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Ein Prediger muss nicht allein *weiden*, also dass er die Schafe unterweise, wie sie rechte Christen sollen sein, sondern auch daneben den Wölfen *wehren*, dass sie die Schafe nicht angreifen und mit falscher Lehre verführen und Irrtum einführen.

Luther

Es ist kein Ding, das die Leute mehr bei der Kirche behält denn die gute Predigt. — *Apologie, Art. 24*

If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? — *1 Cor. 14:8*

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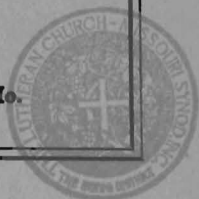
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ARCHIVES

# Sermon Study on 2 Kings 14:8-9

## THE THISTLE OF PRIDE

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

### A FABLE

This text contains one of the shortest parables of Scripture. One verse tells the story. Its brevity, however, does not impair its dramatic effectiveness. In one telling blow it delivers a graphic, cutting lesson on a deep-rooted evil of human nature.

Strictly speaking, its form is that of a fable rather than a parable. Like Judg. 9:7-15,<sup>1</sup> it personifies members of the plant kingdom. The thistle speaks to the cedar, and the subject matter of the conversation is the human relationship of marriage.

### THE SETTING

The fable is deeply imbedded in the complicated history of the Divided Kingdom. Over a century had passed since the secession of the ten northern tribes. Jehoash (798—782/1 B. C.) was the ninth king to rule over Israel, while Amaziah (796—767 B. C.) was the twelfth to occupy the throne of Judah after Solomon.

The verdict upon Amaziah is favorable in general: "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, yet not like David his father" (2 Kings 14:3). Thus, for example, he was guided by the law of Moses in the punishment of his father's murderers: "The children of the murderers he slew not: according to that which is written in the book of the law of Moses" (2 Kings 14:6).

The Lord also granted him military success. The Edomites, who once had been a part of the empire of Solomon, were once more subjugated by him (2 Kings 14:7).

This campaign had a direct bearing upon the circumstances that called forth the fable. Like many another conqueror, Amaziah could not stand success. It went to his head. He looked for new areas of conquest and rashly challenged the superior power of the Northern Kingdom. He did not stop to consider what this step would involve. Presumptuously he sent a declaration of war to Jehoash.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. study on this text in CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, July, 1949.

The parallel account in 2 Chron. 25 tells us that Amaziah indeed had a grievance against the Northern Kingdom. For his campaign against Edom, "He hired also an hundred thousand mighty men of valor out of Israel for an hundred talents of silver" (v. 6). Through a messenger of God he was forbidden to augment his forces with such a mercenary army. "O king, let not the army of Israel go with thee" (v. 7). Amaziah obeyed God also in this instance. However, when he dismissed these hired soldiers, they "fell upon the cities of Judah from Samaria even unto Beth-horon and smote three thousand of them and took much spoil" (v. 13). He did not try other means to get redress for this injury but in the intoxication of his recent victories plunged his people into war and bloodshed.

It proved disastrous (cf. vv. 22-24). The battle took place at Beth-shemesh in Judah. Although he was the challenger, Amaziah was not ready for the necessary action and permitted Jehoash to invade his territory and to fight on his soil. This is further evidence of the truth of the fable: Amaziah personally was no match for Jehoash. He did not have the resources nor the ability to fill the empty words of his challenge with appropriate action.

Josephus is of the opinion that the exchange of messages between the two kings was in the form of letters. He paraphrases Jehoash's answer thus:

King Joash to King Amaziah. There was a vastly tall cypress-tree in Mount Lebanon, as also a thistle; this thistle sent to the cypress-tree to give the cypress-tree's daughter in marriage to the thistle's son; but as the thistle was saying this, there came a wild beast, and trode down the thistle: and this may be a lesson to thee, not to be so ambitious, and to have a care, lest, upon thy good success in the fight against the Amalekites, thou growest so proud, as to bring dangers upon thyself, and upon thy kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

### HOMILETICAL SUGGESTIONS <sup>3</sup>

It is clear at once that the point of the fable and therefore the topic of the sermon is pride. There are many other pointed warnings in Scripture against this congenital folly of man and every pastor has certainly dealt with it in his ser-

<sup>2</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Chap. IX. The substitution of the term cypress for cedar is not correct.

