

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Insights into the Bible [7]

Micaiah the son of Imlah Prophesies Ahab's Defeat I Kings 22:1-39



Background to our Story

Prophecy and Prophets

The institution of prophecy is founded on the basic premise that God makes his will known to chosen individuals in successive generations. A prophet is a charismatic individual endowed with the divine gift of both receiving and imparting the message of revelation. As the spokesman for the deity, he does not choose his profession but is chosen, often against his own will to convey the work of God to his people regardless of whether or not they wish to hear it. (Ezekiel 3:11) A prophet does not elect to prophesy, nor does he become a prophet by dint of a native or an acquired faculty on his part. Prophecy is not a science to be learned or mastered. There is no striving to be one with God, no *unio mystica*, no indwelling of God within the spirit of the prophet through rapture, trances, or even spiritual contemplation. The prophet is selected by God and is irresistibly compelled to deliver his message and impart His will, even if he personally disagrees with it. He is consecrated to be set apart from his fellowmen and is destined to bear the responsibility and burden of being chosen. Appointed messenger, he must translate his revelatory experience into the idiom of his people. The prophetic experience is one of confrontation. The prophet is both a recipient and a participant. The individuality of the prophet is never curtailed. No two prophets prophesied in the same style. Their unique literary styles, whether expressed in prayers, hymns, parables, indictments, sermons, dirges, letters, mocking and drinking songs or legal pronouncements, bear the mark of independent creativity. The divine message is refracted through the human prism. This is dramatically brought out by the striking image of the prophets' receiving, literally eating, God's word and then bringing it forth. (Jeremiah 15.16ff: Ezekiel 3.1ff). God speaks to the prophet and the prophet speaks out. The divine revelation is delivered by a human agent.

The pre-classical prophets are referred to by four different names, 'hozeh', 'ro'eh', both meaning "seer," 'ish ha'-Elohim' ("man of God") and 'navi' (prophet). The last is also the standard term for the classical prophet.

These early prophets played a prominent role in communal affairs and were often sought out and consulted for advice and asked to deliver oracles in the name of God. These early prophets were both clairvoyant and capable of predicting future events. For example, Ahijah predicted the overthrow of Jeoboam's house and the death of his son. The prophets did not merely predict the future, however. They often performed symbolic acts, which dramatized and concretized the spoken word. Through the dynamism of the spoken word is considered to have a creative effect in and of itself, it is given further confirmation by this act, which is efficacious and actually plays the role of the prime mover in creating and causing the coming into being of the event.

The pre-classical prophets should be viewed in the light of their successors, the classical prophets. (1) The classical prophets rejected the cult and ritual and called for ethical monotheism. (2) They rejected the nationalistic outlook of the popular prophets and replaced it with their concept of universalism. (3) The pre-classical prophets were originally mantic; their main function was predicting the future. The classical prophets, on the other hand, were interested in reproving their people in order to save them. (4) Whereas the popular prophets functioned as part of guilds, the classical prophets always appear alone (e.g. Amos 7:14). (5) The popular prophets were often ecstasies, given to intoxication of the senses (I Sam. 19:20-24), and they employed musical accompaniment to induce or heighten their frenzy (II Kings 3:15). The classical prophets, however, for the most part pronounced their oracles soberly in clear control of their senses.

The Story's Context

After King Solomon's death, the kingdom splits in two: the kingdom of Judah in the south, whose capital is Jerusalem and the kingdom of Israel in the north, whose capital is Samaria. All the kings of Judah until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians belonged to the dynasty of David. The kings of Israel (the northern kingdom) succeeded each other counting five different dynasties until the fall of Samaria (721 B.C.E.). One of the most famous kings of the kingdom of Israel was Ahab son of Omri, who reigned between 874 B.C.E. and 853 B.C.E. The first book of Kings dedicates to Ahab 7 chapters in which it tells us what happened during his reign. In these 7 chapters, King Ahab is presented as a sinner, evil in the eyes of The Lord. Ahab's main sin is idolatry (like the other kings of Israel). In Ahab's case, his sin increases when Ahab takes Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tzidon (today Lebanon) as his wife. Jezebel brought with her and introduced the cult to Baal in Israel. During the reign of Ahab, Prophet Elijah appears who constantly admonished King Ahab. The main episodes related in the previous chapters are:

