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Zdzisław Pawłowski
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
zpawlowski_55@o2.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-3042-351X

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Inspiration, Truth, and History in 1 Kings 22:1–28: A Narrative Hermeneutics Perspective

Natchnienie, prawda i historia w 1 Krl 22,1–28. Perspektywa hermeneutyki narracji

Abstract. Inspiration can be approached from a formal perspective by attempting to use texts of the Bible to justify what has been defined at the level of doctrine. However, one may also try to start with the biblical text itself and, instead of looking to it to confirm the presence of inspiration, examine the manner in which inspiration is portrayed in that text. There is one type of biblical narrative that offers a special insight into the complex nature of inspiration—a nature that defies easy explanation. Here, the figure of the prophet, often acting as a starting point for a theological development of the question of inspiration, becomes part of the narrative structure and plays a specific role within it. The purpose of such prophetic stories is to convey a public message that carries some sort of argument and, at the same time, responds to specific contextual needs and employs specific rhetorical strategies. This approach is exemplified by the narrative in 1 Kings 22:1–28, where a group of prophets led by Zedekiah confronts Micaiah, and the two parties deliver two conflicting oracles about the war for Ramoth-gilead. The juxtaposition of the two prophetic discourses reveals the complexity of the problem of inspiration and truth within a specific historical context. Analyzed from the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, the story establishes a common ground for a constructive dialogue between Scripture and its reader, placing on the latter the burden of a responsible interpretation that takes into account the presence of the word of God in human history and the ambiguity of the religious language that attempts to describe it.

Streszczenie. Do natchnienia można podejść od strony formalnej, próbując tekstami Biblii uzasadnić to, co na płaszczyźnie doktryny zostało zdefiniowane. Można jednak spróbować wyjść od tekstu biblijnego, nie szukając w nim potwierdzenia natchnienia, lecz badając, w jaki sposób jest ono tam przedstawione. Szczególny wgląd w jego złożoną i opierającą się łatwym wyjaśnieniom naturę, odsłania jeden typ biblijnych opowiadań, w których osoba proroka, będąca często punktem wyjścia dla teologicznego rozwinięcia natchnienia, zostaje wpisana w strukturę narracji i spełnia w niej określoną

rolę. Celem tych prorockich opowieści jest zakomunikowanie publicznego przesłania, niosącego jakiś rodzaj argumentu, a jednocześnie odnoszącego się do specyficznych, kontekstualnych potrzeb i stosującego określone strategie retoryczne. Ilustracją tego podejścia jest opowiadanie zawarte w 1 Krl 22,1-28, gdzie grupa proroków pod wodzą Sedecjasza konfrontuje się z Micheaszem, przekazując dwie sprzeczne ze sobą wyrocznie w sprawie wojny o Ramot w Gileadzie. Zestawienie obu dyskursów prorockich pokazuje złożoność problematyki natchnienia i prawdy, usytuowanych w konkretnym kontekście historycznym. Analizowane z perspektywy hermeneutyki narracji opowiadanie tworzy wspólną płaszczyznę dla konstruktywnego dialogu między Pismem i czytelnikiem, przenosząc na tego ostatniego wymaganie odpowiedzialnej interpretacji, uwzględniającej obecność słowa Bożego w ludzkiej historii i biorącej pod uwagę niejednoznaczność języka religijnego, próbującego ją opisać.

Keywords: inspiration, truth, lying spirit, narrative hermeneutics, history, prophecy, revelation.

Słowa kluczowe: natchnienie, prawda, duch kłamstwa, hermeneutyka narracji, historia, proroctwo, objawienie.

Introduction

In his reflections on the idea of revelation, Paul Ricoeur (1981, 78) asks if the classical theory of inspiration has perhaps missed the instruction proper to the narrative genre and suggests that more attention should be paid to the events being recounted. John Barton (1990) adds that in the historical books that make up the collection of the Former Prophets (Joshua to 2 Kings), "there is a strong tendency to present the history in such a way that the prophetic message is shown to be exemplified in the events that befell" (51). In consequence, the manner in which these events are presented must take into account the rhetoric of the prophecy, because that rhetoric affects the storyline which needs to be followed in order to recognize the dynamics of prophetic inspiration—not so much in its theological interpretation, which refers to selected philosophical categories, as in the sequence of events in which the word of God intervenes in human history. The prophets do not receive their message passively. On the contrary, they are actively involved in their contemporary social and political situations, analyzing them from an ethical and theological perspective (see Barton 1990, 52–53). The purpose of their discourse is to convey a publicly available message that contains some kind of argument pertaining to the specific contextual needs

of the community of Israel at a given point in history and employs a wide range of rhetorical strategies to convince its recipients (see Kelle 2006, 63).

