

JUSTICE AND DECEPTION IN 1 KINGS 13

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the problem of divine justice in the narrative of the “Man of God.” The claim is made that the Man of God, although deceived by the “Old Prophet” was not innocent, given that he could have worked out the reasons for God’s commands, and had he done so, he could have easily penetrated the Old Prophet’s Lies. Additionally, the essay offers an alternative way of reading Hebrew narrative by drawing inferences from available evidence.

Keywords: Divine Justice, Deception, Obedience, Innocence, Theodicy

1. Introduction

The divinely ordained death of the Man of God in 1 Kgs 13 has famously raised doubts as to the quality of God’s justice, given that the Man of God was the victim of a deception on the part of the Old Prophet from Bethel.¹ However, before finding fault with God’s decision to have the Man of God killed by a lion, we ought to first consider whether the Man of God did all that was within his power to defend himself against the Old Prophet’s lie. In this essay, I contend that the Man of God disobeyed God’s commands

¹ For instance, Uriel Simon evaluates God’s judgment upon the Man of God as too harsh (Uriel Simon, “1 Kings 13: A Prophetic Sign—Denial and Persistence,” *HUCA* 4 [1976]: 93, 96) and James Crenshaw considers God’s judgment in this story to verge upon the “demonic” (James L. Crenshaw, “Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion,” *BZAW* 124 [1971]: 48).

because he failed to discern the probable reasons that informed God's commands. If the Man of God had worked out why God commanded him to not eat or drink in Bethel, and why he should not return to Judah by the same route he took to get there, he could have easily discerned that the Old Prophet was lying. It follows that in a world replete with deception, knowing the principles that inform God's commands is essential to avoid falling prey to cleverly devised falsehoods.

2. The Suppression of the Literary in Biblical Studies

Before engaging with the 1 Kgs 13 "Man of God" narrative, readers should understand that this essay departs somewhat from the traditional rules that govern how biblical scholars interpret Old Testament stories. I have intentionally curtailed some of the formal practices common to biblical studies to concentrate instead on what Robert Alter has described as the "moral vision embodied in a particular kind of biblical narrative."² In other words, my focus is on how 1 Kgs 13, as a realistic narrative, provides moral and spiritual understanding as an effect of its literary design and techniques. As Alter noted in discussing the practice of biblical translation, literary perspectives generally remain marginal in the field of biblical studies. This has resulted in what he refers to as an unfortunate "blindness to the literary dimension of the ancient texts."³ Alter worries that most biblical scholars personally spend very little time (if any) reading non-biblical literature (ancient or modern), leading to his conclusion that biblical scholars tend to be unaware of how literature works. Thus, engaging in biblical interpretation without a broad exposure to literature in general can result in failures to perceive how Hebrew Old Testament literature employs ambiguity and narrative detail as rhetorical devices calculated to encourage the reader to draw logical inferences, thus working out probabilities rather than objective demonstrative proofs.⁴

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans W. Frei describes how biblical

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 12–13.

³ This is not to disparage what Alter refers to as the vast "excavative" body of work generated by biblical scholars over the last 100 years. However, while much preliminary work has been achieved in source analysis, form criticism, theology, archaeology, linguistics, and so forth, virtually nothing has been produced that could be called "literary criticism" (Robert Alter, *The Art of Bible Translation* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019], 12–14). Where literary criticism does exist, it is often deemed peripheral and regarded as less serious for its lack of empirical analysis.

⁴ Alter, *The Art of Bible Translation*, 16–17.

hermeneutics evolved in such a way as to exclude serious literary study of biblical narrative. In the wake of the European Enlightenment, the historical-critical methodology focused obsessively on the factual verity of the Bible. Consequently, biblical stories were thought to be either purely objective accounts of real events (they made fact claims), or, on the other side, they were found unreliable as factual narratives and, thus, could only be read as “sensuous” or sensible representations of moral or theological teachings. This either/or approach to the biblical text meant that too much attention was devoted to whether the Bible was fact or fiction. If it was considered fictional, then biblical narrative could still be read for its moral or theological lessons, but there was little recognition that regardless of its status as either fact or fiction, Hebrew narrative was profoundly literary in its conception and design.⁵

As Frei explains, in the post-Enlightenment drive to determine the factual/historical accuracy of the Bible Stories, the “peculiar and intricate logic of narration got pushed into the background” as the “factuality of the biblical reports became far too central and crucial.” Even today, biblical hermeneutics is often blind to what Frei calls the “logic of narration,” preferring objective or empirical analysis to literary or rhetorical interpretation.⁶ As Frei points out in his broad critique of biblical hermeneutics, once a given method of interpretation is imposed upon a literary text, that same method necessarily sets the terms for what the text can mean. This observation invariably leads to a serious query as to the value of teaching any hermeneutic at all, since having established an empirically sound hermeneutic, one is bound to it and, therefore, also blinded by it.

The problem for biblical studies is that while an empirical oriented hermeneutic promises and supports empirical analysis, it tends to ignore or suppress literary aspects of the text which cannot be objectively proven. Thus, standard biblical hermeneutics constricts what can be known from the text since, as Frei puts it, the “meaning of the text is bound to be similar to the structure of understanding.”⁷ A hermeneutic established from within a tradition of empirical analysis will necessarily blind readers to elements

⁵ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 221.

⁶ Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 220.

⁷ Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 322. Frei also observes that after Kant’s “Copernican revolution in philosophy ... the hermeneutical upshot of the transformation was that the focus of inquiry now became the unitary structure of *understanding* rather than the written text as such” (Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 323).

within a literary text not amenable to a methodology. Thus, whatever cannot answer to a given hermeneutic or framework of understanding must be regarded as either meaningless or, when it comes to the literary or rhetorical features of the biblical text, merely decorative and thus unessential for purposes of identifying meaning.