- ✓ Drought in Samaria (interpreted as a divine punishment)
- ✓ Elijah's challenge to the false prophets at Mount Carmel
- ✓ Ahab defeats Ben-Hadad, king of Aram.
- ✓ Naboth's murder with the complicity of Jezebel

The Plot

Ahab, king of Israel invites Jehoshaphat, king of Judah to fight on his side against the king of Aram in order to conquer Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoshaphat asks the king to consult with the prophets if the mission would succeed. Four hundred prophets tell the king to go to the war. Jehoshaphat suggests to the king to consult with a prophet of The Lord. King Ahab calls Micaiah son of Imlah who finally advises the king not to go to war. The king ignores Micaiah's advice and puts him in jail. The king goes to war and dies. When his chariot is washed, the dogs lick up the king's blood, like Prophet Elijah prophesied. The story also appears with minor changes in I Chronicles, Chapter 18.



The Characters

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah: reigned between 870 and 848 B.C.E. During his reign, Judah came back to prosperity and there was peace between Judah and Israel. The scriptures present him as a righteous God fearing king.

Ahab, king of Israel: As I mentioned, Ahab reigned between 874 B.C.E. and 853 B.C.E. King Ahab is presented as a sinner, evil in the eyes of The Lord. Ahab's main sin is idolatry (like the other kings of Israel). In Ahab's case, his sin increases when Ahab takes Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tzidon (today Lebanon) as his wife. Jezebel brought with her and introduced the cult to Baal in Israel. During the reign of Ahab, Prophet Elijah appears and constantly admonishes King Ahab.

The king of Aram: Defeated Jehoshaphat, king of Judah and Ahab, king of Israel. He commanded his thirty-two chariot commanders saying, "Do not wage war with anyone weak or strong but only with the king of Israel himself."

The Four Hundred Prophets: They advised King Ahab to fight against Aram to conquer Ramoth-Gilead.

Micaiah, son of Imlah: prophet of The Lord. Advised the king not to fight against Aram. He is put into jail. His name appears only related to this story.

Zedekiah Son of Chenaanah: one of the prophets of Baal. He made for himself iron horns and incited the king to go to war.

Micaiah son of Imlah Prophesies Ahab's Defeat

I Kings 22:1-39

¹ Now three years passed without war between Syria and Israel. ² Then it came to pass, in the third year, that Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went down to *visit* the king of Israel.

? Why does the text use the expression "went down"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

³ And the king of Israel said to his servants, "Do you know that Ramoth in Gilead *is* ours, but we hesitate to take it out of the hand of the king of Syria?" ⁴ So he said to Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to fight at Ramoth Gilead?"

Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "I *am* as you *are*, my people as your people, my horses as your horses." ⁵ Also Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Please inquire for the word of the Lord today."

? Jehoshaphat utters an oath of commitment. Can you think of a similar oath in the Bible that parallels the one in our story?

⁶ Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall I go against Ramoth Gilead to fight, or shall I refrain?"

So they said, "Go up, for the Lord will deliver *it* into the hand of the king."

? Why does the Bible use the expression "Go up"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

⁷ And Jehoshaphat said, "*Is there* not still a prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of Him?"

⁸ So the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "*There is* still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."

And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say such things!"

? Jehoshaphat said: "Let not the king say such things!" What did he mean by these words?

⁹ Then the king of Israel called an officer and said, "Bring Micaiah the son of Imlah quickly!"

¹⁰ The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, having put on *their* robes, sat each on his throne, at a threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets prophesied before them. ¹¹ Now Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah had made horns of iron for himself; and he said, "Thus says the Lord: 'With these you shall gore the Syrians until they are destroyed.'" ¹² And all the prophets prophesied so, saying, "Go up to Ramoth Gilead and prosper, for the Lord will deliver *it* into the king's hand."

? Why were the king of Israel and the king of Judah at the entrance of the gate of Samaria?

? What is the meaning of the horns?

Bonus ? Why does a prophet of Baal prophesize in the Lord's name?

¹³ Then the messenger who had gone to call Micaiah spoke to him, saying, "Now listen, the words of the prophets with one accord encourage the king. Please, let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak encouragement."

¹⁴ And Micaiah said, "As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak."

¹⁵ Then he came to the king; and the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall we refrain?"

And he answered him, "Go and prosper, for the Lord will deliver *it* into the hand of the king!"

