

1 Kings 13 — The Word Against the Altar — Josiah Named Three Centuries Early, the Withered Hand, the Old Prophet's Lie, and the Lion That Would Not Eat

1 Kings 13: A man of God comes out of Judah by the word of the LORD and cries against Jeroboam's altar at Bethel, naming king Josiah three hundred years before his birth; the altar is rent, the king's hand withers and is restored at the prophet's prayer; an old prophet of Bethel lies the man of God back to his table, and a lion meets him on the forbidden road home; the first years of the divided kingdom, c. 930 BC (secular chronologies place the division at essentially the same date, c. 931/930 BC).

The kingdom has just torn in two. In chapter 12, Rehoboam's arrogance split ten tribes away from David's house, and Jeroboam — the gifted administrator God himself had promised a kingdom through Ahijah the prophet — immediately faced a political problem: his people's temple was in his rival's capital. His solution was two golden calves, one at Bethel and one at Dan, a new priesthood drawn from "the lowest of the people," and a substitute festival in a month "which he had devised of his own heart" (1 Kgs. 12:28–33). Note that phrase carefully; the whole chapter in front of us is heaven's answer to it. A religion devised out of a man's own heart is about to collide with a word that came out of God's mouth.

Hebrew Word Studies

mopheth (H4159) (תִּפְתָּה) — **sign, wonder, portent vv. 3, 5.** This is not the everyday word for a mark or token (that is *ot*); *mopheth* is the heavyweight term — the word for the plagues of Egypt, where God tells Moses "I will multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 7:3), and for the prophets themselves when their lives become the message: "I have set thee for a sign unto the house of Israel," the Lord tells Ezekiel (Ezek. 12:6, 11); "I am as a wonder unto many," says the Psalmist (Ps. 71:7). A *mopheth* is reality bent far enough out of shape that onlookers must render a verdict about who bent it. Here the rending of the altar is the down payment on a prophecy three centuries long — the near wonder underwriting the far word. But Deuteronomy had already installed the guardrail this chapter tests: if a prophet gives a sign "and the sign or the wonder come to pass," yet the message contradicts what God has commanded, "thou shalt not hearken" (Deut. 13:1–3) — the established word outranks even a successful wonder. The man of God delivers a true *mopheth* in verse 3 and then, in verse 19, surrenders to a claim that offered no sign at all. And the Book of Mormon shows the same coin's other face: Sherem demanding a sign in the teeth of the word (Jacob 7:13–15) and Korihor doing the same (Alma 30:43–50) — both receiving one, neither saved by it. Signs confirm covenants for the obedient; they convert no one. Jeroboam is about to prove that in his own right hand.

derek (H1870) / shuv (H7725) (דֶּרֶךְ / שׁוּב) — **way, road, journey — and by extension, manner of life / to turn back, return vv. 9–10, 12, 17, 24–26, 28, 33.** Two words that build the chapter's skeleton. *Derek* is the road under your feet, but Hebrew never lets it stay merely physical — it is also your course of life, as in "the way of the righteous" and "the way of the ungodly" that open the Psalter (Ps. 1:6), the way we are to acknowledge him in (Prov. 3:6), the ways that are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8–9). *Shuv* is the verb of turning around — and it is the Old Testament's great word for repentance, the physical U-turn that became the spiritual one. Now watch what the chapter does with them. The man of God is forbidden to *shuv* by the *derek* he came (v. 9); the old prophet's sons report which *derek* he took (v. 12); the lie is precisely an invitation to *shuv* (v. 18, "Bring him back"); and the lion meets him "by the way" and leaves his carcass "cast in the way" (vv. 24–25, 28) — the forbidden road becomes the gallows, the geography preaching the verdict. Then the terrible inversion of verse 33: "Jeroboam *returned* (*shuv*) not from his evil way (*derek*)." There is the whole chapter in one verse. The man of God turned back once, on a road God had closed, and it cost him his life; Jeroboam refused to turn back at all, on a road God had begged him to leave, and it cost his house its existence (v. 34). One man's *shuv* was his sin; the other man's refusal to *shuv* was his. The road you take, and the turns you will or will not make on it — Hebrew insists these are never just travel arrangements.