It may be instructive to biblical studies students and scholars to learn that in other disciplines, such as Comparative Literature or English Literature, no formal hermeneutic exists, largely because in these disciplines, literary texts have traditionally not been read for purposes of establishing some truth outside or apart of literature (such as proofs, empirical certainty, or theological dogma). Instead, literature is considered its own best interpreter. Ideally, no external rules outside of the individual text should govern the text's meaning. Reading accurately becomes a matter of reading the text as written—not reading the text as framed by a methodology.⁸

A further problem in both biblical studies and literary criticism generally has to do with the inaccessible nature of critical discourse. George Steiner claims that the best preparation for interpreting literature is for the reader to possess a richly varied and interesting life, not a specialized methodology or a technical vocabulary. Literary criticism is best when it channels the imaginative power of the literature it studies. Steiner (arguably the greatest literary critic of our time) has also observed that too much literary criticism in the humanities consists only of “talk about talk,” a “gray morass” of “commentary without end ... as book engenders book, essay breeds essay, article spawns article.”⁹ Of course, this echo chamber of learned publications rarely, if ever, moves outside the narrow confines of academia. Educated persons outside of the Academy do not read literary criticism and lay Christians rarely attempt to read the publications of biblical scholars. If the point of biblical interpretation is merely to generate endless learned discussion among specialists, the Church would not be wrong to ask why it should support such a project. In fact, how many learned articles remain published but still virtually unread, even by scholars?

The endless proliferation of empirical biblical criticism when combined with the oft impenetrable prose of the critics results in studies that too often are both inaccessible and painfully blind to the Bible's literary modes of thought. Literature was not written for the critics—its audience has always

⁸ Of course, in the last 20 years literature departments have succumbed not to a formal hermeneutics as such, but, rather, to the ideological preoccupations of the political left. Students are now taught to read literature in support of marxist or Leftist politics in ways that render literature essentially mute (and unenjoyable).

⁹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 39.

been the Everyman. Once criticism renders literature inaccessible to most readers, its legitimacy ought to be challenged. In my view, the best way to save literary criticism requires a re-awakening to the immense literary power of the text, with the understanding that when criticism less and less speaks like the literature it studies, it probably has become anti-literary and, thus, antagonistic to the biblical text.

Empirical critical methodologies can be taught and learned, but can we say the same about literary insight, intuition, imagination, or biblical interpretation as a literary endeavor in and of itself? Steiner observes that, unlike critical evaluative methods, "critical tact" cannot be taught. It can be "exemplified" or modeled but not taught in the way that a methodology can be passed down to students. Perhaps the main reason why we find ourselves drowning under a flood of derivative secondary publications is because almost any student with a modicum of intelligence can be taught to perform a methodology. What would be left to us if we were to strip biblical scholarship of its exhaustive and derivative rehearsals of other articles and books? As a case in point, the notorious "literature review" threatens at this late stage to overwhelm the authors' own arguments. Are we approaching a time when Biblical Studies monographs will consist almost entirely of source citations, critics repeating, and citing other critics *ad nauseum*? Can we admit that in biblical scholarship far too much time is taken up in the display of technical expertise and the mastery (or pretense of mastery) of a vast and unwieldy body of secondary commentary?

In his book-length essay, *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis called for a "ten or twenty years" moratorium on literary criticism in his own discipline of English literature since, as he explained, a "surfeit" of evaluative criticism has the effect of making the literary text so remote from its readers that at some point literature will be lost to us. Lewis laments how we train students to only "see books wholly through the spectacles of other books"; he warns:

Less and less do we meet the individual response. The all-important (Reader meets Text) never seems to have been allowed to occur of itself and develop spontaneously. Here, plainly, young people are drenched, dizzied, and bedevilled by criticism to a point at which primary literary experience is no longer possible.¹⁰

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 128–29.

Lewis penned these words in 1961 on the verge of what can only be described as an explosion of literary criticism in the service of an artificially contrived demand for doctoral dissertations, scholarly monographs, and journal articles, all chasing a minuscule number of disinterested readers. In this highly competitive environment, the scholar with the most publications wins, but many of these publications remain largely unread, existing only as mute tokens of extreme personal labor, with virtually no end except the advancement of these authors' careers via the swollen *curriculum vitae* of the professional scholar. This professionalism of reading has not only made literature and the Bible remote from readers, but it may also terminate reading itself as newly minted scholars find themselves increasingly tied to the wheel of rehearsing all that others have said about a text before they can say anything about it themselves. At some point, this entire industry of learned repetition and marginal advancement of actual readerly wisdom becomes farcical and vulnerable to the layperson's common-sense response of "so what?"

We might also question the writing style and vocabulary typically employed in biblical studies: the overwhelming use of abstract, theoretical, or purely conceptual language (or academic jargon) to describe and interpret the Bible (or any literature for that matter) strikes a false chord given the invariably concrete nature of the Bible's own language. The result is an obscurantism that belies the biblical text, inventing an unnecessary barrier between the reader and the text. To what extent do the terms we use to describe a literary text alienate us from the text itself? Can I truly appreciate a text accessed via a filter that prevents me from seeing the very qualities that make that text so richly expressive? Abstract language and Latinisms will always have a place in scholarly discourse, but in literary criticism their frequent over-use suggests that among scholars, obfuscation has come to be seen as a virtue rather than a fault to be corrected. Why choose an abstract term or a piece of technical jargon when a plain English word will do? When interpreting a text, our language ought to somewhat reflect the language of the text that it admires. In practical terms, it could be said that literary criticism of the Bible should err on the side of the concrete rather than the abstract in its attempt to convey the text's own meaning and style as faithfully as possible.

We also need to terminate the bizarre notion of treating the Bible as *literature* since this language assumes that the Bible may properly be regarded as *not* literature or may be approached as something other than literature. I contend that the Old Testament narrative *is* literature and thus thoroughly literary, and to regard it as something else produces habitual misreadings

of the text. I would assert that theological writing (note I did not use the word “discourse”) should be literary in character as well, given its source.

Assuming the Bible’s literariness (realistic narrative in the case of 1 Kgs 13), we must consider how Hebrew literature works in specific cases. Thus, in this essay, elements such as individual character, individual motive, narrative design, and apparently gratuitous detail all combine to tell a story beyond the simple plot line or explicit narrative facts. I contend that the Hebrew narrative was artfully designed to elicit imaginative readings via the drawing of logical inferences from the informational or factual gaps in the stories, since only in the nuance of literature can we begin to appreciate the complex profundities of how God and man interact within a fallen world. Literature is an art form achievable only through the exercise of an author’s imagination. It follows, naturally, that to be properly understood, literature requires the use of the reader’s imagination. Literature is not data; it is an art form.

