

THE DECEIVING SPIRIT SENT TO AHAB'S PROPHETS – 1 KI. 22:1-29

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Ahab, the son of Omri, was king of the northern kingdom of Israel for 22 years, from about 874-853 B.C. He was a notoriously wicked king (1 Ki. 16:30-33; 21:20, 25-26) who, probably for political reasons, married Jezebel, the daughter of the Philistine Ethbaal the king of the Sidonians (1 Ki. 16:31). Jezebel was bent on substituting Baal for Yahweh within Israel to the point that she sought to murder all the prophets of the LORD (1 Ki. 18:4, 13). It was during Ahab's reign that the famous confrontation on Mount Carmel between the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal took place (1 Ki. 18:17-40).

1 Kings 22:1-29 (and parallel in 2 Chron. 18:1-28) reports the meeting in the city of Samaria between the Judean king Jehoshaphat and the Israelite king Ahab in which Ahab sought to persuade Jehoshaphat to join him in taking the city of Ramoth-gilead from the king of Syria. Jehoshaphat agreed to join in the war but insisted that they first inquire for the word of the LORD. Ahab had some 400 of his prophets answer whether or not he should go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, and they unanimously informed him that he would be triumphant, that the LORD would deliver the city into his hand (1 Ki. 22:5-6, 10-12). But Jehoshaphat asked if there was available a prophet of the LORD of whom they could inquire (1 Ki. 22:7). Whatever the nature of Ahab's prophets, Jehoshaphat distinguished them from a prophet of the LORD, and Ahab understood the distinction because he identified Micaiah the son of Imlah as a prophet in that category.¹

Ahab was concerned that Micaiah might discourage Jehoshaphat from participating in the war, so in a preemptive strike he implied that Micaiah was not worth hearing because his personal bias made him an unreliable source. He told Jehoshaphat, "I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil" (1 Ki. 22:8). When Jehoshaphat responded, "Let not the king say so" (1 Ki. 22:8), it was clear that he was still interested in hearing from Micaiah, so Ahab summoned him immediately rather than risk Jehoshaphat assuming the worst (1 Ki. 22:9).

Micaiah first repeated, I assume with evident sarcasm, the favorable words of Ahab's prophets (1 Ki. 22:15), thereby casting doubt on their legitimacy. Ahab feared this may reinforce

¹ As to whether Ahab's prophets are Yahweh's prophets, Daewook Kim states in *Prophetic Conflicts in the Deuteronomistic History* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2021), 110 (fn. 47):

Cogan (*1 Kings*, 490) writes, "[T]here is no indication that they [Ahab's prophets] were other than prophets of YHWH." Conversely, there is also no indication that they are prophets of YHWH because Ahab's prophets and Zedekiah are not mentioned explicitly as YHWH's prophets but as "all his [Ahab's] prophets" (כל־נביאֵיךָ, v. 22) and as "all your [Ahab's] prophets" (כל־נביאיךָ, v. 23) in 1 Kgs 22. Furthermore, in 4Q339, Zedekiah is classified as one of the false prophets. Jassen, *Mediating the Divine*, 305. In v. 7 the phrase, "YHWH's prophet" (נביא ליהוה), seems to indicate only Micaiah. According to Evangelia G. Dafni ("רזה ושקר" und falsche Prophetie in I Reg 22," *ZAW* 112 [2000]: 369-370), Jehoshaphat does not regard the four hundred prophets as YHWH's true prophets and thus requests YHWH's prophet who foretells truth.

John Mark Hicks suggests in *1 & 2 Chronicles*, CPNIVC (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2001), 368, that Ahab's prophets are perhaps "prophets who have a dual commitment in this polytheistic and syncretistic setting (Baal, Yahweh, Asherah)."

Jehoshaphat's concern that the other prophets were mere court sycophants, so he asked Micaiah a question that implied Micaiah had a long history of telling falsehoods in God's name and that he, Ahab, was a champion of the truth: "How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?" (1 Ki. 22:16).

Having by his sarcasm cast doubt on Ahab's prophets and been commanded by Ahab to speak the truth, Micaiah declared (1 Ki. 22:17), "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.'" In other words, Israel would not succeed in its mission and her leader, Ahab, would be killed in the process.

Ahab sought to diminish Micaiah's discouraging words in the eyes of Jehoshaphat by repeating the suggestion that they were fruit of a personal vendetta against him (1 Ki. 22:18). This prompted Micaiah to deliver to Ahab the word of the LORD in the form of a vision he was given. He revealed that a deceitful spirit who went out from God, with God's blessing and approval, ensured that all of Ahab's prophets spoke falsely to him for the purpose of luring him to his death at Ramoth-gilead (1 Ki. 22:19-23).

