

Yahweh's Vanishing House

Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.

July 17, 2017

Judges 19:18b

(BHS)

וְאֶלֶף עַד-בַּיִת לְהֵם יְהוּדָה
וְאֶת-בַּיִת יְהוָה אֲנִי הֹלֵךְ
וְאִין אִישׁ מְאַסֵּף אוֹתִי הַבַּיְתָה:

(NASB)

and I went to Bethlehem in Judah.
But I am now going to my house,
and no man will take me into his house.

The text actually starts a little before *athnach* (א), so technically it's 19:18aβ – b. You may readily discern Bethlehem and Judah in line 1. The “Beth” part means “house,” shown in red. The common verb “to go,” *halak*, in line 1 is inflected as a first person imperfect; in line 2 it's a participle. NASB is so exacting that it italicizes “now” since there is no corresponding Hebrew word for it. But do you notice the big problem in line 2? Look again. Look!

* * * * *

Find it? “And-(direct object marker)-house-of Yahweh I am-going.” NASB has replaced the House of Yahweh with “my house”! You just can't trust anyone these days.

Of course, in the context of the story (go ahead and read Judges 19 if you dare), the Levite had no intention of going anywhere near Shiloh, where the Tabernacle was. He headed home, probably to around Bethel. So on the face of it, the text makes no sense. The Old Greek translators apparently struggled with this also and did what NASB (with NLT, RSV, NRSV, NEB, etc.) does. But the extant Hebrew text unequivocally says, “House of the LORD” (see NIV, ESV, NCV, KJV, etc.). If this is correct, what is going on?

I am persuaded (by Pamela Tamarkin, 2006) that in our verse the Levite is simply lying about his destination. He made himself out to be more spiritual than he really was. No one had offered him hospitality and it was getting late. He was in a dangerous part of town and wanted a place to stay. So he made it easy for a potential host. Not only did he offer to pay his own way (19:19), but he created the illusion that to help him was to show devotion to Yahweh. I think the Levite was using religion to manipulate the old man into taking him in. Thus, the NASB was wrong to prefer the Greek version to the Hebrew. (See my book for more on this, and the bibliography.)

This of course is a challenge for all of us to be mindful of how we use religious language. Have you ever tried to guilt people into tithing? Are you tempted to preach in a legalistic way, subtly manipulating your congregation into volunteering? Or, do you ever take what is in reality just your personal taste and preference, and elevate it to a biblical imperative?

Have you ever noticed that by and large, it is people who wouldn't dance anyway who have theological arguments for not dancing? Natural teetotalers find mandates in Scripture for their personal preference. Those who most enjoy singing psalms have well-developed reasons as to why their predilection is most biblical. One man criticized contemporary worship for being "repetitive" like singing a mantra (yet he loved Handel's Hallelujah Chorus!) Dare I mention some complementarians in other denominations, who cannot resist condemning egalitarians as "betraying the Bible"—when in fact it is a matter of interpretation, not fidelity?

But even worse, do we engage in biblical and theological rhetoric to advantage ourselves? For a comfortable night's sleep, the Levite lied about his

devotion. Jacob blasphemed to steal Isaac's blessing (Gen 27:20). Jezebel used piety to commit murder (1 Kgs 21:13). Those who "devour widows' houses" with much prayer drew especially harsh criticism from Jesus (Mark 12:38 – 40).

Does any of this relate to us? What are our motives to pray, for example? In the back of our minds, do we pray to make our lives easier or to get some worldly thing from God? You know what James says about unanswered prayers (4:3). Be honest: how much of what you do on Sunday mornings is a show before others? Our motives are always mixed—but Jesus always spoke and lived the truth, even to his own hurt (John 8:36 – 40).

I like to remind myself that if it were up to us, this whole Christianity thing would have ended a long time ago. But thanks be to God, it is not up to us. The Spirit of Jesus is at work, always pushing us to become more and more aware of our motives and to get them right. His Word convicts and provokes us to walk ever more faithfully. And we will continue to do so until Jesus returns for us, and makes us perfect through and through. It is to that day that we press on. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!