<sup>3</sup> As in the previous studies, the order of presentation is merely one of convenience. Sermonizing begins with textual study.

mons. The fable form of the text gives him an opportunity to expose the folly of pride and its disastrous results with new vividness and devastating force.

It is also true that the thistle of pride has always grown in the human heart from the primordial seed “ye — shall — be — as — gods” (Gen. 3:5) and that all through man’s history it has been more prolific than any garden pest and more difficult to extirpate than any weed. But it appears that in our time the diabolical gardener has raised the biggest and best crop of this rose of hell. It is timely to lay the ax to the root of *the* sin of our age with full blows.

After the original setting and use of the text has been set forth, the parable as a general principle can be wielded effectively to cut down every thistle of this kind that grows in man’s heart.

Like the original situation that called forth the fable, it applies first of all to man’s relation to his fellow man. There are men of cedar proportions. Stalwart and lofty they rise to giant growth. They tower above all the pettiness and sordidness about them and raise their crowns to ethereal heights. They stand tall and straight, anchored deep in strength of character. Their taproots find hidden supplies of virility and power. When they go down there is a crash of thunder and ages are necessary to fill the gap against the sky.

There are also men of the thistle variety: small, scrawny, prickly, scratching, backbiting, overbearing, ludicrous to everyone but themselves.

The thistle and the cedar both grew in Lebanon. In the forest of life they also thrive side by side. They live in the same town, work in the same shop or office, ride the same bus, dwell under the same roof.

This being so close together does not help the thistle to see the difference between them. Perhaps just for that reason the thistle claims to be equal with the cedar. “Nearness to cedars seems to make pride all the more blind.” The sterling qualities of parents, the patient consecration of the teacher, the unbending faithfulness of the pastor, the high devotion to duty of civic leaders are often not recognized by the people with whom they rub elbows for the simple reason that they are so well acquainted with them. They judge them from their own thistle viewpoint and fail to appreciate them.

This is also true of nearness in time. Great men of history have been maligned and persecuted by their contemporaries; their children's children finally recognized their true stature.

But the thistle claiming equality with the cedar is also an illustration of the relationship that man by nature tries to establish between himself and God. The pride in man's nature is blind to his own thistle insignificance and thin instability. He forgets that the least untoward circumstance annihilates him and snuffs out his very existence. He forgets all this and challenges the lofty, supreme, transcendent God to bring Him down to an equality with him. With his scrawny, thorny mind man tries to make out God in his own thistle image and to make God to conform to his thistle pattern.

"Come, let us look one another in the face." God reveals to man His way of grace and mercy, His way of righteousness and holiness, but the thistle says, I need no revelation. I can figure this thing out myself. I can evolve all that I need from my own thinking and experience. God tells man: You are weak and fallen and hopelessly shut out from all happiness and bliss. The thistle says: I challenge God to tell me that I am bad. I am good and get better every day. God says: I do things that are beyond the grasp of finite minds. The thistle says: I challenge God to do miracles. God says: I sent My Son to be incarnate, to live a human life that alone satisfies My justice, to die in man's stead with the guilt of the world's wrongdoing upon Him. The thistle says: I challenge God to make me out such a helpless, craven creature. His plan of salvation does violence to the nobility of my being. It is inane and completely degrading.

This is indeed the sin of our age. After four centuries, the Renaissance Movement with its humanistic man-centered philosophy is full grown and dominant in Western civilization. "Man is the measure of all things," is the same as saying in the words of the parable: "The thistle is the measure of all things." It was this thistle view that brought on Nazism and Communism.