The key to interpreting Old Testament literature requires a willingness to acknowledge that literature, by definition, ignites potentialities and probabilities rather than confirming interpretations as demonstrable proofs. The thing about inferences is that while probable (and thus logical), they do not arise to the level of proofs, and that is too often what conventional Biblical Studies expects. If we set about to draw logical or probable inferences from the facts of the story, we move from speculation or suppositions (possibilities or educated guesses) into the realm of the probable, where literature lives and breathes. Now, to arrive at probable inferences, we must also attend to the story’s facts (evidence) since all probable inferences must, of course, answer to the story as written, but the facts are never the whole of the story; in some ways, they are only the beginning.

The other thing about probable inferences is that often, more than one can be identified for any given narrative question or problem. It follows that often we do not get just one answer to our question. Here, I would make a distinction between possible inferences and probable ones. They are not the same, and while numerous possibilities often can be identified, probabilities should enjoy a greater status in terms of solutions to interpretative problems. As Eric Auerbach observed in his seminal study of Old Testament narrative, biblical stories are always “fraught with background”¹¹ that is, they contain multitudes of rich possibilities/probabilities many of which, if not

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality In Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12.

all, can never be proven. However, it is that very richness that makes literature a window into the vast complex of human motivations. Biblical characters are dynamic and elusive in terms of what moves them. Some motives can easily be inferred from actions, but others are harder if not impossible to identify with certainty. When it comes to working out possible character motivation in the Bible, methodologies fall flat, and reader intuition and life-experience come fully into play. For instance, one cannot know as a matter of proof why Samson got up at midnight after having slept with a prostitute, but this apparently random fact solicits a range of intriguing possibilities; not the least of which is that Samson could not sleep throughout the night due to the torment of a guilty conscience.

Hebrew narrative consistently urges the reader to pose the question, "What do the facts of a biblical story invite us to learn about a character's motives or state of mind?" Rather than describing a character's thoughts or motives, the biblical author describes external events from which readers can infer interior thoughts. The essential realism of the Old Testament narrative pushes us to grapple with the complexity not just of the characters' interior lives, but also our own. A basic but very useful tool for solving a biblical narrative problem involves putting oneself in the position of the character and then asking the question, "What would I do if I were in this situation?". Biblical characters are not beholden to static theological or moralistic concepts; instead, they move constantly in the arena of the possible or the probable but rarely provable world of the human, and the unfathomable yet still accessible realm of the Divine. This is the moral vision of biblical narrative, not stock answers to stock questions but often veiled, hinted, or silent questions that inspire new depths of meaning.

3. First Kings 13

As D. W. Van Winkle has observed, most twentieth-century scholars have concluded that the 1 Kgs 13 narrative "does not advance any criterion for distinguishing between the message of a true and false prophet."¹² However, if the narrative contains no criterion for judging whether or not the

¹² D. W. Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII: True and False Prophecy," *VT* 39 (1989): 31. Walter Gross claims that "this story is not interested in providing help in distinguishing true prophets from false" (Walter Gross, "Lying Prophet and Disobedient Man of God in 1 Kings 13: Role Analysis as an Instrument of Theological Interpretation of an Old Testament Narrative Text," *Semeia* 15 [1979]: 123). Daewook Kim also concludes that the narrative does not offer any way to distinguish a false from a true prophet (Daewook Kim, "The Old Prophet's Deceit, Jeroboam's Golden Calves and the Disobedience of the Man of God," *VT* 69 [2019]: 490–97). Van Winkle supplies a cogent review

Old Prophet is what he claims to be, it follows that that the Man of God should not be faulted for failing to detect the Old Prophet's lie, but only for disobeying Yahweh's commands, thus making him the victim of a cunning deception who, nevertheless, must die presumably because by eating in Bethel, the Man of God unwittingly endorsed Jeroboam's apostasy.¹³

However, if this is the case, divine justice appears flawed, since the Man of God's punishment does not appear to consider the apparent fact that he disobeyed because he believed that the divine command had been reversed—he thought he was obeying Yahweh when he was doing the very opposite. Yet, in a manner reminiscent of Eve's failure to detect the Serpent's lie in Genesis chapter 2, the fact of having been deceived does not make the Man of God innocent. Instead, as a prerequisite for durable obedience, the onus is upon the Man of God to defend himself against the deception by critically evaluating the Old Prophet's false claim. I contend that in this narrative, the Man of God's obedience hinges upon understanding the principled reasons that inform Yahweh's command. The Man of God's failure to gain that understanding when he could have done so means that he is not innocent for having been deceived.¹⁴

4. The Old Prophet and His Sons

Before considering the actual deception scene, it is helpful to evaluate the Man of God's character as it first appears and then compare it with the character of the Old Prophet. The Man of God is from Judah, while the Old Prophet who deceives the Man of God lives in apostate Bethel where the confrontation scene between the Man of God and Jeroboam takes place. We may logically infer from these facts that the Old Prophet from Bethel has been compromised or corrupted to some degree by Jeroboam's idolatrous

of the various twentieth century interpretations of the 1 Kgs 13 narrative (Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII," 32–33).

¹³ James K. Mead notes the similarity between Jeroboam's and the Man of God's disobedience: "Jeroboam had been given a gracious word of Yaweh against which he rebelled. So, too, the man of God has received a revelation and has been given multiple opportunities for retelling it. He has twice directly and twice indirectly quoted the word of God to him, and now breaks that word, as it were, word for word" (James K. Mead, "Kings and Prophets, Donkeys and Lions: Dramatic Shape and Deuteronomistic Rhetoric in 1 Kings XIII," VT 49 [1999]: 200).