davar (H1697) / kachash (H3584) (דָּבָר / כָּחַשׁ) — **word, speech, matter, thing / to lie, deceive, deny vv. 1–2, 5, 9, 17–18, 20, 26, 32–34.** Readers of 1 Kings 17 will remember *davar* as the noun that chapter stands on — the word of the LORD that shuts heaven, fills the barrel, and raises the dead. Here, four chapters earlier in our reading and seventy years earlier in the history, the same noun is put through its darkest trial: verse 18 is the only place in the chapter where "the word of the LORD" is a forgery. The man of God comes "by the word of the LORD" (v. 1), cries "in the word of the LORD" (v. 2), refuses the king by it (v. 9), recites it under the oak (v. 17) — and then the old prophet lifts the entire formula, intact, and

wraps a lie in it (*kachash*, the verb Scripture uses for Sarah denying her laughter, Gen. 18:15, and for covenant fraud between neighbors, Lev. 6:2–3). The counterfeit works because it is indistinguishable in vocabulary — only in channel and content can it be tested. Then two exquisite ironies close the study. In verse 20 the genuine article arrives at the liar's own table — "the word of the LORD came unto the prophet that brought him back" — the true *davar* forcing the forger to pronounce sentence on his own victim. And in verses 33–34 the chapter signs off on *davar*'s famous double meaning (word *and* thing, the ambiguity the 1 Kings 17 essay traces): "After this *thing*... and this *thing* became sin unto the house of Jeroboam." The chapter of the weaponized word ends with Jeroboam's answering deed called a *davar* — his devised worship was always a rival word, and it is the one word in the chapter that comes to nothing but destruction.

aryeh (H738) (אֵרֶיֶךְ) — lion vv. 24–26, 28. Six times in five verses — the narrator will not let the lion leave the frame, because the lion's restraint is the evidence in the case. Scripture keeps a whole file of lions as covenant instruments in Kings: a few chapters on, another prophet's disobedient colleague is slain by a lion for refusing a word of the LORD (1 Kgs. 20:35–36), and when Assyria resettles Samaria with foreigners ignorant of "the manner of the God of the land," the LORD "sent lions among them" (2 Kgs. 17:25–26). The lion in Israel's imagination is royal power under exact command — which is why it can stand for God himself ("the lion hath roared, who will not fear?" Amos 3:8), for Judah ("Judah is a lion's whelp... he couched as a lion," Gen. 49:9), and ultimately for the Messiah, "the Lion of the tribe of Juda" (Rev. 5:5). Peter's inversion completes the picture: the devil prowls "as a roaring lion... seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8) — appetite without warrant. This lion is the opposite creature: warrant without appetite. It kills on commission, eats nothing, tears nothing, and stands watch over its work like a soldier awaiting inspection. In a chapter about a prophet who could not hold to his orders, the lion holds to its orders perfectly — the beast obeys the mouth of the LORD better than the man of God did, and that contrast, more than the death itself, is the lash of the story.

From the Chapter's Architecture

*There is no chiasm here, and I won't manufacture one. The chapter is built instead as a diptych — two panels hinged at verse 10, deliberately mirrored. In the first panel the man of God faces a king: a summons to "come home with me, and refresh thyself" backed by a reward (v. 7); he refuses, citing the word (vv. 8–9), and departs in triumph. In the second panel he faces a prophet: the same invitation, "Come home with me, and eat bread" (v. 15), backed not by a reward but by a revelation-claim; he refuses once, citing the word verbatim (vv. 16–17) — and then falls. The mirroring is the argument. Same test, harder disguise: the fist and the purse could not move him, but the counterfeit thus saith the LORD did, because it attacked the one authority he had never had to defend his commandment against — the appearance of God contradicting God. The narrator reinforces the frame with repetition worked like *inclusio*: the commandment recited in full three times (vv. 9, 17, 22), "saddle me the ass" tolling through the second panel (vv. 13, 23, 27), and the chapter opening with a man arriving "by the word of the LORD" (v. 1) and closing with the old prophet's confession that the word "shall surely come to pass" (v. 32) — before the camera pans, in the final two verses, to the king who learned nothing. The artistry is escalation and mirror, not symmetry around a center, and its craftsmanship is in what it withholds: no motive for the liar, no last words for the victim, no comment on the justice of any of it. The text trusts the lion, standing quietly beside the body, to say everything.*