



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of 1 Kings 22:1–40

"Israel struggled hard without much immediate success to establish criteria by which to distinguish the true from the false prophet." (Brevard Childs.)

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

¹ Three years passedⁱ with no war between Syriaⁱⁱ and between Israel. ² Then, in the third year Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, went downⁱⁱⁱ to the king^{iv} of Israel.^v

³ The king of Israel had said to his servants, "Do you know that Ramoth-Gilead belongs to us? But here we are keeping quiet about taking it back from the hand of the king of Syria!" ⁴ So he said to Jehoshaphat: "Will you go to war with me for Ramoth-Gilead?" ⁵ Jehoshaphat said to the King of Israel: "As with me, so with you, as with my people, so with your people; my horses are your horses." But Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, "Please seek now the will^{vi} of Yahweh."

⁶ So the king of Israel assembled the prophets, about four hundred men,^{vii} and said to them, "Shall I go against Ramoth-Gilead in battle or shall I refrain?" And they said: "**Go up, and the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.**" ⁷ But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there not still a prophet of Yahweh here, that we may inquire of him?" ⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man from whom to inquire of Yahweh, but I myself despise him because he does not prophesy any good about me but only bad, Micaiah son of Imlah." But Jehoshaphat said, "The king should not say this."

⁹ Then the king of Israel called for one officer and said, "Summon quickly Micaiah son of Imlah."^{viii}

¹⁰ So here are the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah, sitting, each one on his throne, dressed in royal robes at the entrance gate of Samaria while all the prophets are prophesying before them. ¹¹ Now Zedekiah son of Canaana had made horns of iron and said, "Thus says Yahweh, 'With these you will gore Syria until you finish them off.'"

¹² And all the other prophets were prophesying thus, saying, '**Rise up against Ramoth-Gilead, and prevail; Yahweh will give it into the hand of the king.**'

¹³ As for the messenger who had gone to call Micaiah, he spoke to him saying, "Heh, look, the words of the prophets' mouths are uniformly favorable to the king; let your words be as one with them; speak favorably!" ¹⁴ But Micaiah said: "As Yahweh lives, only what Yahweh says to me, that shall I speak." ¹⁵ And he came to the king, and the king said to him, "So Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth-Gilead or shall we refrain?" ¹⁶ And he said to him: "Go up and prevail; Yahweh will give it into the hand of the king."^{ix} 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 Yahweh?" ¹⁷ So he said: "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills, as a flock without their shepherd, and Yahweh said, 'These (troops) are without officers; let each man return to his house in peace.'"^x ¹⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies good about me, but only bad?"

¹⁹And he (Micaiah) said (further): “Therefore, hear the word of Yahweh: I^{xi} saw Yahweh sitting upon his throne, and the entire host^{xii} of the heavens was standing beside Him, at His right hand and at His left. ²⁰ And Yahweh said, ‘Who will deceive Ahab, that he will go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said this, and another was saying that. ²²Then a^{xiii} spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh and said, ‘I will entice him.’ And Yahweh said to him, ‘By what means?’ ²²And he said, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of these his prophets. And he (Yahweh) said, “You are to entice him and also prevail; go out and do this.’ ²³ “So now, look, Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours; Yahweh has proclaimed disaster for you.”

²⁴ Then Zezekiah son of Canaana approached and slapped Micaiah on the cheek, and said, ‘Is this how the spirit of Yahweh passed from me to speak to you?’ ²⁵ And Micaiah said, “Look, you will see on that day when you enter an inner chamber and hide yourself.”

²⁶ And the king of Israel said, “Take Micaiah and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash, the son of the king. ²⁷ And say, “Thus says the king, ‘Put this fellow in prison and feed him meagre rations of bread and water until I return safely.’ ²⁸ And Micaiah said, “If you return safely, Yahweh has not spoken through me.” And he said, “*Hear you peoples, all of you!*^{xiv}”

²⁹ The the king of Israel went up, and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to Ramoth-Gilead. ³⁰And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “I will go into battle disguised; but as for you, wear your royal robes.”^{xv}

³¹ Now the king of Aram (i.e., Syria) had commanded his thirty-two chariot commanders, saying, “Don’t fight against small or great, but only with the king of Israel himself.” ³² And when the chariot captains saw Jehoshaphat they said, ‘Surely he is the king of Israel,’ so they turned to fight against him; but Jehoshaphat cried out. ³³ And so when the chariot captains saw that he was not the king of Israel they turned from going after him.

³⁴ Now a certain individual drew his bow randomly,^{xvi} and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. And he said to his charioteer, “Change course^{xvii} and take me out of the battle, for I have been wounded.” ³⁵ The battle kept up that day; as for the king, he was propped up in his chariot facing Syria and died that evening. And the blood of the wound flowed to the bottom of the chariot. ³⁶ And a shrill-cry passed through the camp at dusk, “**Each man to his city, each man to his land!**”^{xviii} ³⁷ So the king died and entered Samaria, and they buried the king in Samaria. ³⁸ And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes bathed (in it), according to the word of Yahweh, which he had spoken. ³⁹ And the rest of the deeds of Ahab and all that he did, and the house of ivory which he built,^{xix} and all the cities that he built, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Israel? ⁴⁰ And Ahab slept with his fathers and Ahaziah his son reigned in his stead.

