

# Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah As a Test Case

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## ■ Introduction

The understanding of Hebrew prophecy has made great advances in modern biblical scholarship. To be sure, such is the diversity and complexity both of prophetic texts within the Hebrew canon and of contemporary methods of interpretation that many unresolved—perhaps irresolvable—issues remain. Yet recent hermeneutical debate, like the philological and historical work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can offer fresh lenses through which to read the text, in ways that at least sometimes may help make progress beyond seeming impasses. My purpose in this paper is to focus on one particular prophetic narrative, one which is often used as a case study: the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kgs 22:1–38. I hope it may illustrate something of the kind of fresh understanding of a difficult prophetic text which is achievable.

It is an interesting narrative in many ways. On the one hand, there are many hard questions of an “introductory” (*Einleitung*) kind, most of which revolve around the location of the story in its present context (though there are also questions about the literary integrity of the text). Why does Micaiah make this cameo appearance within a sequence of narratives where Elijah consistently features both previously and subsequently? How does the identification of the Israelite king as Ahab (vv. 20, 39–40), clear in the story as it now stands, relate to the likely processes of transmission, interpretation, and literary formation in relation to Israel’s history that have given rise to the story? What is the role of the story within the wider Deuteronomistic

History's portrayal of Israel? I suggest, however, that such questions, despite their time-honored labelling as "introductory," need not precede a reading of the text, but may best be tackled subsequent to one's reading—even though, of course, any procedure is to some extent artificial, since the process of reading necessitates a constant reciprocity between assumptions about the nature of the text and decisions about the text's construal.

On the other hand, difficult as these questions are, even greater difficulties appear to attach to the story on a moral and theological level. These difficulties focus particularly on the content of Micaiah's second vision and its interpretation (vv. 19–23), where—so reads the apparent plain sense of the text—God sponsors a lying spirit to deceive a king so that he gets killed. This often features as a parade example of the difficulty for both Jewish and Christian faiths of accommodating (unless with apologetic smoothing) the rough-hewn texture of Israelite beliefs.

For Robert Carroll, for example, this is just the kind of text which shows the unsuitability of the Bible for those theological purposes to which it is often put:

Among the elementary truths of theology might be imagined to be the claim that the gods do not tell lies. If the gods lie, then we are all in trouble because we will never be able to be certain about anything connected with our religious foundations. . . . "God is truth" is a foundational claim of every religious system and a certitude embraced by every member of a theological community. What makes the Bible so problematic for theology is the representation in some of its narratives of Yahweh as a being who uses lies or encourages deception in order to get his own way. . . . In the story of Micaiah ben Imlah's vision . . . there is a prime example of Yahweh's involvement with lies. The problem represented by Micaiah's account of the divine throne room is a logistical one in which Yahweh is seeking an effective strategy for enticing Ahab to his death (1 Kings 22.19–23). Yahweh's problem is resolved by a spirit who volunteers to be "a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets" (v. 22). Yahweh commands the spirit to go forth and entice Ahab and promises success. I suppose a desperate theologian might want to make subtle distinctions between encouraging others to lie and lying oneself, but both practices seem to be on the wrong side of truth-telling.<sup>1</sup>

Even those scholars who are more confident and positive than Carroll about a continuing religious use of the biblical text do not necessarily fare much better at this point. Walter Brueggemann, for example, in his recent *Theology of the Old Testament* cites this story in the general context of "Israel's Countertestimony"

<sup>1</sup>Robert Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991) 43–44. Another recent example: "God can simply lie. . . . Thus, falsehoods innocently proclaimed by prophets speaking at God's instigation were to lead Ahab to his death at Ramoth-Gilead (1 Kgs 22:20–23)" (Michael Carasik, "The Limits of Omniscience," *JBL* 119 [2000] 221–32, at 231).

(which is set over against “Israel’s Core Testimony”), within a chapter entitled “Ambiguity and the Character of Yahweh,” under the subheading “Does Yahweh Abuse?”:

In 1 Kgs 22:20–22, surely a “primitive” prophetic tale, the reader of the text is imagined into a discussion in “the divine council,” a cabinet meeting of Yahweh’s heavenly government (see parallels in Job 1–2). The discussion turns on the way in which King Ahab can be “enticed” to a military maneuver that will cause his death. The purpose of the narrative, and the purpose of the discussion in the divine council, is to assert Yahweh’s decisive hostility toward Ahab and the dynasty of Omri and to assert Yahweh’s hand in the governance of history—even royal history.

What interests us is the conversation in the government of Yahweh, which is as cynical and ignoble as anything the “plumbers” in Richard Nixon’s White House might have devised. . . . The conversation is unambiguous. What is being planned is a massive deception of the king. Second, Yahweh fully colludes in the manipulative discussion, which aims at a royal death. Indeed, Yahweh is at the head of the conspiracy to cause a wrong death in royal Israel. Yahweh here obviously exercises no covenantal self-restraint, but is determined to have Yahweh’s own way no matter what the cost, even if it means deceptive violence.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to these moral indictments of the words and actions of YHWH, the following exegesis and interpretation will suggest an alternative construal. Indeed, to anticipate, it will be argued that the story may best be read as a prime example of what Nicholas Lash depicts as one of the prime and enduring responsibilities of Jews and Christians (those whose identity is significantly formed by the prophetic legacy within the Bible)—that is, to “speak truth to power.”<sup>3</sup>

## ■ Exposition of 1 Kings 22:1–38<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For three years Syria and Israel continued without war. <sup>2</sup> But in the third year Jehoshaphat the king of Judah came down to the king of Israel. <sup>3</sup> The king of Israel said to his servants, “Don’t you know? Ramoth-Gilead belongs to us. Yet we are doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Syria.” And he said to Jehoshaphat, “Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-Gilead?” Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, “I am as you are; my people are as your people, my horses are as your horses.”

<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 360–61. The interpretation is not different, though the wording is less strong, in Brueggemann’s commentary, *1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2000) 272–73, 280.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholas Lash, “The Church in the State We’re In,” in *Spirituality and Social Embodiment* (ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 121–37, at 130.

<sup>4</sup>The translation of 1 Kgs 22:1–38 is my own.

The issue for going to war is the perennial problem of disputed frontier territory (Ramoth-Gilead is close to that part of the Golan which is still in dispute between Syria and Israel today). Although, according to other texts, Ramoth-Gilead was part of Israel under Solomon (1 Kgs 4:13) and was assigned to the tribe of Gad as a city of refuge (Deut 4:43, Josh 20:2), the text does not specify whether or not the king's claim to the territory should be seen as a good one. Territorial integrity is a legitimate concern for a king. The peace between Syria and Israel, however, had only been a short one (three years/days being the Hebrew idiom for an indefinite short period of time, as opposed to forty years/days for an indefinite long period of time), and the king is willing to sacrifice peace for the arguable benefit of regaining disputed territory (arguable, because no benefit is specified for anyone—except, implicitly, the king in his reputation and power). Moreover, if one allows the placement of this story next to the preceding story of Naboth's vineyard to bear upon its interpretation, then the reader will be less inclined to see territorial responsibility as the prime royal motive. Thus, the king may implicitly be abusing royal prerogative in lightly sacrificing peace and greedily undertaking war.