¹⁶ So the king said to him, "How many times shall I make you swear that you tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?"

¹⁷ Then he said, "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 house in peace.'"

? Read Numbers 27:15-17. What is the text in Numbers about?

¹⁵ Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying: ¹⁶ "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, ¹⁷ who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd."

¹⁸ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Did I not tell you he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?"

¹⁹ Then *Micaiah* said, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right

hand and on His left. ²⁰ And the Lord said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. ²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, and said, 'I will persuade him.' ²² The Lord said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And the Lord said, 'You shall persuade *him*, and also prevail. Go out and do so.' ²³ Therefore look! The Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the Lord has declared disaster against you."

? What is the meaning of the expression "all these prophets of yours"?

²⁴ Now Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah went near and struck Micaiah on the cheek, and said, "Which way did the spirit from the Lord go from me to speak to you?"

²⁵ And Micaiah said, "Indeed, you shall see on that day when you go into an inner chamber to hide!"

²⁶ So the king of Israel said, "Take Micaiah, and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king's son; ²⁷ and say, 'Thus says the king: "Put this *fellow* in prison, and feed him with bread of affliction and water of affliction, until I come in peace." ' "

? What is the meaning of "bread of affliction" and "water of affliction"?

Extra Bonus ? Why doesn't the king kill Micaiah?

²⁸ But Micaiah said, "If you ever return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me." And he said, "Take heed, all you people!"

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Read Numbers 16: 25-30. What is the connection with our story?

²⁵ Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins." ²⁷ So they got away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children.

²⁸ And Moses said: "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. ²⁹ If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the

Lord creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord."

²⁹ So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went up to Ramoth Gilead. ³⁰ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into battle; but you put on your robes." So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle.

? Why did King Ahab disguise himself?

³¹ Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty-two captains of his chariots, saying, "Fight with no one small or great, but only with the king of Israel."

? Why did the king of Aram want to fight only with the king of Israel?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

³² So it was, when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, that they said, "Surely it *is* the king of Israel!" Therefore, they turned aside to fight against him, and Jehoshaphat cried out. ³³ And it happened, when the captains of the chariots saw that it *was* not the king of Israel, that they turned back from pursuing him. ³⁴ Now a *certain* man drew a bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the joints of his armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and take me out of the battle, for I am wounded."

³⁵ The battle increased that day; and the king was propped up in his chariot, facing the Syrians, and died at evening. The blood ran out from the wound onto the floor of the chariot. ³⁶ Then, as the sun was going down, a shout went throughout the army, saying, "Every man to his city, and every man to his own country!"

³⁷ So the king died and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria. ³⁸ Then *someone* washed the chariot at a pool in Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood while the harlots bathed, according to the word of the Lord which He had spoken.

³⁹ Now the rest of the acts of Ahab, and all that he did, the ivory house which he built and all the cities that he built, *are* they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? ⁴⁰ So Ahab rested with his fathers. Then Ahaziah his son reigned in his place.

Analysis Questions

? Please, describe the personalities of 1) Jehoshaphat, king of Judah; 2) Micaiah son of Imlah; 3) the king of Aram, 4) Ahab's 400 prophets, 5) Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, and 6) Ahab, king of Israel;



? King Ahab complained that *"There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."* Nevertheless, when Micaiah tells the king what he wants to hear: "Go and prosper, for the Lord will deliver *it* into the hand of the king!" he [King Ahab] tells Micaiah: "How many times shall I make you swear that you tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?" **?** How can you explain Ahab's strange behavior?

Extra Bonus ? Micaiah told the king that if he goes to war he will die. Why does he go anyway? Please try to answer the question from a theological point of view and from a sociological, and psychological point of view?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

? You may be familiar with Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*. Do you find any parallels between King Ahab and Captain Ahab?

Captain Ahab is a fictional character and one of the protagonists in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). He is the monomaniacal captain of the whaling ship *Pequod*. On a previous voyage, the white whale Moby Dick bit off Ahab's leg and he now wears a prosthetic leg made out of ivory. The whaling voyage of the *Pequod* ends up as a hunt for revenge on the whale, as Ahab forces the crew members to support his fanatical mission. When Moby Dick is finally sighted, Ahab's hatred robs him of all caution, and the whale drags him to his death beneath the sea and sinks the *Pequod*.

"There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod.- On deck!" (Captain Ahab, Moby Dick)