It is this seeing through the eyes of the thistle which shuts out everything other worldly from the view of men today. It sees no soul, only matter; it sees no ideals, only food and drink for the body; it sees no conscience, only nerve fibers; it sees no God, only machines. The thistle has made itself the cedar; man has made himself God.

Since Science is primarily a method for investigating Nature, objects perceptible by the senses, and for the development of this method into an instrument for subordinating Nature to the human will, the assumption that Reality is identical with what Science perceives (and this is the assumption of Science termed philosophy) issues into the following dreadful position: that ultimate, final Reality is subordinate to man. In other words, Man is the Absolute. God exists to fulfil human purpose. Divine Spirit is the ethereal petrol to propel the automobile of man's progress. . . . Science, therefore, in the guise of philosophy, intensifies the very thing that bedevils all our life—pride. . . . "Glory to man in the highest; for he is the master of all things." <sup>4</sup>

How foolish!

Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyrus, Thus saith the Lord God; because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; *yet thou art a man, and not God*, though thou set thine heart as the heart of God (Ezek. 28:2).

"Put them in fear, O Lord; that the nations may know themselves to be but men" (Ps. 9:20). Cf. also Is. 10:15; Rev. 3:17.

"A wild beast trode down the thistle." No wonder that Western civilization, yea, man's very existence, is balanced to-day on a razor's edge. "A man's pride shall bring him low" (Prov. 29:23).

Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands? (Is. 45:9.)

Cf. also Is. 14:12-13; Jer. 48:7, 14-15, 29; Zeph. 2:15; Luke 1:51.

How blind is this pride to try to find a cure for the ills of modern man by patching up the world with thistle remedies, "that say in the pride and stoutness of heart, The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars" (Is. 9:9-10). "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him" (Prov. 26:12).

The remedy is "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

It goes without saying that Christians also must cultivate the ground of their hearts unceasingly lest the seeds of the thistle, sown in such profusion today, find a fertile spot. From

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<sup>4</sup> D. R. Davis, *The Sin of Our Age*, p. 15.

this thistle of pride grows everything that mars our relation to God. Calvary alone will help:

When I survey the wondrous Cross,  
 On which the Prince of Glory died,  
 My richest gain I count but loss  
 And pour contempt on all my pride.

### EXEGETICAL NOTES

Like the fable in Judg. 9, this apologue sears with the white heat of scorn and ridicule. Sharp and pointed, it thrusts the hot iron into the wild flesh of overweening pride. "His [Jehoash's] answer was one of the most crushingly contemptuous pieces of irony of which history records."<sup>5</sup> Although the unwelcome truth is expressed in parabolic form, the sneer of contempt is not masked.

Did Jehoash have a right to assume such a superior attitude toward Amaziah, or was he putting himself into a glass house as he hurled this invective at his fellow king? There can be no doubt that Jehoash is overstating the case. His admonition did not come from a truly humble heart, least of all from one that bowed under the Lord's rule and direction. He forgot that even the cedars of Lebanon are strong only by comparison and in degree.

The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars; yea, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn. (Ps. 29:5-6.) For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon everyone that is proud and lofty, and upon everyone that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low: And upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up. (Is. 2:11-13.)

Israel's day of reckoning was also coming. "The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet" (Is. 28:3).

However, this fact does not invalidate the fable as a general truth. Everyone who inflates himself is just as ridiculous as the thistle when it wants to claim cedar status. It should also be stated that as far as the comparative strength of the two kings was concerned, the fable described the true situation of the inferiority of the southern king. Finally, it is the nature of most fables that the truth is stated in an overdrawn caricature in order to impress its lesson.

In interpreting the text we must also bear in mind that the details of the fable cannot be pressed.

<sup>5</sup> F. W. Farrar, *The Expositor's Bible*, p. 184.