The fact that the king lets what he has in mind be known publicly in his court (v. 3) implies that his mind is already resolved. His question is not a genuine question (as it is, at least in form, in v. 6) but a leading question. Since people don't like changing publicly adopted positions (for fear of loss of face), they don't ask for support for a position unless the decision is already taken. That the king knows what he wants to do, and is resolved to do it, is basic to the dynamic of the story. So Jehoshaphat consents to the king's request (v. 4) in the deferential language of diplomacy.

<sup>5</sup> But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, "Inquire first for the word of YHWH." <sup>6</sup> Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-Gilead, or shall I refrain?" They said, "Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king."

But Jehoshaphat, who is a principled believer as well as a diplomat, does not in fact want simply to rubber-stamp the king's decision. So he requests that proper religious practice be observed, and that God's will be sought before such an undertaking begins. To this the king consents. The prophets, religious functionaries whose livelihood depends on the king, know which way the wind is blowing and what the king wants, for the king had made his wishes public (v. 3); so they duly oblige by telling the king what he wants to hear.

<sup>7</sup> But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there no other prophet of YHWH here of whom we may inquire?" <sup>8</sup> The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one other by whom we may inquire of YHWH, Micaiah the son of Imlah; but I hate him, for his prophecies about me are never good but only bad." Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say such a thing."

The assumption that the prophets are telling the king what he wants to hear is confirmed by Jehoshaphat's response. He smells a rat. We are not told how. Maybe it is simply as obvious to Jehoshaphat as to the four hundred which way the royal wind is blowing, and he wants his request for the seeking of God's will to be taken more seriously.

The discernment of God's will by prophets is a basic element within the biblical portrayal of Hebrew prophecy (Amos 3:7 specifies a characteristic understanding). Yet how are people to exercise discernment with regard to the prophets, either when they disagree among themselves, or when there may be some other apparent reason not to credit what they say? One false start in this context is to suppose that Jehoshaphat thinks that the four hundred are not truly prophets of YHWH at all, but are prophets of Baal like the four hundred and fifty prophets of the contest on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 18:19, 22). This typological linkage with the Elijah story has the venerable precedent of the Septuagint translators (followed recently by the NIV), but depends on omitting one Hebrew word (עוד, "other") and goes against the fact that the four hundred prophesy in the name of Israel's God (אֱלֹהֵינוּ, v. 6; cf. יְהוָה, vv. 11, 12). That is, the issue is not as simple as just distinguishing the one who speaks for YHWH from those who speak for someone else such as Baal, as though the credibility of a prophet were determined by that prophet's formal, public allegiance to the acknowledged God. The problem of the text is the harder one—when prophets indeed speak in the name of the acknowledged God, and yet there is reason to doubt what they say.

The king knows of another prophet, Micaiah ben Imlah, but he is unwelcome for a simple reason. Micaiah is known by the king as someone who does not tell him what he wants to hear (טוֹב, i.e., "favorable," "positive"), but rather what he does not want to hear (רַע, i.e., "unfavorable," "negative"). Micaiah says things which the king dislikes.

However, as Jehoshaphat diplomatically puts it, the fact that the king does not like Micaiah does not mean that Micaiah may not have something to say which needs to be heard. Jehoshaphat still wants a second opinion, and if Micaiah is the only other prophet around, then he must be heard; to which the king again agrees.

<sup>9</sup> Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah." <sup>10</sup> Now the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing-floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them. <sup>11</sup> Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and he said, "Thus says YHWH: With these you shall gore the Syrians until they are destroyed." <sup>12</sup> At the same time all the prophets were prophesying the same thing and saying, "Go up to Ramoth-Gilead and triumph; YHWH will give it into the hand of the king."

As Micaiah is summoned, the narrator pauses to fill out the context in which all this is happening, which so far has been passed over in favor of focussing on the content of the dialogue (vv. 6–8). An impressive scene it is—the kings of Israel and Judah, wearing the special clothes (robes) and sitting in the special chairs (thrones) which symbolize the dignity and authority of their position. And they are at the gate of the city, the formal gathering place where those with public responsibility administered justice (see Ruth 4:1–12; Job 29:7–17). In the presence of these kings, the prophets are performing their accredited religious function of speaking on God’s behalf to the leaders of God’s people. Zedekiah, presumably the leader of the prophets, performs a symbolic action such as Hebrew prophets characteristically performed (e.g., Jer 13:1–11, 19:1–15), while the rest prophesy similarly, supporting their leader. The temporal and spiritual authorities of God’s people are gathered together in their official capacity in the place of justice. Here surely one can expect God to be present and his will to be done.

Why does the narrator take the trouble thus to depict the setting? It is not, I think, that he likes grand occasions (of a sort still to be found today, *mutatis mutandis*, in Westminster, Washington, or the Kremlin). There are, I suggest, at least three reasons in terms of his story. First, because the story has already raised as a possibility that the four hundred prophets are speaking less than the truth, we are invited to contemplate the possibility that such a formal and symbolically resonant gathering of religiously responsible leaders may in fact be a sham, an elaborate fraud. Secondly, related to this, the scene of the earthly court prepares for Micaiah’s vision of a heavenly court (vv. 19–23), at which the true nature of the earthly court will be revealed. Thirdly, we are given to know exactly what Micaiah has to face—not a private meeting with the king, where the privacy of the occasion and the not unfriendly presence of Jehoshaphat might perhaps allow Micaiah space and confidence. Rather, he must face a meeting in a formal, public, symbolically charged context whose every dimension underlines the authority of the hostile king and so will bring pressure on Micaiah to conform to the will of that king.

<sup>13</sup> The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, the words of the prophets are with one accord positive to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak positively.” <sup>14</sup> But Micaiah said, “As YHWH lives, whatever YHWH says to me, that I will speak.”

We are not told of special instructions from the king to the messenger, but that is because he needs such instructions no more than do the four hundred prophets. The messenger, like the prophets, lives and works at court, and he knows what is going on. So he already starts to bring pressure to bear on Micaiah. Micaiah must tell the king what he wants to hear, something that will sound “positive” to him (טוֹב, that which the king has already complained he never got from Micaiah, v. 8). Micaiah, not surprisingly (given what the king has already said about him), refuses

to do any such thing, but rather formulates his responsibility to speak truly for God (compare the paradigmatic depiction of Moses' prophetic role, to hear what God says and speak it to Israel, Deut 5:22–33, esp. 27–31). By his invocation of YHWH, Micaiah makes clear that it is to YHWH that he is accountable.

<sup>15</sup> When he had come to the king, the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-Gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?" He answered him, "Go up and triumph; YHWH will give it into the hand of the king." <sup>16</sup> But the king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of YHWH?"

A surprise! Micaiah says what the other prophets say, when we expected him to say something different. But the surprise is short-lived, for the king's indignant response shows what is happening. Micaiah is a skilled communicator who understands the dynamics of the situation. If what the king wants is a favorable message, then that is what Micaiah, his loyal subject, will give him. Micaiah repeats verbatim the words of the other prophets (v. 12b). But as he does so, he mimics them so sarcastically that the king instantly gets the point—he, the king, is being mocked by Micaiah. This provokes from the king a protestation of delicious irony. The man who hitherto has wanted nothing but confirmation of his own will now claims the moral high ground and says that he wants nothing less than the truth of God, and implies that Micaiah is the one who has problems with being truthful.

