

## Micaiah: Speaking Truth to Power

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I Kings 22:15-28

The prophet Micaiah is somewhat obscure – he does not have a book named after him, and appears only in this one story concerning King Ahab of Israel. He is one of numerous prophets, some not even named, who appear in Israel’s history. The books of *Kings* are often labeled as “books of history” in the Christian *Bible*. But, in the *Jewish Bible* they are part of the second division of scripture, “The Prophets.” I think that properly puts emphasis on their importance as scripture. They give us God’s words of prophesy, and do so in a historical context. The “Former Prophets” are those mentioned in the books *Joshua* through *II Kings*. Except for *Samuel*, these prophets do not have books named for them. Micaiah is one of these “former prophets,” along with Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, and many others.

The context is the reign of King Ahab of Israel, and Jezebel as his queen. Israel is the northern kingdom that broke away from Judah after Solomon’s time. In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures), Chapters 20 and 22 are together. The incident of Naboth’s Vineyard, Chapter 21, may have been misplaced from earlier in the Elijah stories. Still, Elijah reappears later to confront Ahab’s son after Ahab’s death. So, it is difficult to know with confidence where the various Elijah stories fit into the history of Ahab’s wars reported in Chapters 20 and 22.

There were three primary local powers: One was Israel, the Northern Israelite kingdom, with its capitol of Samaria, a city established by King Ahab’s father Omri. The older city Jezreel more or less served as a second capital. Israel was the “northern ten tribes” of the descendants of Jacob, Israel. The Kingdom of Israel was much larger than the Kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, named for the tribe of Judah. The very small tribe of Benjamin had stayed with Judah. The third major local power was Syria, or Aram, with its capital (as now) of Damascus. After the split of Israel from Judah after Solomon, these three kingdoms were usually in alliances fighting against each other. Sometimes the two Israelite kingdoms would ally together against Syria, as in I Kings 22. At others times, Syria would ally with Israel or Judah against the other. Initially, the lesser kingdoms in the area were subject domains, Edom to Judah, and Moab to Israel.

A place that seems to have been particularly fought over between Israel and Syria was Ramoth-gilead. That city had been seized by the Syrians, led by their

King Ben – Haddad, who eventually laid siege to Samaria. With God’s help, the Syrians were defeated (*II Kings* 20). Ben- Haddad was released by King Ahab after promising to return all of the towns he had captured. But he apparently didn’t return Ramoth-gilead. King Ahab decided to do something about that.

So, as the scene opens, King Jehoshaphat of Judah is paying a courtesy call on King Ahab in Samaria. At the time, Jehoshaphat seems to be a junior ally. Jehoshaphat’s son and heir Jehoram was married to Ahab and Jezebel’s daughter, Athaliah. That may have been the occasion for the visit. This may well have been part of the deal by which Jehoshaphat made peace between Judah and Israel. The two kings were holding court in a large open area at the city gate, each on a throne.

Ahab puts his plan before Jehoshaphat, **“Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?”** Jehoshaphat is the junior king. He needs to say “yes.” He answers, **“I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.”** (*I Kings* 22:4) But, then King Jehosophat wisely asks, **“Inquire first for the word of the LORD.”** (v.5) Now, King Ahab had prophets on staff, and perhaps had let them know what they were supposed to say. Maybe that’s being unfair. Perhaps all four hundred had heard from God and unanimously had this prophesy to give to Ahab, **“Go up [to Ramoth-gilead], for the Lord will give it into the hand of the King.”** (v. 6) Notice that these are not prophets of Baal; they are speaking in the name of the Lord. [Our Bible renders the Hebrew “YHWH,” the name of God, as LORD. But what the prophets say here is “Lord,” not quite the same name. “Lord” is the translation of “Adonai”, which name Hebrew readers would substitute aloud for the printed “YHWH”. So, effectively, the two are really the same. These four hundred were prophets of The LORD.]

Apparently Jehoshaphat was not convinced. **“Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?”** (v. 7) Well, yes. Maybe Jehoshaphat knew of Micaiah, and had noticed he was not among those four hundred. Ahab concedes that, yes, there is another. **“... but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil”** (v.8). Ahab sends for him. The messenger makes sure to tell Micaiah what he’s expected to say (v. 13). Meanwhile, the other prophets are putting on a show of support for King Ahab (v. 11-12). That brings us to our scripture reading, vs. 15-23. The two missing verses in our lesson book tell us what happens to Micaiah after he spoke.

**24 Then Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah came near and struck Micaiah on the cheek, and said, “How did the Spirit of the LORD go from me to speak to you?” 25 And Micaiah said, “Behold, you shall see on the day when you go into an inner chamber to hide yourself.”**

Then, in 26-28, King Ahab orders Micaiah locked up until he returns. But King Ahab wasn't stupid. He decided to take precautions to protect himself.

