahweh."). Far from punishing him, however, God even spoke through the old prophet (vv. 20—22). So here, some scholars raise theological/ethical questions regarding the portrait of God, as implied in the text.

→ The expression "by the word of Yahweh" is repeated 7 times in this story alone, whereas it occurs only 5 times elsewhere in the entire Old Testament. So the narrator's intention to emphasize the importance of obeying the word of God is obvious. To interpret the story, as intended by the narrator, I argue, we should read the story in this framework; God's commandment given "by the word of God" requires absolute obedience, and, to deliver this message as clearly as possible, the narrator used this story.

In this story, the man of God is tested against this standard, and King Jeroboam (in vv. 7-10) and the old prophet from Bethel (in vv. 14-19) each tests him by trying to make him do the things that God prohibited him from doing. The man of God obeys first but fails the test in the second time. So I argue that this whole story is about showing the importance of obeying the word of God.

God is using the man of God as a means by which to warn Jeroboam. The man of God's death also became a message for Jeroboam and also for the reader. So reading the story from a simplistic ethical perspective, the main message of the story will be missed.

3. The issue of true and false prophecy

Is this story, as suggested by many scholars, about the true prophecy vs false prophecy? Then, who is the true prophet in this story and who is the false?

→ Though there are some elements in the story that may make the story look related to the topic (true and false prophecy), that is not the issue that the narrator deals with in this story.

This story does not present any criteria by which we can tell who is a true prophet and who is a false prophet. Interestingly, the man of God who spoke the true Word of God at the beginning disobeyed the command of God and as a result was punished, while the old prophet who lied to the man of God received the true word of God and delivered them (vv. 20-26), which was later fulfilled. If the old prophet were a false prophet, his last word (v. 32) does not make sense, which, I argued, is the main theme of the story, the certainty of the fulfillment of the word of God.

4. The placement of the story in its current location

Why has this story been inserted in the current location? It is a long story that slows down the reading of the Jeroboam narrative, and at first glance, seems somewhat irrelevant to the overall storyline of the Jeroboam narrative.

→ This story was inserted into the present location to show why King Jeroboam's destruction was inevitable (v. 34). The fate of the man of God (not just his prophetic message), as the speaker of the word of God, was to become a warning to King Jeroboam. The parallels between the man of God and King Jeroboam may be drawn up as follows: initial obedience—disobedience—punishment.

The man of God showed his loyalty/obedience to the word of God by rejecting Jeroboam's suggestion (Obedience); then he was tricked by the old prophet and turned from his "way" and disobeyed the command (Disobedience); as a result, he received the punishment (Punishment). As I showed in chapter 3, Jeroboam's beginning was very promising, and God's promise for him was great. I argued that he was not portrayed as a man of ambition for kingship (in 12:1-2), and any negative connotation about him is not to be found before 12:26-32. But at the peak of his political career, he could not trust God and made two golden calves, leading the whole nation to idolatry (Disobedience). 1 Kings 13:33-34 clearly says that "even after this" Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way and added even more evils, thus his destruction becoming very certain. So the story is contributing to the plot of the Jeroboam narrative, in showing how Jeroboam was transformed from God's chosen instrument to God's despised enemy.

5. A proper hermeneutical approach for the interpretation of the story

Then, what is the hermeneutical approach that we should take to read the story in the way it was intended by the narrator?

→ I argued that we should pay attention to the symbolic nature of the story. The fate of the man of God became a symbolic message for Jeroboam. I argued that the narrator configured the details of the story in a particular way that the story could be functioning as a kind of prophetic drama (the man of God's obedience, disobedience, and punishment // Jeroboam's obedience, disobedience, and punishment). The literary connections between this story and 1 Kings 20:35-36 support this argument. In both passages, two prophetic figures are involved; one prophet disobeys the command given "by the word of Yahweh" rather innocently; as a result, the prophet who disobeyed was killed by a lion.

These two passages which are not very far from each other can both be categorized as prophetic symbolic acts/drama that the narrator configured in a particular way to use them to accuse the involved kings (Jeroboam and Ahab respectively) of their disregard for/disobedience to the word of Yahweh.