In provoking the king thus Micaiah has thrown him off guard, and has at least got him to express the importance that Micaiah truly speak the words of YHWH to him. Such an expostulation is, of course, no guarantee that that is what he really wants, but it at least might lead to a greater openness. Moreover, the king's recognition that the promise of victory on Micaiah's lips is empty words, mere mockery of himself, perhaps indicates that the king himself knows (or at least suspects) that his prophets are toadies whose word is not to be relied upon. But can Micaiah make the king acknowledge this?

<sup>17</sup> Then Micaiah said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd. And YHWH said, 'These have no master; let each one go home in peace.' " <sup>18</sup> The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Didn't I tell you? His prophecies about me are never good but only bad."

Micaiah's message from YHWH initially takes the form of a vision, a vision of the future and its interpretation by YHWH. The king instantly thinks he understands it and pronounces accordingly. His prejudices about Micaiah have been confirmed: Micaiah just makes unpleasant threats against the king.

But has the king understood the vision? Only in part. He has seen, rightly, that it is a vision which implies his death in battle. What he has not seen is that it is not primarily a vision about him at all. It is a vision about Israel, the people for whom he has responsibility; they are scattered and leaderless. YHWH's concern is for them

and their safe return home. But the king is concerned only with the implications for himself. Micaiah's words, in essence a challenge to the king to remember his responsibilities as shepherd to his people before it is too late, evoke no response. Or rather, they evoke the wrong response.

The story here presupposes some of the basic dynamics of Hebrew prophecy. In essence, prophecy—at least, as articulated in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and as presupposed in much other prophetic literature—is relational, engaging language that seeks a response. Typically, it is a warning of “disaster” (רָעָה) which seeks as response a fundamental change of heart and action (“repent,” שׁוּב) so that the disaster may be averted, because YHWH himself responds to such a response (he may “change his mind,” נָחַם): i.e., he responds genuinely to the people who turn to him. This responsive dynamic of prophecy is set out as a basic axiom in Jer 18:1–12 (esp. 7–10) and Ezek 33:1–20 (esp. 7–9, 11) and is exemplified perhaps most famously in the story of Jonah (Jon 3:1–10). In Ezekiel's depiction, prophetic speech is a warning whose whole purpose is to get the delinquent person (רָשָׁע) to respond. If the person responds, the words fulfil their purpose of bringing life. If the person does not respond, and if they die in their sin, there is no satisfaction in the literal fulfilment and correctness of the warning; there is only the knowledge that the prophet who gave the warning is not at fault for having failed to do so.

This means that Micaiah's vision of Israel's distress, and their loss of a leader, is a warning designed to avert its taking place. It is a challenge to the king to repent, i.e., to abandon his self-willed ambitions for Ramoth-Gilead and in so doing both to save his own life and benefit his people. But the king does not repent. Rather, in the classic Hebrew idiom, he “hardens his heart”/“stiffens his neck” (הִקְשָׁה לֵב/עֲרָף), simply seeing in Micaiah's words a confirmation of his prejudices.

At this point it might seem that Micaiah has failed. After skilfully mocking the king into requesting a true message, he has delivered his message from YHWH. But he has not been heeded. Micaiah, however, is not intimidated and does not give up. Rather, he speaks again with words of such keen sharpness that they will surely cut through even the hardest of hearts.

<sup>19</sup> Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of YHWH: I saw YHWH sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right and on his left. <sup>20</sup> And YHWH said, ‘Who will deceive Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another, <sup>21</sup> until a spirit came forward and stood before YHWH, saying, ‘I’ll deceive him.’ <sup>22</sup> ‘How?’ YHWH asked him. He replied, ‘I’ll go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then YHWH said, ‘You shall deceive him, and you shall succeed. Go now, and do it like that.’ <sup>23</sup> So you see, YHWH has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; YHWH has decreed disaster for you.”



The dynamics of the encounter between Ahab and Micaiah are crucial—Micaiah begins with “therefore.” This vision of the heavenly court is not the initial or primary message of Micaiah, which has already been delivered (v. 17). But Micaiah is faced by the king’s refusal to respond positively to his warning. The issue at stake is, in the proper sense, one of life and death. But how do you get through to someone who does not want to hear? This is Micaiah’s supreme attempt to engage with the king.

Micaiah has a communicative strategy similar to that of Nathan in his famous confrontation with David (2 Sam 12:1–7). The golden rule is simple: Don’t state the obvious. If you simply tell reluctant people what they think they already know, using categories that they already accept, then they will ignore you; you are at best a bore, and more likely an irritating nuisance. So Micaiah cannot just repeat what he has already said, but must find some other way of expressing his warning to the king such that it brings home to the king the reality of his situation. Micaiah does not resort to right-sounding religious rhetoric. Rather, he paints a picture and tells a story of such imaginative starkness that the king must surely be moved by it.

The purpose of the vision (vv. 19–22) is made crystal clear by Micaiah in his closing words (v. 23), as he interprets the vision to the king. His conclusion, that “YHWH has decreed disaster (רָעָה) for you,” makes the vision into a classic prophetic warning, the logic of which we have already seen in relation to Micaiah’s first vision: it is a warning whose purpose is fulfilled if it moves the person addressed to respond in such a way (“repent,” שׁוּב) that what is envisaged does not actually happen. The second vision has the same purpose as the first vision. If the message is that the king will die, it is given so that the king may not die.

The narrator has told in some detail of the court scene in Samaria to which Micaiah has been summoned: the kings on their thrones and their religious courtiers speaking in their presence. Micaiah now tells of another court scene, of a king on his throne surrounded by his courtiers. But now the king is YHWH and the setting is “heaven.” But “heaven” does not mean somewhere else—another place, another time—but rather represents and depicts the spiritual reality of what is happening in the here and now on earth, at the entrance of the gate of Samaria. That is, the relationship between the court of YHWH and the court of Ahab is not that of a causal relationship between two different times and two different places: i.e., YHWH first makes a decision at his court, and subsequently this is enacted upon a luckless Ahab; first a decision is made somewhere else (wherever heaven might be supposed to be), and subsequently it is enacted in Samaria. Rather, God is both *now* and *here*. The court of YHWH is the spiritual counterpart to the court of Ahab, it is the other side of one and the same coin. The scene of YHWH’s court interprets to Ahab the reality of his court.

How then should we understand Micaiah's vision? There are three different levels or dimensions within Micaiah's words, though these are all interrelated facets of the one vision, and to take any one element in isolation may lead to misunderstanding.