It is a common feature of such apologues that they are not exact parallels to the case whereto they are applied but only general or partial resemblances. Hence there is need of caution in applying the several points of the illustration.<sup>6</sup>

The thistle certainly represents the inferior Amaziah. But it would be precarious to infer that Amaziah had actually proposed the marriage of his son to the daughter of Jehoash. Nor can it be shown that Amaziah demanded the submission of the northern king to the throne of David which he occupied, as Josephus postulates:

But Amaziah was not able to contain himself under that prosperity which God had given him although he had affronted God thereupon; but in vain insolence he wrote to Joash that he and all his people should be obedient to him, as they had formerly been to his progenitors, David and Solomon.

The point of comparison is the contrast between the strong, noble, majestic with the weak, insignificant, contemptible, and the foolish presumption of equality on the part of the latter. This difference and the refusal to recognize it are brought into focus by the request of intermarriage between the two, made by the lesser. In the social order of that day only equals could ally themselves through marriage.

Again the fable would not run "on all fours" if the wild beast that was in Lebanon and trod down the thistle is identified with Jehoash. In that case the northern king would be represented twice: first as the cedar and then as the trampling animal. "Das Zertreten des Dornbusches durch ein wildes Tier dagegen soll den ploetzlichen Sturz und Untergang veranschaulichen, welcher den Hochmuetigen unverhofft mitten unter seinen kuehnen Plaenen treffen kann."<sup>7</sup> Amaziah was intoxicated with the heady wine of pride and staggered blindly to his fall. "As a thorn goeth up into the hand of the drunkard, so is the parable in the mouth of fools" (Prov. 26:9).

Linguistically the text presents little difficulty. The only point that calls for attention is not in the fable itself, but the message sent by Amaziah: "Come, let us look one another in the face." It certainly cannot be an innocent invitation for a friendly renewal of personal acquaintance: come let us sit down together and talk things over. The reply of Jehoash clearly indicates that it was not a love message.

<sup>6</sup> F. C. Cook, *The Holy Bible with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary*, Vol. III, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Daechsel, *Bibelwerk*, II, 622.



The verb *nithra'ah* is clearly a cohortative in the Hithpael. The root *ra'ah* is used in this conjugation only once more besides this passage and its parallel, 2 Chron. 25. In Gen. 42:1 the brethren of Joseph look at each other in doubt and hesitation. The verb in both instances has reciprocal rather than reflexive meaning.

The syntax of the following noun, *panim*, face, is explained in a number of ways. It may be thought of as "the accusative of the part affected": let us look upon one another as to the face (Lange). Gesenius takes it as a shortened subordinate noun clause which adds a statement of the particular circumstances of the main action and which in its complete form would read: while face was turned to face, *panim 'el panim*. Kittel: "Wohlan, wir wollen einander ins Gesicht sehen." Luther: "Komm her, lass uns mit einander besehen." LXX: ὀφθῶμεν προσώποις: "let us be seen in faces." The meaning is not affected materially in either case. The hostile implication of this idiomatic phrase is clearly seen from vv. 11 and 12: "And he and Amaziah looked one another in the face . . . and Judah was put to the worse before Israel, and they fled every man to their tents." Gesenius adds as parallel expressions the German proverbs: "sich die Koepfe besehen" and "sich das Weisse im Auge besehen." It was meant to be a declaration of war and was understood as such.

The only other term that calls for a comment is the word "thistle," *choach*. It is not the same word used in the fable of Judg. 9. Gesenius gives it the meaning: a thorn, thorn bush. It occurs again in Job 31:40 and Prov. 26:9 and in the plural in Canticles 2:2 and 1 Sam. 13:6. From the last passage it appears that it grew tall enough for man to find a hiding place when it grew into a thicket. Luther: Dornstrauch. From the related Arabic and Syriac words it has been identified with the sloe or sloe-thorn. It appears to be the more generic term for the various plants of the thistle or thorn variety.



### Contributors to this Issue

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