Whatever other questions God's dealing with Ahab in this instance may raise, he cannot rightly be accused of deceiving him. Peter Leithart comments:

As Davis points out, there is ultimately no deception here or, more accurately, the deception is completely telegraphed. Yahweh's Spirit inspires the prophets to mislead and lure Ahab to his death, but then Yahweh sends Micaiah to tell Ahab he is being lured to his death. Yahweh sets a trap for Ahab, but politely shows Ahab the trap before he springs it. Yet, Ahab blindly goes to Ramoth-gilead, confident he can cheat death and escape the word of Yahweh.²

The fact God sent a spirit³ who ensured that Ahab's prophets spoke falsely to him is puzzling given God's hatred of lying (Prov. 6:16-27, 12:22) and the fact his omnipotence no doubt gave him other options for bringing Ahab to a battle. I think the key to the convoluted method of Ahab's execution is his conduct in the case of Naboth in 1 Kings 21.

1 Kings 20–23 is a narrative block that deals with the military conflict between Israel and Syria (Aram). Brian Irwin states:

That this material is to be read together is indicated by the common subject matter of the struggle against Aram and by literary features that unite the material. One such literary connection is made through the use of *inclusio*. In 20:1, in the first attack against Israel, the king of Aram musters 32 kings to attack Ahab at Samaria. In the final battle, the same Aramaean monarch directs 32 chariot commanders to attack Ahab on the battlefield (22:31). A second example of *inclusio* is found in 20:30 and 22:25. In 20:30, the narrator notes that following

² Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, BTC (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 164.

³ Leithart in the quote assumes the spirit was "Yahweh's Spirit," but his identity is much debated. See, e.g., Richard L. Mayhue, "False Prophets and the Deceiving Spirit," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 4/2 (Fall 1993), 135-164.

the battle, the defeated Ben-Hadad cowers in an 'inner room' (בְּחֶדֶר חֶדֶר). In 22:25, the prophet Micaiah uses this same phrase to describe the fate of the royal prophet Zedekiah. Another unifying feature is the use of the repeated motif of prophetic endorsement of military activity in 20:13 and 22:6.⁴

Various literary features tie the Naboth account to this narrative block, which indicates it is part of that larger story.⁵ Indeed, Ahab's death at Ramoth-gilead (1 Ki. 22:37-38) is the fulfillment of the judgment pronounced on Ahab by Elijah in response to his treatment of Naboth (1 Ki. 21:18-19), so there is reason to look to the Naboth episode for the roots of other aspects of that judgment.

Ahab was complicit in Jezebel's outrageous plan to steal Naboth's vineyard by murdering him. After Naboth's adamant refusal to sell the vineyard to Ahab, Jezebel informed Ahab she was going to take it from him, and then she wrote letters in Ahab's name and using his seal directing and orchestrating Naboth's murder (1 Ki. 21:7-10). When she informed Ahab that the deed was done, he promptly went to take possession of the property (1 Ki. 21:15-16). Thus, God instructed Elijah to say to Ahab, "Have *you killed* and also taken possession?" Elijah declared that Ahab had sold himself to do evil regarding Naboth and was going to die a bloody death (1 Ki. 21:17-20).

Ahab (via Jezebel) instructed the elders to cause others to testify falsely about Naboth and then to use that testimony as justification for killing him. The spirit causes others to prophesy falsely about Ahab, and then Ahab uses that testimony to have himself killed in fulfillment of God's righteous death sentence by representing it to Jehoshaphat, his necessary military partner, as a true word of Yahweh. God is here meting out poetic justice. Ahab is justly executed in a way that echoes how he had unjustly murdered Naboth. As Irwin observes, in bringing Ahab to his death at Ramoth-gilead, God used the very hardness to his word that Ahab exhibited in killing Naboth:

Just as Ahab had earlier been complicit in using lying witnesses to kill Naboth, so now Yahweh would use a lying spirit to bring about the death of the king. This fate exploits the same character flaw that allowed Ahab to kill Naboth in the first place. While Ahab knew Micaiah to be speaking a genuine word from Yahweh, he was unwilling to obey it. In the case of Naboth, Ahab understood that tradition and Torah did not allow him to take the vineyard, but he ignored both and seized the property anyway.⁶

There is no question that Yahweh approved of and sent the deceiving spirit to ensure that all of Ahab's prophets spoke falsely to him; that was the intended means, the poetic justice, of Ahab's execution. But Yahweh's word is distinguished from that of the deceiving spirit. The deceiving spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets predicted success (good) for Ahab, whereas Yahweh pronounced disaster (evil) on him through the words of Micaiah (1 Ki. 22:23). God does not speak falsely himself but can have others deliver false words when recalcitrant wickedness

⁴ Brian P. Irwin, "Yahweh's Suspension Of Free Will In The Old Testament: Divine Immorality Or Sign-Act?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 54:2 (2003), 60.

⁵ These are summarized in Irwin (2003), 60-61.

⁶ Irwin (2003), 61.

makes that an appropriate response. Though God is more active in this situation, the concept parallels his allowing Satan to act in fulfillment of his larger purpose, as in the case of Job. Indeed, Mayhue concludes his study of the identity of the deceiving spirit in 1 Kings 22 this way: "These philological, hermeneutical, and theological factors lead to the conclusion that 'the spirit' in 1 Kgs 22:21 was in fact Satan and that demonic activity, initiated and superintended by Satan, provided the dynamic force responsible for the false prophecy in 1 Kgs 22:6."⁷

⁷ Mayhue (1993), 162.