First, there is the ("psychological") level of the communicative dynamics of Micaiah's trying to get through to Ahab. Here the issue focuses on the word used to initiate the plot within the vision, that is, YHWH's proposal that someone should "deceive" (הָרַג, vv. 20, 21, 22) Ahab. The meaning of the Hebrew word is not in doubt. The basic form of the verb means "to be simple-minded/foolish," i.e., the sort of person who is easily put upon by others. It is a derogatory term, used by Hosea of Israel when he depicts Israel as "bird-brained" (Hos. 7:11). The form of the verb here means "treat as a fool," i.e., "deceive," as elsewhere Joab accuses Abner of doing to David (2 Sam 3:25). Thus in God's proposal, "Who will deceive Ahab?," Micaiah is in effect saying to Ahab, "You are so foolish that you are being duped." The point is that nobody likes being told they are being duped, and nobody willingly goes along with it. If you think you are being duped, you do something different. In this sense, the difference it makes that it is not just the court prophets (whom Ahab may hold in contempt) but God himself who is duping Ahab, is that it greatly sharpens Micaiah's challenge: Ahab faces a real and serious deception, in which the stakes are as high as they could be, and the results will be permanent. The king has the more reason, then, not to acquiesce in being duped. To tell someone that they are being deceived has a similar logic and dynamic to that of warning someone of coming disaster, but the former may now be the more effective rhetorical strategy for Micaiah to employ with an unresponsive Ahab.

The second ("moral") level within Micaiah's vision arises once the deception has been agreed on, with reference to the means by which it is to be carried out. The issue here focuses again on one particular Hebrew word, signifying that which the spirit says it will be in the mouths of Ahab's four hundred prophets, which YHWH commends as sure to succeed, and which Micaiah confirms in his explanation of the vision. The word is שָׁקֶר ("lie," "falsehood," "deception"), another fundamental term of Hebrew prophetic language, of particular importance within the book of Jeremiah because of the constant conflicts in which Jeremiah is embroiled. As articulated within Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 14:13–14; see also 6:13–14), שָׁקֶר is that which prophets speak when they are not sent by YHWH and when they tell people the acceptable ("favorable," טוֹב) things that they want to hear. It is at heart a self-serving use of religious language, which lacks integrity and so lacks engagement with God.

If the message of Ahab's prophets is designated as שָׁקֶר, Micaiah means that what the prophets say lacks integrity. It is self-serving because the prophets are telling the king what he wants to hear. But in speaking thus the prophets are reflecting back to the king his own self-will. Here is the moral point of Micaiah's vision. The deceptive message of the prophets is the counterpart to the king's self-seeking. Thus

Micaiah complements the psychological challenge to the king not to let himself be duped (“don’t be a fool”) with the moral challenge to recognize a lack of integrity about the proposal to fight at Ramoth-Gilead (“don’t be so self-seeking”).

The third (“theological”) level in Micaiah’s vision is the God-centered dimension: namely, that the proposal to deceive Ahab through putting a self-serving message in the mouth of his prophets be ascribed to YHWH. Micaiah’s clear concern is that Ahab should recognize *his* message (and not the message of the four hundred prophets) as none other than the message of their God. It is not just that he, Micaiah, has “decreed disaster” (רָעָה) for Ahab, but that YHWH (v. 23b emphasizes YHWH as subject; compare Job 1:21) has spoken thus. A divinely ordained disaster is the (admonitory) meaning of the visionary scene. It is God whom Ahab is confronting.

What sort of God is YHWH? As already seen, one whose purpose in sending the prophets to announce “disaster” (רָעָה) is a compassionate one, to reach out to and reclaim those who are going astray, so that they may turn to God (שׁוּב) and so that the disaster may possibly never take place, because YHWH may mercifully respond (נָחַם) to genuine response. But how is the compassionate concern of God to be communicated to someone resolved on morally questionable self-will? The announcement of compassion in such a context (“Although you are pursuing your own course, God is merciful to you”) is hardly capable of conveying, or being understood as, true compassion. Rather, it will invariably sound to the addressee like ultimate indifference and consequent licence; that is, acquiescence in, or even encouragement of, the self-willed course of action, with no fundamental change of direction required because God will be merciful come what may (one might compare the famously complacent dictum ascribed to Heine on his deathbed, “Dieu me pardonnera, c’est son métier”). Such a message would lack genuine engagement with the moral and spiritual realities of human resolve. This means that the message of divine compassion must be expressed in other terms which do engage with, and challenge, the human will. In other words, the message of divine compassion must be formulated as a challenge. The message of God must be presented as, in one way or other, confrontational and adversarial, so that its moral character may be genuinely represented.

What is at stake is the “I—thou” dynamics of encounter. In encounter with God, the compassionate but demanding engagement of God with the human may be unwelcome and even threatening unless and until appropriate response is made. Moreover, such engagement does not, and cannot, leave the human person where they were previously, for response of some kind to God is inevitable. The one who does not respond positively is thereby driven further away from a positive response. In Hebrew terminology, when the initiative of God does not engender “repenting” (שׁוּב), it engenders “hardening of heart”/“stiffening of neck” (הִקָּשָׁה לִב/עֲרָף). This

is not just a description of the subsequent state of a person, but also a description of what is happening in the moment of encounter. In short, Micaiah's depiction of God's mercy as hostility towards Ahab cannot be understood if abstracted from the dynamics of Micaiah's encounter with Ahab.

Once Micaiah's vision is seen for what it is, a supreme attempt to touch the king's heart and mind, one may feel that surely it cannot leave the king unmoved.

<sup>24</sup> Then Zedekiah son of Chenaanah came up to Micaiah and hit him on the cheek. He said, "Which way did the spirit of YHWH pass from me to speak to you?" <sup>25</sup> Micaiah replied, "You will find out on that day when you go in to hide in an inner chamber." <sup>26</sup> The king of Israel then ordered, "Take Micaiah. Take him back to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son, <sup>27</sup> and say, 'Thus says the king: Put this fellow in prison, and feed him on minimum rations of bread and water until I come in peace.' " <sup>28</sup> Micaiah said, "If you return in peace, YHWH has not spoken by me." And he said, "Hear, you peoples, all of you!"

At this point Zedekiah intervenes. Zedekiah, as leader of the court prophets, is the person who stands to lose the most if the king heeds Micaiah. If publicly exposed as one who self-servingly deceives the king, he would face at least public shame and probably more—loss of his position, perhaps loss of his life. So at the moment of truth he decides (in effect) fully to embody the lying spirit of Micaiah's vision. He intervenes to ensure that a possibly wavering king remembers who his real friends and advisers are.

Zedekiah performs another action, as much a symbolic action as was his previous wielding of iron horns (v. 11). He hits Micaiah, to hurt and humiliate him. At the same time he asks a clever rhetorical question, which seeks to change the whole dynamics of the moment. For if Micaiah tries to answer such a question on its own terms, i.e., to justify or explain what he has said, Zedekiah would hold the initiative in interrogating a defensive Micaiah; and ultimately Micaiah has no justification beyond that contained in what he has already said. Micaiah, therefore, does not waver but responds with a challenge to Zedekiah.

The point of Micaiah's words at first seems obscure. Is it another vision? Is it a riddle? It is neither. Its point relates to the implicit dynamics of the situation. Why might Zedekiah "go to hide in an inner room"? The "inner room" is not a place of piety (for prayer) or modesty (a privy), but the most obscure place possible within a building (a cubbyhole of some kind or other), the place where you hide when you are trying to escape from people who want to kill you (the Hebrew idiom for "inner room" is used to depict where Ben-Hadad flees to when he is fleeing for his life [1 Kgs 20:30]). When you are hiding for your life is when you pray to God for safety; it is when, fearful of discovery and death, you are vulnerable. The meaning of Micaiah's words, then, is this. At the present moment Zedekiah is deflecting any possible danger to his own fraudulent position by abusing Micaiah. As such,

the reality before God of what he is saying and doing is hidden from him, for in abusing Micaiah he is hardening his heart (הִקְשָׁה לֵב). But if a time comes when Zedekiah seeks God in his own hour of need, a time when Zedekiah's own life is threatened, his future hangs by a thread, and he genuinely cries out to God, then the truth will searingly become clear to him and he will know the genuineness of what God has said through Micaiah.