**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 wear your robes.” And the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. 31 Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty two captains of his chariots, “Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel.” 32 And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, “It is surely the king of Israel.” So they turned to fight against him; and Jehoshaphat cried out. 33 And when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. 34 But a certain man drew his bow at a venture, and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate; therefore, he said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn about, and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.”**

Ahab subsequently died that evening and the battle was lost. King Jehoshaphat must have escaped unhurt. We don't have any further words about Micaiah, but I would like to think he would have been released. Ahab's son Ahaziah then briefly became the next King of Israel, followed soon by his brother Joram. King Jehoshaphat continued as king in Judah for 22 more years.

Returning to Micaiah, he faithfully told the King what God had told him to say. It is interesting that he managed to do so while answering the question, “So, why does your testimony contradict what these other 400 said?” The issue was answered on the battlefield. Had Ahab survived, Micaiah would have been exposed as a false prophet, and killed. I think it's important to recognize that God protected Micaiah; he did not let Micaiah's words “fall to the ground.” Micaiah could not count on that. Ahab could have had him killed then and there. God could have showed mercy to Ahab, as had happened before in the case of Naboth's Vineyard (21:27-29). Micaiah was faithful to God's service, and seemingly had been before as well. God gave him words to help him stand up to those other 400 prophets.

Did God really plant a false message to be conveyed by those other prophets, as Micaiah describes? Or, did they merely reply to the king what he wanted to hear, like the messenger urged Micaiah to do? We don't really know. After Ahab's death, did the new king have those four hundred killed for being false prophets? Probably not; you would think there would have been mention of it, as for those killed by Elijah after the events on Mount Carmel. One way or the other, being a prophet was dangerous. Being a king's son was too. Eventually the seventy sons (male descendants ?) of Ahab were all killed, as well as the one who followed his next heir on the throne, when Jehu became king. The same kind of killing off of all of the heirs of the previous king had already happened twice before in Israel's short history.

The author discusses "the role of the prophet" in the lesson on pages 52 to 53, but each prophet was different. Micaiah's message isn't even described here, except for this prediction of doom for Ahab if he goes to fight at Ramath-gilead. The writer of Kings is clear on what he considers the sins of King Ahab. He writes, **"Indeed, there was no one the like of Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the Israelites."** (*I Kings 21:25-26*)

The sin is first and foremost idolatry, turning away from the LORD. Offenses such as killing Naboth for his vineyard are secondary, and a consequence of seeing himself, as most kings, unaccountable to anyone, even God. Notice the parallel to David, who had Uriah killed in order to cover up his sin with Bathsheba. But there's an important difference. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David repented, and showed his love for God. Ahab showed signs of repentance, such as at Mount Carmel, and after being confronted by Elijah, but never followed through.

Throughout the books of *Kings*, it is to the king that prophets come. They are not challenging the nature of social structures, inequities, or other present-day issues. They are completely focused on the idolatry issue. That would change. After Ahab, the prophet Elisha typically does NOT go to challenge kings. He's more likely to be helping them. He does things to help individuals. Likely his great wealth helped sustain the companies of prophets that were important in Israel. He may have had a role in preserving the words and actions of these "former" prophets. Hosea and Amos did not go to kings; they went to the people of Israel. It is as if after Ahab, God had completely given up on the monarchy.

The Kings were supposed to be intermediaries. When the people first wanted a king, and Saul became the first king of Israel, it was because they didn't want to have to be responsible to God themselves. The King would deal with God, and also lead the Israelites in battle to protect them, both against foreign enemies, and from God's displeasure. He would make them do what God required. At least, that was the idea. In the Northern Kingdom of Israel, there was not one king credited as "good." All of them, including both competent administrators like Ahab and Jeroboam II later, and incompetent ones, put themselves and their interest in power first. That meant putting God second, if considered at all. So, in that day, yes, prophets went to the king. In Judah, there were good kings as well as bad. But, ultimately the institution of kingship failed. Perhaps that was inevitable.

Later in Israel, and even in Judah, prophets went to the people, not just the king. Amos and Jeremiah are good examples. In the waning days of the monarchy, the prophets called attention to how individuals other than the king were behaving. Not just idolatry, but also injustices against others. That was new. Earlier, the king was supposed to see that there was justice, and that God was worshiped. That change in the destination of the message was followed, in Exile, by a different message. Prophets like Ezekiel brought a message of hope for those who turned back to God. We will be seeing that in the words of Isaiah of the Exile next week.

We no longer have kings in our day. But, there are those who would make themselves all-powerful. They promise to fix things, to order life for the benefit of those who follow them. They ask people to trust them, but their ultimate purpose is their own power. They are false gods, just as the kings and emperors of antiquity, though clothed in modern social language and ideals. There are also those who call for us to adore the idols of various kinds of our day. They tempt people to put themselves and their own interests first. There is no one single power comparable to a king in this country, thankfully, but there are many who would grasp for such power given a chance. We, as Christians, must continue to put God first, and call others to do so also. Is that prophesy? No, but it's a way we all can live, in keeping with what God intends, and with guidance by the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: *Shepherd God, show us the path of life that relies on faith in you and dares to speak truth to power. Amen.*