THE CONTEXTS OF 1 KINGS XIII

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In a literary work as complex, both diachronically and synchronically, as the OT, the possible contexts within which a passage may be read are numerous. Yet interpretation is a function of context as much as of text. Different readings of the same passage may emerge when we advert to different unifying horizons, whether those horizons be source documents, redactional levels, or narrative or poetic units.

This essay is not historical, attempting to reconstruct events underlying our texts, nor is it historical-critical, in the sense of seeking to separate sources and redactional levels, even though some of its questions inhabit terrain usually claimed by redaction criticism. It is essentially a literary inquiry, and it will confine itself to the final form of the text. As a literary inquiry, it is an analysis of the act of reading as much as of the text read, for the choice of horizon or context within which to read a text, in other words, what to read a text as, is determined, consciously or unconsciously, by the reader.

This essay will examine 1 Kgs xiii at three different contextual levels: as two self-contained narratives,¹ as a component of the story of Jeroboam, and as an element in the Deuteronomistic History of the two kingdoms. At each level different aspects of the text stand out, and notably different theological issues are emphasized.²

¹ My focus is the text in its final form. The uncertainties inherent in the attempt to reconstruct a hypothetical "pre-Deuteronomic form" of the narratives are evident in the divergent results obtained by, for example, Würthwein, Gross, and Dozeman (see the following note).

Most historical critical analyses of 1 Kings xiii have produced readings on this level, but they are readings of a reconstructed text from which all "secondary" or "redactional" elements have been removed (these include all references to Jeroboam and Josiah, as well as other elements that vary from commentator to commentator). The hypothetical "original story" that remains is identified as two prophetic legends (or a single legend in two episodes) whose Sitz im Leben was prophetic circles, probably of the Northern kingdom. The legends are then understood to express one or both of two specifically prophetic views: opposition to the cult of the northern kingdom, and encouragement to fidelity for prophets confronted by other prophets whose messages were at odds with their own.

1 Kings xiii falls clearly into three sections: the man of God at the Beth-El sanctuary (vv. 1-10); the man of God and the Beth-El prophet (vv. 11-32); and an evaluative comment about Jeroboam (vv. 33-4). Of these, the first two are complete narratives that can be analysed independent of their context. The third corresponds closely to xii 30-1, and requires the larger context of Jeroboam's cultic innovations to be understood.


A significant exception to this is the recent commentary by Long mentioned above (n. 2). He concentrates as I do on the final form of the text; and as a result we have several similar conclusions. We differ, however, in that his discussion of the chapter remains essentially historical critical, and his interpretation of it is independent of its place in the larger context of the Jeroboam story.