For the present, however, Zedekiah's action and words are decisive. The king does not heed Micaiah, but arrests him and orders him to be detained. One may wonder whether the giving of Micaiah to the charge of two such significant figures as the city governor and one of the king's sons may not imply some kind of VIP treatment, a tacit recognition of Micaiah's stature. But certainly the instruction that Micaiah be given only meager amounts of bread and water makes no concessions. The king's final words, that Micaiah be held in prison on minimum subsistence "until I return in peace" — which, in terms of what Micaiah has said, will not happen, and so anticipate a possible life sentence for Micaiah — may be one last attempt by the king to get Micaiah to change his message to one of "peace"/"good" (שָׁלוֹם/טוֹב), so that Micaiah may escape incarceration.

Micaiah does not flinch. Although he may be signing his own death warrant, he reaffirms the content of his message and warning. If the king is indeed successful at Ramoth-Gilead, then Micaiah is prepared to recognize that his own words have been empty and have not conveyed the will of God to Ahab.

There is then a final postscript, a summons to "all peoples" to hear Micaiah's message. The wording is in fact identical to that of the opening words of the message of the canonical prophet Micah (Mic 1:2). The precise significance of this parallel is unclear. But if one takes the wording at face value in its present context it makes sense. The kind of conflict between king and prophet which has just preceded is not something peculiar to the history of Israel, but is rather, in one form or other, recurrent in the history of every nation. What the story of Micaiah does is to set the dynamics of such conflicts in the light of Israel's God.

<sup>29</sup> So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah went up to Ramoth-Gilead. <sup>30</sup> The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes." So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. <sup>31</sup> Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty-two captains of his chariots, "Fight with no one small or great, but only with the king of Israel." <sup>32</sup> When the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "This is surely the king of Israel." So they turned to fight against him. But Jehoshaphat cried aloud. <sup>33</sup> When the captains of the chariots saw that he was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him.

The king has decided to seek his moment of glory at Ramoth-Gilead. But something has gone wrong. At the very moment that his glory and power should be demonstrated in anticipation of victory, the king puts on a disguise, so that nobody

would recognize him as king. He cannot savor his longed-for battle, because when it comes he is too afraid. Why? Presumably because the king recognizes in his heart what he cannot bring himself to acknowledge publicly or act upon—that Micaiah was probably speaking the truth. But he thinks that he can get round Micaiah’s words by a deception of his own. If he is a “marked man” because of Micaiah’s warning—and perhaps aware that the king of Syria regards him as the cause of the warfare and so wants to single him out—then he will remove his public markings and become, as it were, invisible. If he can survive he may yet triumph. The Syrians are initially taken in by this ruse and think that Jehoshaphat in his robes must be Ahab. Jehoshaphat (a passive figure throughout the story, who also seems a little slow on the uptake) realizes what is happening and makes sure they discover their error. But if Ahab remains invisible can the Syrians do anything about it?

<sup>34</sup> Now a certain man drew his bow with no clear intention, and he hit the king of Israel between the scale-armour and the breastplate; so he said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around, and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.” <sup>35</sup> The battle grew fierce that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians; at evening he died, and the blood from the wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot. <sup>36</sup> Then at sunset a shout went through the army, “Every man to his city; every man to his own territory!” <sup>37</sup> So the king died, and came to Samaria where they buried him. <sup>38</sup> They washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria; the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed themselves in it, according to the word of YHWH that he had spoken.

The end comes simply. Ahab’s device works, in that he remains unrecognized. Nobody points him out, not even God, who might perhaps have given specific instructions to a particular Syrian. Rather, an archer acts unknowingly, that is, not specifically targeting Ahab, and his arrow finds not just Ahab but also the chink in his armour, so as to give a fatal wound. Ahab lives a little longer but only to see his army defeated. And so it becomes apparent that the message of Zedekiah and the four hundred prophets was indeed a falsehood. Micaiah’s words receive the fulfilment that they never sought (as earlier words of Elijah are also fulfilled, 22:38; see 21:19), and even in unintentional human action God’s purposes are fulfilled.

### ■ Some Brief Reflections on the Exposition

If the above reading is on the right lines, the story of Micaiah is a good example of much that is characteristic of biblical prophecy. Although it contains an inseparable element of future prediction on which Micaiah is willing to stake his credibility, it most of all illustrates the kind of conflict between self-will and integrity, understood in terms of responsiveness to the moral character of God, that regularly recurs both within the biblical canon and within the religious faiths rooted in the biblical literature. Moreover, message and life are interwoven. The one who speaks for God,

even—or, rather, especially when—faithfully, cannot expect a ready reception. To challenge the complacencies and self-deceptions of the human heart and mind with the searching truth of God will regularly provoke a hostility whose consequences may be devastating. To try to avoid this by being more accommodating risks becoming a prophet whose message is ultimately self-serving.

The story simultaneously raises the fundamental hermeneutical issue of how one might be able to tell between conflicting voices, when all speak in the name of the same God. The king has to choose between rival accounts of what is good for him, in which he must decide who is speaking the truth. What the king has to choose between is, in essence, his own self-seeking desire, as expressed and represented by his prophets (vv. 6, 12), and Micaiah's warning that he is neglecting his duty and jeopardizing his life (v. 17). Even before Micaiah has spoken, a certain kind of integrity is what the king grudgingly recognizes as characterizing Micaiah (v. 8). Micaiah challenges the king about the integrity of his proposed action, and in his climactic appeal he is most explicit. There is no integrity about the prophetic encouragement to fight at Ramoth-Gilead. It is a message which only a fool will heed, because it is deceit, and it is deceit because it represents an outworking of Ahab's heedless self-will. Thus, integrity is the key to discernment. But it is a demanding key to use, too demanding for Ahab and Zedekiah.

Yet even if Micaiah was not heeded at the time by those to whom he spoke, neither was he wholly unheeded. Someone—we do not know who—recognized him as speaking and living the truth of God, and wrote his story so that his story would continue to be a witness to that truth. Indeed the story shows a depth of insight comparable to that of Micaiah himself, for the dynamics of Micaiah's engagement with the king could not have been thus portrayed by someone who did not grasp what is going on. And the incorporation of the story within the wider history of Israel again implies recognition that such a story represents something important within that history, to which those who would be the people of God must attend. (The book of Kings as it stands presumably dates from sometime in the sixth century B.C.E., during or after the exile, when Israel's world seemed to have fallen apart, and is concerned to show Israel not only how the exile came about but also what constitutes that true response to God which can make for a more faithful future.) What we see, therefore, is a long afterlife for Micaiah's story, appropriated and used by others to witness to God long after Micaiah himself could no longer do so. In this we see something of the nature and purpose of the canonical compilation of texts as Israel's Scriptures.