¹⁴ D. W. Van Winkle also argues that the Man of God is not innocent on the basis that the Man of God "should have recognized the assurance of the old prophet to be false since it encouraged him to violate the commandment of God" (Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII," 40). However, Van Winkle's criterion fails to take into account why the Man of God disobeyed; namely that he thought the lie was true.

agenda, otherwise, God would likely have employed him to confront Jeroboam instead of the Man of God from the neighboring kingdom of Judah. Although the Old Prophet does not attend Jeroboam's counterfeit feast of Tabernacles himself, it appears that he permits (or perhaps even commands) his sons to attend the idolatrous ritual. The sons then report back to their father everything that the Man of God said to Jeroboam.¹⁵ This suggests a Prophet perhaps unwilling to attend Jeroboam's counterfeit feast himself, but also unwilling to confront apostasy in his children—much less his King. The Old Prophet's attitude towards Jeroboam's false feast and apostasy seems ambivalent—we cannot be entirely sure of his precise allegiances, as he appears to neither condemn nor endorse Jeroboam's apostasy (he does not personally attend the false feast, but his sons do, suggesting a divided mind regarding the King's apostasy). But this compromised attitude very likely explains why he is not chosen to confront his King.

The attendance of the Old Prophet's sons at the counterfeit feast is especially telling, given the degree of authority which the Old Prophet exercises over his sons as emphasized by the narrator in both verses 13 and 27 when he orders the sons (on two different occasions) to saddle his donkey. It appears that the Old Prophet is in full command of his sons' actions; therefore, the sons' attendance at Jeroboam's counterfeit feast implies their father's consent, and given that elsewhere in the narrative, the sons are clearly subordinate to their father's will, it may be that their attendance at the feast was at their father's command. The Man of God is, undoubtedly, a better spokesman for God than the Old Prophet, but the fact that the Old Prophet was compromised should warn us that no prophet is immune from human foibles.¹⁶

¹⁵ Simon J. De Vries claims that the Old Prophet does not attend the feast because he is old; however, his age does not prevent him from chasing down the Man of God on his donkey later in the story (Simon J. De Vries, *1 Kings*, WBC 12 [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985], 171). In 1 Kgs 12:33, we are told that Jeroboam invented a feast on the "fifteenth day of the eighth month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense." The very next verse reads, "And Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense." We can assume that the confrontation between the Man of God and Jeroboam took place on the date of Jeroboam's counterfeit feast one month after the Feast of Tabernacles proper.

¹⁶ De Vries observes that the term, "Man of God" functions in this narrative as a "provisional acknowledgement of prophetic status" (De Vries, *1 Kings*, 170). Jerome T. Walsh notes that, "the chosen instrument of Yaweh's will can, through disobedience, come to a bad end" (Jerome T. Walsh, "Contexts of 1 Kings XIII," *VT* 39 [1989]: 365). The "Man of God" appellation may also distinguish the Judean prophet from the compromised "Old Prophet" who, as the narrative shows, is obviously not a "Man of God".

5. The Fatal Error

The first instance of serious error in the Man of God's judgment can be seen in how he foolishly reveals to Jeroboam (and the entire assembly) God's command that he return to Judah by a different route. The negative implications of this announcement have gone unobserved by critics, but as a failure of prudential caution it contributes significantly to his demise. In response to Jeroboam's invitation to come home with him and "refresh himself" (v. 7), the Man of God informs the King that "I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place ... for so it was commanded me by the word of the Lord, 'eat no bread, nor drink water, nor return by the same way you came'" (vv. 8–9).¹⁷ The narrative does not reveal why the Man of God could not "eat ... bread, nor drink water" while in Bethel, or why he must return home by a different route, but in Hebrew narrative a full grasp of the text's range of meaning necessitates drawing probable inferences from what may often seem to the modern reader as inconsequential or random narrative detail.

In this instance, narrative logic dictates that the most practical reason why God commanded the Man of God to travel home by a different route is that by doing so, he would have a good chance of escaping his pursuer (the Old Prophet).¹⁸ We may reasonably infer that the Man of God traveled to Bethel via the shortest, most traveled or easiest route, and that God's command that he return by a different, probably less traveled and longer route would have made it difficult for the Old Prophet to find him. However, by naively (and unnecessarily) announcing that God commanded him to return home by a different route, the Man of God unwittingly frustrates God's attempt to protect him from the nefarious designs of the Old Prophet.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ All biblical quotes are taken from the *New King's James Version* (Philadelphia, PA: The New American Bible Society, 1990). The NKJV term "commanded" is the Hebrew *tsavah* meaning to "charge or command." Later in the narrative the Man of God substitutes a less authoritative term as his resolve weakens presumably due to increasing hunger and thirst.

¹⁸ Uriel Simon, "Prophetic Sign: Denial and Persistence," *HUCA* 47 (1976): 90 cites Deut 17:16 about Israel not returning to Egypt to get horses and suggests that by returning to Judah via the same route, the Man of God would symbolically negate God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. I think the evidence supports a more pragmatic reason.

¹⁹ The Old Prophet's motive for tracking down and lying to the Man of God are not directly revealed to us in the narrative. However, a probable motive would be simple envy for having been displaced by the Judean prophet in his own hometown. This inference is supported by the fact that once the Man of God is dead, the Old Prophet immediately assumes the Man of God's prophetic role by emphatically endorsing the Man of God's original prophecy regarding Jeroboam's altar (v. 32).

Man of God's failure to draw the logical inference as to the reason for God's command to return by a different route is reflected in most readers' failure to do the same. It appears that the narrative tests both the Man of God and the reader in much the same way.

My claim that the Man of God gives too much information to his enemies finds further support in vv. 11 and 12, where we learn that upon coming home, the Old Prophet's sons "came and told him [the Old Prophet] all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel: the *words* which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father." The narrator is specific with regards not only to the son's report of the "works" of the Man of God at Bethel, but also his "words." Note, as well, that in v. 11 the word "told" (*spr*) is closely repeated to emphasize the Man of God's mistake in divulging that he would be returning to Judah by a different route, as it appears that everyone in attendance at Jeroboam's feast heard the Man of God's words and, therefore, took note of which direction he took upon leaving.²⁰ Again, this may seem an inconsequential detail, but in v. 12, we learn that the Old Prophet, upon hearing of the Bethel confrontation and the words spoken by the Man of God, immediately asks his sons, "What way went he?" and, at this point, the narrator specifically remarks, "for his sons had seen what way the Man of God went, which came from Judah" (v. 12). The fact that the sons had seen the Man of God depart the scene provides clear evidence that they were present at the false feast and that the Man of God made a critical mistake in publicizing his route home.