II. QUOTABLE QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

“To a Christian, nothing is either more necessary or more profitable than the knowledge of Holy Scripture, for it is God’s true Word, setting forth both His glory and man’s duty. . . Therefore, all who desire to enter the right and perfect way unto God must apply their minds to know Holy

Scripture. Without it they cannot adequately know God and His will, nor can they know their office and duty." (Thomas Cranmer, Book of Homilies.)

See the summary of the message of 1 Kings 22, copied here (at the end of this handout) from my essay, "How Can the Wrathful God of the Old Testament Be Reconciled with the Gracious Lord of the New Testament," in *Guide for the Christian Perplexed*, ed. Thomas Power, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2012, pp. 37-41.

IV. RELEVANT PASSAGES

1 Kings 18:17—*here we find a clue as to why the 400 prophets that the king of Israel summoned were not considered true prophets of Yahweh by Jehoshaphat—they were prophets of the goddess Asherah (whom many pagan Israelites, evidently like King Ahab, identified with Yahweh!)*

"When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"¹⁸ And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals."¹⁹ Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

2 Kings 3—*there are close parallels between this passage and 1 Kings 22 that repay close attention*

Micah 1:1-2a—*Micaiah's later namesake, the canonical prophet Micah, begins his prophecy echoing the last words of Micaiah as if to say that a true prophetic word is now to be understood as a prophetic book of Scripture*

The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. "Hear, you peoples, all of you. . . ."

Inscription found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud—*found in 1979, this inscription helped confirm that some Israelites idolatrously worshipped Asherah as though she were Yahweh's consort!*

"I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria, and by His Asherah."¹

ⁱ Literally "dwelt.

ⁱⁱ I translate "Aram" "Syria" because the latter term is familiar.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jerusalem, the capital of Judah is higher than Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. (Israel once referred to the United Kingdom but now refers to the northern part of the kingdom.)

^{iv} It is odd that the king of Israel is not named; in my judgment, the best explanation is that this is a mild slur against Ahab, who in the previous chapter violated a prime responsibility to protect the rights of citizens by taking possession of Naboth's vineyard after allowing him to be unjustly stoned to death.

^v The appearance of Jehoshaphat so soon in the narrative (before the king of Israel has mentioned the problem and hatched his plan) indicates that Jehoshaphat is central to the story. He, after all, is more godly than Ahab (which isn't hard to be!).

^{vi} Literally, "the word of Yahweh."

^{vii} Note that four hundred *pagan* prophets are mentioned a few chapters earlier (1 Kings 18:17).

^{viii} That no details accompany the summons suggest that Micaiah is well known. The context further singles him out as a notorious nay-sayer.

¹ I discuss this inscription and the overlap between Yahweh and his "wife" Asherah in pagan thought in *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20/3 (1994), pp. 52ff.

^{ix} Note the contradiction between what the true prophet, Micaiah, has just vowed—to speak only what Yahweh tells him—and his actions: speaking falsely at first. Rather than soften the problem, it is best to consider this “contradiction” as part of the message of the narrative, namely, that even true spokespersons for God can, at times, be fickle. So, yes, Micaiah initially caves in (presumably under the pressure presented by the intimidating scene described in vss. 10-12).

^x Note that Yahweh’s intention to rid Israel of an apostate king does not include bringing harm to any of those in his army or that of Jehoshaphat! God is just and merciful!

^{xi} Note that “the word of Yahweh” includes what the true prophet reports he has seen. This claim of divine authority and inspiration of the true prophet is all the more striking in a narrative that underscores problems with true prophets.

^{xii} “Host” is the traditional translation for a celestial army of divine attendants.

^{xiii} The Hebrew contains the definite article “the” before spirit. Yet the Hebrew definite article doesn’t fully coincide with that in English, making “a” a viable translation. In other words, it is not necessarily “the (Holy) Spirit.”

^{xiv} Overly skeptical scholars are quick to disregard this comment, choosing to see it as a clumsy addition from Micah 1:2 by an ignorant editor who mistook Micaiah for the prophet Micah who lived 150 years later. In my view the phrase is a brilliant, inspired “canon conscious” link that points away from the uncertainty around which human prophet is inspired of Yahweh to the certainty we now have in canonical books of prophecy that are inspired of Yahweh. The synonymy between Micaiah and Micah help forge this link. In short, Micaiah’s comment, raised in a context of people’s uncertainty about who speaks for Yahweh, signals a forthcoming solution in the codification of written prophetic books which constitute the true and abiding Word of God.

^{xv} How did the king of Israel know that the king of Syria would be gunning only for him? I take the narrator to imply God’s hand in aligning Ahab’s plan and the Syrian king’s focus; a double-irony arises from the futility of the divinely seen (and arranged) plan of Ahab to alter his destiny, as predicted by Micaiah.

^{xvi} The word used here can mean, “with fullness, completeness, integrity, innocence, or simplicity.” The BDB lexicon says, “i.e., without definite aim.” In short, it was a naïve fluke shot from the shooter’s perspective, but certainly not from God’s!

^{xvii} Literally, “turn your hand.”

^{xviii} Micaiah’s prophecy regarding the safe return of the army, excepting Ahab, is here fulfilled.

^{xix} Archaeological excavations at Samaria have uncovered evidence that coincides with Ahab’s penchant for building and for ivory.