■ *Einleitung* in Retrospect*The literary integrity of the text*

The story of Micaiah has been construed as a coherent whole. Since it is not uncommon to find analyses which call in question the story's literary coherence,<sup>5</sup> it will be appropriate briefly to consider as representative the analysis of Simon De Vries, who has written a whole monograph on the story, and whose views are conveniently summarized in his *Kings* commentary.<sup>6</sup>

De Vries considers that the Micaiah story is "best explained as the interweaving of two independent sources," and argues for his position as follows:

Evidence that we actually do have distinct sources is as follows: (1) vv 4b–5 twice introduce Jehoshaphat as speaking, but in a self-contradictory way; (2) the scene shifts inexplicably at v 10; (3) the subject changes unaccountably at v 19, leading to Micaiah's second vision-oracle; (4) Micaiah is rebuked in v 24, then punished in vv 26–27; (5) climactic repartees appear at v 25 and v 28, respectively; (6) "put on your robes" in v 30 is inconsistent with v 10, where Jehoshaphat is described as robed; (7) the singular address in vv 10 [sic], 15 is inconsistent with the two kings as addressees; (8) reference to "all the prophets prophesying" in v 10 is redundant after v 6, and inconsistent with the wording of v 12b; (9) in v 9 the king of Israel dispatches a סרִיס "officer," but in v 13 a מַלְאֲךְ "messenger" fetches Micaiah; (10) in v 14 Micaiah swears by Yahweh's life to speak what Yahweh tells him, yet in v 15 he tells a lie, for which the king of Israel scolds him in v 16 (Micaiah is doing what he criticizes the king's prophets for doing in v 22); (11) לִכֵּן "therefore" in v 19 presupposes something Micaiah himself had just said, not someone else's comment; (12) the futuristic "that day" of v 25 is structurally inconsistent with the past "that day" of v 35. . . . Add to this mass of detail the facts that the story has no meaningful structure as it now stands, and that the separate narratives that we have been able to disentangle do have meaningful structures in and of themselves, and we have a compelling case for the acceptance of this literary hypothesis.<sup>7</sup>

In response to De Vries's detailed points we may make the following observations: (1) The subtlety of a diplomatic answer, which acquiesces before raising a difficulty, is missed. Hebrew narrative style regularly uses speech introductions within the discourse of one speaker so as to indicate changes of

<sup>5</sup>A convenient guide to debate and literature is G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (2 vols.; NCB; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984) 2:360–62.

<sup>6</sup>S. J. De Vries, *Prophet against Prophet: The Role of the Micaiah Narrative (1 Kings 22) in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); idem, *1 Kings* (WBC 12; Waco: Word, 1985) 259–72. A rather different analysis is proposed by Ernst Würthwein, "Zur Komposition von 1 Reg 22 1–38" in *Das Ferne und Nahe Wort: Festschrift Leonhard Rost* (ed. Fritz Maass; BZAW 105; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967) 245–54.

<sup>7</sup>De Vries, *1 Kings*, 265.



content (akin to the paragraph in modern punctuation).<sup>8</sup> (2) It is unclear that there is any shift in scene, for the Hebrew idiom (simple *waw*, subject, participle) is that of a circumstantial clause, which describes the context without furthering the action. It is probably an amplifying account of the scene already presupposed. Yet if it were a change of scene, it would simply be to allow the passing of time while Micaiah is summoned. (3) There is nothing unaccountable about the change of subject. In a dialogue between two speakers, where the context makes clear who is speaking, Hebrew regularly does not specify the name of the speaker within each speech introduction. (4) The rebuke (naturally) is from Zedekiah, the punishment (appropriately) from the king. (5) The first climactic words are to Zedekiah, the second to the king. (6) Verse 30 envisages the context of preparation for battle, clearly distinct (v. 29) from the context within the city of Samaria (v. 10). To postulate difficulties on the basis of ignoring who is speaking to whom or discounting a clearly specified change of context, as in this and the previous two points, hardly displays a high degree of reader competence. (7) The king of Israel is clearly the leading protagonist throughout, with Jehoshaphat in a subordinate role, so singular address to this king is entirely appropriate. (8) The repetition is not redundant, for it is part of the amplified account of the scene that Micaiah must face. The supposed inconsistency with v. 12b eludes me. (9) This is stylistic variation, appropriate since the officer functions as a messenger. (10) The apparent inconsistency of Micaiah is one of the most common observations about the story; yet the irony of Micaiah's words is not difficult to discern. All that is required is a recognition that a Hebrew writer may use even a little of the kind of subtlety in narrative portrayal that is common in almost all significant literature. (11) Certainly in prophetic discourse לָכֵן ("therefore") usually draws an inference from what the prophet himself has just said. But in the context of confrontational dialogue there is no reason why the "therefore" should not be based on the hard-hearted response of the addressee. (12) The "that day" of v. 35 is a simple time notation in the context of the king's fatal battle, and is entirely unrelated to the earlier warning to Zedekiah.

Of course, it is always possible that a narrative in the Old Testament is composite. One of the clearest examples is Numbers 16. In such a case, a reading of the whole needs to be informed by an awareness of the parts, so that improper harmonizing of difficulties can be avoided, and so that one can appreciate in what way the whole has been put together to say something which may be more than the sum of its parts. If, however, the reading of the Micaiah narrative offered above is accurate, then all De Vries's detailed points, together with his overall contention that "the

<sup>8</sup>See my *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 18 n. 19 for further examples and bibliography.

story has no meaningful structure,” simply fall to the ground as a failure to discern the structure and sequence that the text in fact has.

*Traditio-historical and redactional problems*

If the question of the literary integrity of the text is straightforward, the same cannot be said of questions as to its possible tradition-history and redaction.<sup>9</sup> The problems here arise out of questions which any careful reading of the story in its wider context within Kings may be likely to raise.

First, why does Micaiah make this cameo appearance in the middle of a sequence of narratives which feature Elijah? Moreover, the other narratives about Ahab, despite their recognition of unnamed prophetic figures who both advise and confront the king (1 Kgs 20:13–19, 22, 28, 35–42), show no knowledge of a named Yahwistic prophet of stature other than Elijah, a prophet moreover with apparently regular access to the court of the Northern Kingdom.

Secondly, although the identification of the Israelite king as Ahab is clear in the story as it now stands, both internally (v. 20) and in the editorial framework (vv. 39–40) and in its placement within the wider narrative following 1 Kings 21, this identification is not without problems (and one may note that apart from v. 20 the story itself consistently designates the king with the nonspecific titular name “the king of Israel”). Most obviously the story’s portrayal of the Israelite king as a forceful and hard man depicts an Ahab quite other than the spineless Ahab of the Naboth story (1 Kings 21) or the Ahab who hates Elijah but does what Elijah tells him (1 Kings 18).

Thirdly, a niggling difficulty of detail attaches to the fulfilment of the prophetic word (other than that of Micaiah) in relation to the king’s death. As the text stands, the dogs licking up Ahab’s blood (22:38) is a fulfilment of the message which Elijah is given by YHWH to speak to Ahab (21:19b). Yet Elijah’s words specify that Ahab’s blood will be licked up in the same place that Naboth’s blood was licked up, that is Jezreel (21:1, 8–14), a poetic justice which is underlined by being applied also to Jezebel (21:23);<sup>10</sup> while the dead Ahab is brought not to Jezreel but to Samaria (22:37). One could simply observe that this shows that “the prophetic word does not come ‘true’ in a literalistic sense”<sup>11</sup> or that because “prophecy is not a mechanical process but a living word” then “if the central thrust of the prophecy is realized,

<sup>9</sup>Most source-critical analyses of the story, not least those of De Vries and Würthwein, also advance traditio-historical hypotheses commensurate with their source hypotheses.