The narrative logic is inescapable: God commands the Man of God to travel home by a different route because by doing so, he could elude the predatory Old Prophet; however, by announcing this specific part of God's command to his enemies, the Man of God exposes himself to danger and makes it possible for the Old Prophet to find him before he can get safely back across the border to Judah. We can infer that having heard the Man of God say that God had commanded him to return by a different route, everyone in the assembly naturally takes notice as to which way he went, which is precisely what the Old Prophet's sons did.

In addition to his indiscretion, the Man of God emerges as morally vul-

²⁰ Pamela Tamarkin Reis points out how in v. 11, the verb *spr* ("to tell") is "unnecessarily" repeated in the verse in such a way as to emphasize the importance of the Man of God's words: "The son (or sons) could have talked about both the works and the words with just one use of the verb. Nowhere else in the Bible is the relating of the words of an episode given prominence by distinguishing them from the relating of the action" (Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Vindicating God: Another Look at 1 Kings XIII," VT 44 [1994]: 380).

nerable when, in his refusal of Jeroboam's offer to "refresh himself," he indulges in some unnecessary, if idiomatic, hyperbole: "If thou wilt give me half of thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread ... in this place" (v. 8). The possible inference be made here is that if Jeroboam would offer to the Man of God something more than "half his house" the prophet might well change his mind. As Reis has noted, the "half of thine house" expression bears some similarity to other expressions in the Old Testament used to negotiate a deal or agreement; however, it is not entirely clear that in this context the Man of God is negotiating or naming his price, since Jeroboam makes no counteroffer, and the Man of God does not press the issue further. If the Man of God is negotiating, he does not elicit a similar response from the King, suggesting that the phrase "half thine house" is not perceived by Jeroboam as an attempt at negotiation.²¹

Jeroboam is almost certainly looking for an advantage here in terms of using the Man of God to endorse his counterfeit feast by eating and drinking (as Reis points out), but it is not as clear that the Man of God is looking for a greater reward than what was offered, at least not on any conscious level. Reis claims that Jeroboam does not make a counteroffer "because Jeroboam recognizes the man of God's greedy ploy and withdraws from the transaction."²² This is an interesting possibility, but if the Man of God was that enveloped in sin (Reis also calls him "rapacious"), why did God choose him in the first place, and why does the narrator nominate him as a "Man of God"?²³ Furthermore, the narrative later reveals that the Man of God only disobeys Yahweh's commands once he is tricked into believing that God has reversed his original command, thus allowing him to eat and drink in Bethel; this suggests that even though his resolve weakens over time, he does not actually disobey unless he is first deceived.

As Angel Hayyim has observed, in their stated refusals to disobey God, both the Man of God and Balaam reject a proffered reward in terms relative to the size of the King's "house": "And Balaam answered ... if Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do less or more" (Num 22:18).²⁴ We know that Balaam

²¹ Reis argues that the "half thy house" expression constitutes a "desired commercial transaction" on the part of both Jeroboam and the Man of God (Reis, "Vindicating God," 377).

²² Reis, "Vindicating God," 379.

²³ It is instructive in this regard to note that the covetous Balaam is never explicitly referred to as a prophet. The Man of God may be vulnerable to a reward, but he is clearly determined not to give into temptation.

²⁴ Angel Hayyim, "When God's Will Can and Cannot Be Altered: The Relationship Between Balaam and 1 Kings 13," *JBQ* 33 (2005): 31–39.

strongly desired the reward, while the Man of God refuses the proffered reward. But the striking similarity in the language used by both prophets suggests that while the Man of God is probably not as keen to get a reward as Balaam was, he is still vulnerable. The “half thine house” expression suggests a latent desire on the Man of God’s part for the King’s reward and, therefore, functions as a temporizing coda to the divine command.²⁵ In referring to the King’s estate in relation to himself, the man of God’s refusal gets muddled by human desire. The King’s reward is rejected, but in choosing to couch his refusal in terms of the size of the reward, the Man of God, like Balaam, betrays an interest in what God has forbidden him to have (but might otherwise take).

I cannot fully agree with Reis’s claim that the Man of God is a “guileful, acquisitive schemer” as it seems more likely that he is simply poor and therefore, attracted to the possibility of a reward even as he rejects it. His relative poverty can be inferred from the fact that the nefarious Old Prophet owns at least two donkeys (vv. 13 and 17) while the Man of God must travel on foot. Note, as well, that in Num 22, the covetous Balaam also owns a donkey. Kenneth C. Way suggests that both the 1 Kings and the Numbers narratives “depict the donkey as a mount for a prophet—that is a person of status.”²⁶ We can infer that the Man of God’s mode of travel indicates that he occupied a lower status than the Old Prophet; a possibility that may also factor into his fatal credulity.

How the Man of God also rejects Jeroboam’s invitation portends the way he will accept the meal offered by the Old Prophet. The narrative’s internal logic suggests that, ultimately, the only thing standing between the Man of God and the eating of a forbidden meal is the external force of God’s command. The Man of God does not appear to grasp the principled reasons for God’s commands; therefore, his obedience is necessarily based upon his ability to remain loyal to a command that, to him, lacks a clear rational or principled basis. This, I would argue, functions as the primary factor in his eventual disobedience and demise, especially in view of his relative poverty and, of course, his growing hunger and thirst.

Thus far, the Man of God has strictly obeyed the divine commands. However, in this story, obedience requires more than resolve; it also requires understanding, and it is understanding that the Man of God lacks. On the surface, the Old Prophet’s successful deception of the Man of God

²⁵ The irony, of course, is that in the end, the Man of God disobeys the divine command for much less than “half” of the King’s house.

