

Keys to Dynamic Bible Study
Eating with the Enemy
Read 1 Kings 12:25-13:34

Jeroboam felt the ecstasy of his power. He was the first, yes the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel. His people wanted freedom from the exorbitant taxes of Solomon's son. He would grant them that freedom and more. His political agenda provided for drastic changes in his new nation's worship. He would supply temples, so they would not have to travel to the temple in Jerusalem. Secretly he thought it would accomplish his greater motive: No longer would the people's loyalty be pulled back to the king who reigned in Jerusalem. The people had sulked for a god who possessed a body, so he would offer them Yahweh, in the form of a golden calf. He would even free up the priestly restriction. No more would the priesthood solely consist of Levites; now anyone could become a priest. This became a great sin for Jeroboam.

Hunger transformed the tranquil stroll of the man of God into a grueling hike. He had completed the task Yahweh had required—confronting Jeroboam with a devastating prophecy against his idolatry--and now he was returning to Jerusalem. Jeroboam's request that he remain for a meal had been shunned by the man of God. Yahweh had stipulated, "You shall eat no bread, nor drink water there." The man of God would not endorse the king by eating with him. He was famished.

Resting under an oak tree that provided protection from the sun, the man of God saw a man traveling on a donkey toward him. "Are you the man of God?" the man asked, tying his beast to the tree. When the man of God replied that he was, the man said, "Come home with me and eat a meal." The man of God arose to leave while explaining that God had instructed him to refrain from eating here. The new arrival, however, held him back.

"I too, am a prophet like you," the man said, "and an angel spoke to me." The self-proclaimed prophet scraped dirt off his robes in order to gain time to develop his lie. He craved an opportunity to entertain this celebrated guest. The man of God turned to the prophet frowning quizzically. "Yes," the lying prophet assured him, "the angel said, 'bring the man of God to your house that he may eat and drink.'" The man of God, thankful that Yahweh had changed his mind, grabbed his sandals and followed the prophet.

In the midst of the meal, an astounding thing occurred. The prophet began to prophesy against the man of God: "You have disobeyed the voice of Yahweh who demanded that you neither eat nor drink in this place. You will die, but your body will not lie in the grave of your fathers." Panicked, the man of God got ready to leave. The prophet offered his donkey to him to speed his way back to his own country. But the man of God never arrived there.

The lion, hungry from days of modest rations, saw a man on a donkey and crouched. When the lion had ripped the life out of the man, however, he sat there on his haunches; instead of feasting on his prey, he merely licked at his front paws. Astonished townspeople, passing by a docile lion, an unharmed donkey, and a bloody corpse spread the news. Hearing of the spectacle, the prophet came to see and bury the man of God—in the prophet's own grave.

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This is one of the most peculiar narratives in the Old Testament. First, because the good guy is torn apart by a lion, but the bad guy is never harmed. Second, its conclusion is puzzling. The man of God is killed by a lion, yet left uneaten. What is the point of the story? The bookends (similar wording used at both the beginning and ending of Old Testament narratives, and illustrated in this article with the information about Jeroboam's sin) can help solve the mystery.

The bookends reveal that Jeroboam was leading his people into idolatry. For this reason, God requires the man of God to abstain from eating with the enemy. Yet he heeds an (imaginary) angel instead. In an ironic twist, the lion responds properly to the Lord's command by refraining from eating his prey. The stark contrast between the man of God and the lion challenges God's people to attend solely to God's Word. "Not even an angel from heaven," Paul writes in Galatians 1:8, should deter us.