<sup>10</sup>This argues against the attempt to ease the problem with regard to Ahab by suggesting that the Hebrew במקום אשר followed by a verb in 1 Kgs 21:19b should, by analogy with the same usage in Hos 2:1 (ET 1:10), be rendered not “in the place where” but “instead of” (Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* [NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995] 160).

<sup>11</sup>Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (IBCTP; Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 147.

variations in circumstantial detail are irrelevant.”<sup>12</sup> But despite the truth of such observations, which clearly depict how 22:38 as it stands is to be understood in relation to 21:19, one should at least observe that the fate of Jezebel specifically in Jezreel is told in gruesome detail (2 Kgs 9:30–37), just after Jehu has acted in accordance with Elijah’s prophetic words by casting the corpse of Ahab’s descendant Joram on the ground within Jezreel that had belonged to Naboth (2 Kgs 9:24–26). On any reckoning, something not quite straightforward seems to be going on in relation to the fate of Ahab and his descendants in relation to a prophetic oracle of divine judgment.<sup>13</sup>

These three problems have, not surprisingly, given rise to a considerable scholarly debate which has attempted to unravel and sort out a seeming tangle of threads. Any proper engagement with the debate lies beyond the scope of this essay, but at least some brief observations on a possible way of making sense of the difficulties are clearly required.

In general terms, these are not the kind of problems which are susceptible of any clearcut resolution, simply because we do not have sufficient evidence. Any proposals must be more or less hypothetical, and the informed and plausible hypothesis will remain a hypothesis. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the three problems are interrelated, and that perhaps the best way to make progress is to entertain as a likely possibility that the identification of the king of Israel as Ahab is not original to the story,<sup>14</sup> which once told instead of Micaiah’s confrontation with one of Ahab’s descendants.<sup>15</sup> Why then the transformation of the story into the climactic event of Ahab’s life? It could have been because the figure of Ahab was seen as in some way a type of, or representative for, his descendants as king. This would be in some way analogous to the Genesis portrayal of Jacob as a distinct

<sup>12</sup>Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996) 358.

<sup>13</sup>Some of the subtleties and complexities of the prophecy and its interpretation are well brought out by Peter D. Miscall in his “Elijah, Ahab and Jehu: A Prophecy Fulfilled,” *Prooftexts* 9 (1989) 73–83.

<sup>14</sup>This is, of course, no novel proposal. Graeme Auld, for example, writes that “It is widely held that Ahab was not the original anti-hero involved” (“History-Interpretation-Theology: Issues in Biblical Religion” in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* [ed. Edward Ball; JSOTSS 300; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999] 22–36, at 32), though he himself is doubtful about this “widely-held” position. For a dissent from this position, in favor of Ahab as original to the narrative, see, e.g., John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 247 n. 55.

<sup>15</sup>The reidentification of the king is much more likely than the suggestion (admittedly tentative) that one might reidentify Micaiah as Elijah (so James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict* [BZAW 124; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1971] 84). Apart from the fact that the Kings tradition consistently presents Elijah as an “outsider” who, unlike Micaiah, only meets the king beyond the precincts of the royal court, such a reidentification of Micaiah would miss the interrelated nature of the three problems outlined.

individual who yet in some way embodies the nation descended from him (Gen 25:23–24, 27:29).<sup>16</sup> Thus Ahab as a particular figure could be seen as summing up the outlook and practice of the house of Ahab as a whole, and so a story which had arisen in the context of Ahab's descendants could appropriately, to this way of thinking, be told of Ahab himself.<sup>17</sup>

The portrayal of the most notorious king (representing the most notorious dynasty) within the whole history of Israel as meeting his end in the way the Micaiah story relates could also be significant for the location of the story within the wider Deuteronomistic History. It shows that the disaster which befalls the unfaithful king—and which befell both Israel and Judah—is, right up to the end, not a foregone conclusion, but rather is poised on the knife-edge of response, or lack of it, to the will of God for integrity and truth.<sup>18</sup> Such a story could well be meant to further a resolve to be and do otherwise than Ahab on the part of those who read it as part of their canonical history.

In general terms, what appears to have mattered to those who preserved the material of Israel's history for subsequent generations was less the specific sequence of individual characters and events “as they actually happened” than a presentation which would present the inner meaning and enduring significance of the history as

<sup>16</sup>A possible modern parallel might be to tell the story of the Soviet Union in such a way that decisions and actions carried out by Lenin's successors were ascribed to Lenin himself. It would, of course, be the dramatist or novelist, rather than the modern historian, who would have the liberty to rearrange material thus (for we regularly distinguish between literature and history in ways which many ancients did not). Some thought-provoking reflections on the nature of biblical narrative are offered by David Ford (“System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* [ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 191–215). Ford suggests Solzhenitsyn's portrayals of the Soviet Union may possibly offer illuminating analogies to biblical narrative (196–97, 206 n. 22). Although Ford's comments are directed specifically to the narratives of the gospels, much of what he says would be applicable to at least some other biblical narratives, not least 1 Kings 22.

<sup>17</sup>One obvious difficulty for this proposal is that the two remaining kings of Israel descended from Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram (both of whom, according to the biblical chronology, were on the throne while Jehoshaphat was king of Judah), are accounted for specifically in the manner of their dying (Ahaziah suffers a fatal domestic injury, 2 Kings 1; Jehoram is shot by Jehu, 2 Kings 9). Despite numerous resonances between the narratives about Ahab and Jehoram, not least Jehoram's attack on Ramoth-Gilead in alliance with a Judean king (2 Kgs 8:28–9, 9:14–15), it is doubtful whether we can do more than conjecture about the possible antecedent tradition-history of these resonances.

<sup>18</sup>One might compare H. W. Wolff's well-known thesis that a likely purpose in the writing of the Deuteronomistic History is the offer of hope to the exiles on the basis of repentance (“Das Kerygma des deuteronomischen Geschichtswerk,” *ZAW* 73 [1961] 171–186 = “The Kerygma of the Deuteronomistic Historical Work,” in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* [ed. W. Brueggemann and H. W. Wolff; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975] 83–100).

a whole.<sup>19</sup> This means also that a responsible handling of the biblical text, which seeks to read and respond to it with total imaginative seriousness, must not make the mistake of confusing such imaginative seriousness with the historicizing assumption that one can move in any direct or straightforward way between the biblical text and the history which gave rise to it.<sup>20</sup>

### *A biblical template for interpretation?*

One of the key issues in interpreting our text (like many others) is that of deciding the best set of assumptions on which to ground the interpretation. This is meant here not in terms of general hermeneutical assumptions, but more specifically in the sense of determining which other texts in Israel's scriptures provide the best analogies, or, as it were, template, for the reading.