²⁶ See Reis, “Vindicating God,” 377.

appears to be inevitable on the grounds that there is no way for the Man of God to know that the Old Prophet is lying to him; a view apparently supported by the fact that the narrator finds it necessary to inform the reader that the Old Prophet's claim of having received a message from the "angel of the Lord" is, in fact, a lie (v. 18).²⁷ The narrator knows that both the Man of God and the reader are equally susceptible to the Old Prophet's deception. The difference, of course, is that we have the benefit of the narrator's commentary whereas the Man of God does not. Still, we expose ourselves to be just as prone to deception as the Man of God when we take the view that there is no way that the Man of God could identify the Old Prophet as suspect or work out that he is lying.²⁸ As a result of this assumption, we find it difficult not to conclude that God's punishment of the Man of God was unjust and in drawing this conclusion, we expose ourselves to be potentially just as incapable of discerning God's reasons for his commands as the Man of God was.

6. The Deception Scene

The fact that the Man of God is found by the Old Prophet sitting "under a terebinth" (v. 14) suggests that the Man of God is weary and suffering from lack of water and food.²⁹ It also highlights, again, the Man of God's failure to grasp the reason why God directed him to go home by a different route. The Man of God is easy prey. He publishes to his potential enemy his route home, his pursuer has the advantage of riding on a donkey, and he unwisely

²⁷ Robert Alter has observed that "narratorial comment in biblical narrative is close to zero-degree." In other words, the narrator's felt need to inform us that the Old Prophet was lying is a notable departure from the literary conventions of Hebrew narrative (Robert Alter, "A Life of Learning: Wandering among Fields," *Conference on Christianity and Literature* 63.1 [2013], 8).

²⁸ Mead notes that if the narrative comment to the effect that the Old Prophet was lying was taken out of the narrative, the reader would be left "wondering if Yahweh actually *had* spoken by an angel to the old prophet" (Mead, "Kings and Prophets, Donkeys and Lions," 200). Van Winkle states that if the narrative is to provide a "criterion" for judging if the Old Prophet is telling the truth or not, that criterion must meet "two tests": first, it must make it possible for the Man of God to know that the Old Prophet was lying and, second, it also has to do the same for "any Israelite" (Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII," 37).

²⁹ The terebinth tree (*Elah*) is associated with the Hebrew name for God (*El*) and both were linked to worship, incense-burning, and burial of the dead. See Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible: A Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 108. These associations are richly suggestive within the context of the story, but the most likely practical reason for why the Man of God chose to sit under the Terebinth tree was for its shade: "They ... burn incense on the hills, under oaks, poplars, and terebinths/Because their shade is good" (Hos 4:13).

rests when he should exert himself in order to escape. The Old Prophet (like Jeroboam) then offers the Man of God a meal at his home in Bethel. The Man of God refuses, but in this instance, the Man of God mitigates his refusal by stating that he “is not able” to eat or drink. This suggests a loss of resolve when compared with his more determined rejection of Jeroboam’s offer of a meal. As Reis observes, in his first refusal of a meal, the Man of God tells Jeroboam in verse that he “would not go in with you” or eat or drink in “this place,” but now, after a long day without food or water, the Man of God states in v. 16 that he is “not able” (*yakol*) to eat or drink.³⁰ This change implies that he wants to eat and drink, and if God were to suddenly command that he could eat and drink “in this place” — he would.³¹

In his refusal of the Old Prophet, the Man of God also degrades the authority of God’s commands by substituting the milder “told” or “said” (*dabar*) for the original “commanded” (*tsavah*) found in v. 8 in this, his second recitation of God’s original command. Similarly, in framing his lie, the Old Prophet claims that the “angel of the Lord” merely “spoke” (*dabar*) rather than “commanded”; a subtle mirroring of the Man of God’s own changed wording that further reinforces the view that God has only spoken rather than commanded. By contrast, when God speaks through the Old Prophet in condemnation of the Man of God’s apostasy in v. 21, the word “commandment/command” (*tsavah*) is restored and repeated twice for emphasis.³² In effect, the Man of God somewhat reduces the authority of God’s commands in his choice of language, and the Old Prophet cleverly responds with a lie that employs similarly reductive terms to further degrade the Man of God’s already weakened resolve.

A similar pattern of deception through subtle verb substitutions can be seen in Gen 2 and 3. In Gen 2, God “commands” (*tsavah*) Adam not to eat from the forbidden tree. However, when the Serpent tempts Eve, the Serpent substitutes “said” (*amar*) for “commanded” (*tsavah*) to weaken the force of the prohibition by using a less authoritative verb. In her response to the Serpent, Eve also uses the verb *amar* rather than the original *tsavah* when she restates God’s prohibition, thus, mirroring the deceiver’s choice to substitute the original and more authoritative *tsavah* with the more common verb

³⁰ Reis, “Vindicating God,” 382.

³¹ As Reis puts it, “The contrast thus made between volition and compulsion is obvious; he would go with the old prophet and accept his hospitality if only he could” (Reis, “Vindicating God,” 382).

³² Reis also points this out; she also observes that the Man of God substituted “said” for “commanded” (Reis, “Vindicating God,” 384).

amar. When God confronts Adam and Eve after their disobedience, God restores the original verb (*tsavah*) to the prohibition regarding the forbidden tree and thus gives back to the command its original force very much like how God reinstates *tsavah* in his judgment upon the Man of God. Thus, in both these deception scenes, the changed verbs suggest a shift from authoritative divine commands to merely spoken prohibitions—God’s rules are to be obeyed, but they can be softened or even reversed when seeming necessity or convenience requires.

We observe no conscious, deliberate, or flagrant disobedience of God’s commandment by the Man of God, only a gradual temporizing. Ironically, we find this same relativizing attitude in Jeroboam when he urged Israel to worship the golden calves in Bethel and Dan because having to travel to Jerusalem was “too much” or too inconvenient for them (1 Kgs 12:28). By the end of the story, the Man of God has come to unknowingly reflect Jeroboam’s attitude towards God’s commandments: they can be changed when human circumstances require it, especially when it appears that God has sanctioned the change. The difference here, of course, is that while Jeroboam takes it upon himself to change God’s commands via a clever bit of revisionist history, the Man of God is deceived by another prophet, but in the end, the result is the same.