This issue with regard to the Micaiah story was highlighted by the responses of certain participants in different seminars where a draft of this paper was read.<sup>21</sup> The responses were, in essence, an incredulity towards the interpretation offered, an incredulity seemingly based on a sense that the real difficulties of the text had somehow been surreptitiously massaged into a more religiously acceptable reading. Specifically, there was a sense that the deity of this text could not be gracious in intent, and in one instance this was because the proposed best parallel to the text was the Exodus narrative of YHWH and Pharaoh, where (apparently) YHWH's hardening Pharaoh's heart seeks to bring about not his repentance but his calamitous death.

My proposed template (arrived at heuristically over time) is the book of Jeremiah—that is, the achieved portrait which is the received form of the book, in which pre/non-Deuteronomistic and Deuteronomistic elements are subsumed into a

<sup>19</sup>A striking illustration is afforded by the difficult story of the prophet of Judah and the prophet of Bethel in 1 Kings 13. At least some of the difficulties become comprehensible when it is realized that the prophets in some way typologically represent the northern and southern kingdoms. This is indicated by the location of the story as the first story after the division of the kingdoms in 1 Kings 12, and also by the reprise of the story in the account of Josiah's reform (2 Kgs 23:16–18) which symbolically reunites the kingdoms. The story of the prophets is thus a story about the meaning of the history of the divided kingdoms.

<sup>20</sup>The fact that Micaiah can speak out of the story to an audience different from that within the story (v. 28b) is also perhaps indicative of the genre of the material, at least as it was perceived by its ancient tradents (it is analogous to Jesus' switching his discourse from a warning to the disciples to a warning to "all," Mark 13:37; a possible contemporary analogy would be the character within a film who turns to address the camera/viewer). Even if this is a gloss (of unknown date; interestingly it is not in the LXX of 1 Kgs 22:28, though it is in the LXX of the parallel account in 2 Chr 18:27), and whether or not it presupposes some typological identification of Micaiah with the canonical Micah, its presence indicates a dramatic and engaging mode in which the text is seen to operate. See further E. Ball, "A Note on 1 Kings XXII.28," *JTS* 28 (1977) 90–94.

<sup>21</sup>The seminars were in Durham, Cambridge, and Leeds (SOTS) in the United Kingdom, and at Duke and Princeton (the CTI) in the United States.

larger whole. Jeremiah offers a developed understanding of the nature and purpose of prophecy, and was a natural source of cross-reference in the exposition. The dates and originating contexts of Jeremiah and of the Micaiah story (as a constituent part of the Deuteronomistic History) are also likely to be close to each other.

It is not difficult to see significant parallels of both substance and detail. 1) Jeremiah, like Micaiah, is presented as a lone voice in the midst of numerous other prophets who speak a more palatable message, with the consequence that 2) the problems of falsehood and deception (שֶׁקֶר) play a major role in each text. 3) Jeremiah, like Micaiah, fulfils his vocation at the cost of considerable personal suffering, including imprisonment. 4) Although each prophet is primarily concerned with the dynamics of moral responsiveness to YHWH, each recognizes that his credibility is also tied up with a prediction of future events: the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, the king's death in battle. 5) The language of divine deception (מִדְּבָר), a deception which succeeds (הִכָּל), strikingly recurs in the final personal outcry on the lips of Jeremiah (20:7; see also v. 10), though its function differs from that in the Micaiah story.

In the light of these undoubted parallels, it becomes appropriate to include the possibly more contentious point that human turning to God (שׁוּב) is the explicit goal of prophetic warning (Jer 18:7–8, 23:21–22). But this goal is only specified in the context of a corresponding awareness of how costly and difficult true turning to God may be (3:10, 3:19–4:4). Moreover, there may come a time when the possibility of turning is replaced by a recognition that a wilfully chosen path must run its course (15:1–2), with hope for the future to be found only in new possibilities on the far side of judgment and disaster (32:1–44).

### ■ Conclusion: On Reading a Sophisticated Prophetic Narrative

It was noted at the outset how Carroll and Brueggemann sharply articulate a common response to the Micaiah story—that YHWH in Micaiah's second vision speaks and acts in an immoral way (indeed, that he is lying, manipulative, self-willed, violent). To be sure, the words in themselves would seem to bear that meaning. Yet if the interpretation offered here is correct, then that is a fundamental misreading of the text. What is happening? In essence, I suggest it is an example of scholars themselves unwittingly doing what they warn their first-year students against doing—that is, taking the text out of context. Neither Carroll nor Brueggemann makes any serious attempt to contextualize Micaiah's second vision within the dynamics of Micaiah's attempt to get through to a reluctant king. Nor do they even raise the possibility that the heavenly court might be revealing the true nature of the earthly court, i.e., that the manipulation, deception, and self-will might belong solely to Ahab and his prophets, and that they are being displayed to Ahab in an ironic and dramatic challenge.

The interpretation offered here undoubtedly goes against the grain of the kind of construal that one often finds in modern secondary literature (though it is difficult to generalize, especially with a spate of more holistic literary readings in recent years).<sup>22</sup> James Crenshaw, for example, discusses the story in his significant study, *Prophetic Conflict*.<sup>23</sup> He sees the story as “quite straightforward,”<sup>24</sup> with the consequence that what is said within the story tends to be taken at face value: “There can be no question about the fact that this story depicts the ‘false prophets’ as men who gave in good faith the message conveyed to them, and portrays God as the source of this lie, even if mediated by a spirit.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise his construal of the king’s first words to Micaiah: “Micaiah ben Imlah used deceit so often that the king had to rebuke him by saying, ‘How many times shall I adjure you that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?’”<sup>26</sup> Men of good faith, or self-interested courtiers? A justly indignant king, or a posturing hypocrite? A deceptive prophet, or a courageous and imaginative speaker of the truth?

These divergences of interpretation remind us that one of the many important emphases of recent hermeneutical debate concerns the role of the interpreter in establishing the meaning of the text. The disentangling of biblical study from certain kinds of religious attitudes and dogmas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>27</sup> was necessary in order to gain fresh purchase upon the biblical text; but the freedom thereby acquired can easily be lost or become vacuous, unless the question of the adequacy of the interpretative categories whereby a reader construes the text remains center stage. In other words, interpretation, however scientific, remains an art. The one who knows cannot be so easily separated from that which is known as has sometimes been thought, least of all when handling texts which speak of God. The question of how best the biblical interpreter may be formed so as to be able genuinely to understand the biblical text is not the kind of question that will ever be simply or definitively resolved. Yet to be able to make some progress with the question is surely a pressing need for biblical scholarship in the years ahead.

<sup>22</sup>For example, four recent Kings commentaries, those of Nelson (see n. 11), Provan (see n. 10), Walsh (see n. 12), and Fretheim (*First and Second Kings* [WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999]), all offer narrative readings with various affinities to my reading.

<sup>23</sup>See n. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Crenshaw, *Conflict*, 84.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 84; see also his remark that “the narrative makes abundantly clear the fact that the royal prophets acted in good faith” (56).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 59. But in his retelling of the story as a whole, Crenshaw says at this point, “However, the king recognizes the irony in these words so out of character” (83), which would seem to point in a different direction.

<sup>27</sup>For example, the notion of inspiration in many Christian contexts tended to be utilized in an astonishingly high-handed and a priori kind of way.