It can be argued that *how* the Man of God falls for the Old Prophet’s deception is immaterial to the severity of his punishment. However, while it is true that the Man of God is punished by God because he disobeyed, it must be stressed that this disobedience was the result of his being deceived. There is no direct evidence in the text to support the inference that the Man of God would have disobeyed had he not first been tricked into thinking that the original command had been countermanded. The fact that the Man of God could have penetrated the Old Prophet’s lie but did not, tells the reader that, given the Man of God’s failure to grasp the reasons for God’s commands, the Man of God was not a victim of Divine Justice in the sense that there was no way that he could have known that the Old Prophet was lying. The onus was upon the Man of God to infer the reasons for God’s commands as a sure-fire means to being able to discern the Old Prophet’s lie. In other words, being tricked into disobeying God’s commands when one could have discerned the lie incurs the same level of guilt as having consciously chosen to disobey God.

Superficially, the Old Prophet’s life appears iron-clad, but the Old Prophet endangers his false claim when he states that God reversed the original command via an angel: “An angel spake unto me by the word of the

Lord.” By contrast, the Man of God has twice stated that the divine commands were issued to him “by the word of the Lord” without any mention of an intermediary agency. In other words, the Old Prophet’s lie appears suspicious given the fact that the supposed reversal of the command has been delivered to the Man of God third hand, and since the original command was given to the Man of God directly, why would God choose to then reverse that same command through not just one but two intermediaries? This detail should, at the very least, raise the Man of God’s suspicions.³³

At the same time, the Old Prophet’s claim that God has reversed the original command via a messenger angel to another prophet also suggests that the original command has become less serious in God’s eyes, since while the original command is given to the Man of God directly from Yahweh, the reversal of that same command does not require Yahweh’s direct involvement—it can be communicated effectively enough by a messenger angel; a figure of lesser authority than Yahweh Himself. Yet again, the authority of the original command degrades over time; it gets weakened as it moves from the initial status of being a direct command from God to the lesser status implied by its having been reversed by intermediaries.

Of course, this also potentially makes the reverse command weaker than the original (as noted above), but this may be a moot point since the Man of God’s hunger and thirst have increased over time such that they effectively bolster the Old Prophet’s false claim. The rhetorical effect is that when the Old Prophet claims that God has reversed the original command, the indirect third-hand means through which that reversal is communicated dictates that the original command automatically loses force. Naturally, this effect also makes the lie more believable since its claimed reversal (in tandem with the Man of God’s hunger and thirst, since he had not eaten or drunk for nearly an entire day) weakens the force of the original command at the same time as it seeks to replace it. This is very much like what happens when the Man of God tells Jeroboam that even if Jeroboam offers him “half his house,” he will not “eat or drink” in this place. In both cases, the original command gets relativized and, thus, weakened even as the Man of God’s thirst and hunger continue to grow. Thus, it becomes evident that as the narrative progresses, the authority of the original command undergoes a steady process of erosion to the point where it becomes easy to disregard it, given the deception.

³³ Mead states that the “man of God needed to have heard the alleged angel for himself, rather than relying on the word of the old prophet” (Mead, “Kings and Prophets, Donkeys and Lions,” 200n25). It seems possible, as well, that the Old Prophet hopes to avoid divine retribution by avoiding the claim that God spoke to him directly.

The easiest way to detect the Old Prophet's lie is not available to the Man of God because, apparently, he fails to work out why God would forbid him from eating and drinking in Israel in the first place. Again, an inference can be drawn. In Chapter 12, we learn that Jeroboam had invented a counterfeit and idolatrous east of Tabernacles that took place one month after the proper or true feast of Tabernacles instituted by God. Thus, we can infer that the divine prohibition against eating and drinking in Bethel or Israel was intended by God to prevent the Man of God from appearing to endorse the counterfeit feast.³⁴ The Man of God, however, does not appear to grasp this rationale for the divine command; instead, upon being told that "the angel of the Lord" has reversed the prohibition against eating and drinking, the Man of God immediately returns to Bethel to eat. The narrative indicates no hesitation or pondering of this reversal; having heard the lie, the Man of God "went back with him, and ate bread in his house, and drank water" (v. 19). We must conclude from this abrupt action that the Man of God has no clue as to why God commanded him not to "eat or drink" in Bethel in the first place. If he had known the reason, he would have immediately identified the Old Prophet's claim as a lie. In other words, the Man of God's obedience was contingent not upon a principled understanding of the reason for the command, but only upon the command itself as an apparently arbitrary exercise of divine authority. If we grant that the Man of God was obeying what, to him, appeared to be a set of purely arbitrary commands from God, it becomes more evident as to why the Man of God would couch his refusal of Jeroboam's invitation in relativistic terms ("half thy kingdom"): if one cannot or does not discover a real-world rationale for a divine command; violations of the command become more attractive to the extent that they are rational (it is a matter of common sense to eat and drink) as opposed to the seeming arbitrary command from God. Van Winkle argues that the "criterion" for discerning the truth value of the Old Prophet's claim is precisely the "conformity of the message to the commandment of *Yaweh*"; however, while this is true, 1 Kgs 13 raises the likelihood that a commandment cannot be obeyed *in extremis* without some grasp of the principles that inform it. The Old Prophet does not tell the Man of God to disregard God's command, he just changes it by offering a what he purports to be a divine countermand.³⁵ Moreover, a purely arbitrary command can be reversed

³⁴ Walsh observes that, "to break bread in Beth-El, especially with the royal patron of the doomed sanctuary, would be to condone that city's cultic abominations" (Walsh, "The Contexts of 1 Kings XIII," 358).

³⁵ Van Winkle, "1 Kings XIII," 42.

without any apparent contradiction because arbitrary commands are irrational by definition.³⁶

Finally, given that the Old Prophet claims to be a prophet in v. 18 (“I too am a prophet like you are”) the Man of God might well question why it was that the prophet who lived in Bethel was not tasked by God with the mission of confronting Jeroboam in Bethel instead of himself. Can they really be the same sort of prophets if the prophet from Bethel was excluded from the mission to Bethel in favor of a prophet from another nation?³⁷ But despite these opportunities for identifying the lie as a lie, the Man of God believes the lie; not least because, from the Man of God’s extremely limited grasp of the issues at stake in Bethel, the lie appears more rational to him than the original command. If the Man of God had drawn the correct inferences as to the reasons for God’s commands, he would have instantly recognized the false nature of the Old Prophet’s claim. In this narrative, obedience requires understanding.

7. The Deception as Satire

It follows that while the reader may object to the divinely ordered death of the Man of God, given the Man of God’s seeming innocence in having been tricked, this conclusion stems from the reader’s own failure to detect evidence in the narrative that shows how the Man of God was a victim not of a fickle or unjust God, but of his own prudential, intellectual, and moral weaknesses. In a particularly Hebraic form of narrative sophistication, this story effects two deceptions at once—the Man of God is deceived because he fails to work out the probable real-world reasons for God’s commands which, in turn, leads him to frustrate God’s plan to protect him from the Old Prophet and blinds him to the false nature of the Old Prophet’s claims, and the reader is potentially deceived into believing that the Man of God was a victim due to the reader’s careless attention to narrative details that invite inferences that go beyond the facts as stated. Here, we discover that this

³⁶ De Vries argues that the “arbitrary and irrational” nature of God’s commands is “precisely the point,” since “the divine purpose can only be tested through laying on him conditions that may seem unreasonable and burdensome to him” (De Vries, *1 Kings*, 171). My interpretation takes the very opposite approach: the critical test lies in the Man of God’s ability to infer the reasons for God’s commands as a necessary pre-condition for successfully resisting the Old Prophet’s lie.

³⁷ Reis states, “had the man of God been steadfast, surely he would not have been swayed by a falsehood from a functionary of an idolatrous city” (Reis, “Vindicating God,” 383).

narrative also functions as satire to the extent that it cleverly tests the Reader in much the same way as the Man of God was tested in real life.

The deception works not because it was undetectable as a lie, but because the Man of God and the reader are potentially the same when it comes to their concept of what it means to obey God's commands: both fail to recognize when faced with a strong deception, obedience requires an intelligent spiritual understanding of the reasons/principles for the divine command (along with the assumption that all divine commands are, indeed, rational and principled). In the case of the Man of God, he has more reason to believe the Old Prophet's lie than he does to doubt it because he has reason enough to want to "eat and drink," and he possesses no reason for not eating and drinking except that God told him not to, and once he is told by the lying prophet that God will allow him to eat—he does so. A command that makes no sense loses traction once the Man of God encounters an apparently opposite command that makes perfect sense (he is, after all, hungry and thirsty). In this contest between the two commands, we can see that the command that seems the more reasonable will win regardless of its actual truth value. The Man of God's problem is not that he is irrational; his problem is that while he may be perfectly rational, he appears to assume that God is not.³⁸

8. A Theodicy of the Rational God

This narrative implies a theodicy of a rational and caring God whose followers must strive to achieve a principled understanding of His divine commands as a prerequisite for durable obedience in a world replete with artful deceptions. The narrative does not suggest that it was impossible for the Man of God to obey God unless he understood the reasons for the commands, but narrative logic dictates that not knowing the reasons made it much more likely (if not inevitable) that the Man of God would be deceived, since he lacked the available tools for determining the truth-value of the Old Prophet's claim.

9. The Last Meal

Finally, there is the Man of God's puzzling response to the divine message that his "corpse" would "not come" to the "tomb of his fathers" (1 Kgs 13:2).

³⁸ It is also possible that Yaweh's commands were designed to be successfully obeyed only upon the condition that the Man of God could identify the reasons that informed them.

This prophecy is stated during the meal, and it appears that the Man of God goes on to finish his meal as if nothing untoward has happened: “So it was, after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk, that he [the Old Prophet] saddled the donkey for him” (v. 23). The close and unnecessary repetition of the word “after” (*ahar*) emphasizes that the Man of God does not allow this ominous prophecy to terminate his meal.³⁹ The narrator only reports that “after” the meal was finished, the Old Prophet “saddled” the donkey for the Man of God.⁴⁰ *Ahar* means to procrastinate, to tarry, to wait, or to defer. The Man of God, having heard the dire sentence pronounced upon him for his disobedience, obviously does not want to leave the Old Prophet’s house. The repetition of *ahar* emphasizes his delay; however, it appears that his delay serves no useful purpose beyond merely putting off the inevitable death sentence, since we find no evidence that he repented. It may also be argued that since no definite time was announced as to when the Man of God would die, his delay signified that he was not expecting to meet his end on that very day; however, as he was not in his home Kingdom of Judah, the enigmatic prophecy that his corpse would not be buried in his ancestral burial plot can be read as implying that he would die before he could reach home. Whether the Man of God considered this possibility remains shrouded in mystery.

As noted above, the Old Prophet twice orders his sons to “saddle” his donkey, but now, the Old Prophet, himself, saddles the donkey for the Man of God (v. 23) and then gives the donkey to him as well—a combination of hospitality and gift-giving that parodies the refreshment and the reward offered by Jeroboam to the Man of God in v. 7. Apart from the rather poignant gesture of the Old Prophet giving his donkey to his victim, the Man of God exhibits what appears to be resignation in the face of God’s verdict. Like Jeroboam, the Man of God does not cease his rebellion after being confronted by God (he finishes his meal) and like Jeroboam he does not appear to repent. The Man of God dies much as he lived: the apparent victim of his

³⁹ The repetition of the word “after” in v. 23 appears to be somewhat unique in the Hebrew Bible. This construction is very similar to verse eleven where the word “tell” also gains emphasis via repetition (see note 20 above). The narrative’s repetition of the words (“tell” and “after”) when viewed in tandem, suggests that the Man of God’s divinely ordered death stems primarily from his failure to conceal God’s command to return by a different route, which, once reported by the Old Prophet’s sons to their father, becomes the means whereby he is deceived.

⁴⁰ Verse 33 tells us that “after this event [the death of the Man of God] Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but again he made priests from every class of people for the high places.”

belief in an arbitrary Divine Will that unreasonably conflicts with basic human needs. When his fate is announced, the Man of God does what he has done before—he dumbly submits to Yahweh's command without appearing to understand why.