As a theological construct, inspiration focuses too one-sidedly on the effects of God's action on man and His influence on man's cognitive powers,[1] disregarding the fact that it is set in a specific historical context which may affect what takes place between the prophet on the one part and God and the recipients of His message on the other. This bottom-up view of the concept of inspiration that manifests itself in biblical narratives avoids defining inspiration solely as a formal principle that determines the reader's attitude towards Scripture regardless of its content, which raises the question of whether all that can be found in the Bible is *equally* inspired and intended by God. The extent of inspiration may vary depending on the literary genre, which also entails a varying degree of reference to truth. Inspiration can be approached from a theological perspective by attempting to use texts of the Bible to justify what has been defined at the level of doctrine (see Zatwardnicki 2022, 125–144[2]). However, one may also try to start with the biblical text itself and, instead of looking to it to confirm some theory of inspiration, examine the manner in which inspiration is portrayed in that text.

There is one type of biblical narrative that offers a special insight into the complex nature of inspiration—a nature that defies easy explanation. Here, the figure of the prophet, often acting as a starting point for a theological development of the question of inspiration, becomes part of the narrative structure and plays a specific role within it. A unique example of this type of narrative is the account given in 1 Kings 22:1–28, which tells of events that involve Ahab, king of Israel and the war that he waged on the king of Aram (Syria) to regain the lost territory of Ramoth-gilead. Before the war broke out, acting at the instigation of his ally Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and following the ancient Middle Eastern custom rooted in the close relationship between politics and religion, Ahab had gathered 400 prophets and asked them for an oracle to legitimize his plans as the will of God (see Wray Beal 2014, 283).

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[1] This general view of inspiration stems from a trend in the rabbinical tradition that treats the revelation contained in the Torah (which is the subject of inspiration) as God's exclusive action, with man being completely passive. For a broader discussion of this subject, see Toorn 2013, 18.

[2] Also note the bibliography provided by the author.

1. The Kings (Three), the Prophets (Many), and God (One) on the War against Aram: 1 Kings 22:1–28[3]

The story opens with the scene of a meeting between Ahab and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and the council that they are holding with regard to the war against the kingdom of Aram (1 Kings 22:2–4). Once the council is over, the two kings sit on their thrones at the gate of Samaria to hear the prophets who are gathered there. This is the place where the rulers pursue real politics, especially with regard to matters of such importance to the lives of nations as war. Throughout the story, this setting remains constant while the prophets and their oracles change in succession. The prophets' varied rhetoric, recognizable in the grammar of the religious language that they use, has an effect on the main actors, shaping the course of events in which they are entangled. This is why the narrative under study can be a litmus test, so to say, that reveals the nature of inspiration in the narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible (see Quine 2018, 204–205).

The whole chain of events is set in motion by the intention of the king of Israel to go to battle against Aram, in alliance with Jehoshaphat, in order to restore the integrity of the land of Israel.[4] Jehoshaphat, however, demands that proper religious practice be observed by first inquiring for the word of YHWH (1 Kings 22:5) (see Moberly 2003, 4). So, Ahab calls upon his 400 prophets, but instead of asking them about the word of YHWH as requested by Jehoshaphat, he inquires whether he should wage the war for Ramoth-gilead or abandon his plans.[5] This manner of consultation is the first of many indications that the king's intentions are dishonest. The prophets who arrive at his command seem to be subordinated to political power (see 1 Kings 18:19), which suggests that they will say what the king wants to hear (see Brueggemann 2000, 269; Moberly

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[3] The boundaries of this text are clearly delineated. The passage in question recounts the events that focus around the prophetic consultation taking place at the gate of Samaria, concerning the war against Aram. In the next episode (verses 29–38), the story moves on to the battlefield at Ramoth-gilead and describes Ahab's death as foretold by Micaiah.

[4] See Judges 11:12–28, where Jephthah engages in a dispute with the Ammonites as to who owns the land of Gilead.

[5] The number of prophets brings to mind the events of Mount Carmel, where Ahab was to gather 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah as commanded by Elijah (1 Kings 18:19–20). However, 1 Kings 18:40 only mentions the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, which may indicate that the latter simply did not answer the king's call. See Wray Beal 2014, 284.

2003, 4). This calls into question their ability to speak on behalf of YHWH. In this sense, the fact that they are formally prophets does not guarantee that what they proclaim comes from God. Therefore, even at this level, the issue of inspiration becomes quite complicated because economic dependence on political power may influence a prophet's conduct.

What turns out to be even more problematic is the prophets' oracle: "Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:6, ESV). The whole sentence is structured as a general prediction, without specifying who the "Lord" is (as the term "Adonai" may refer to both Baal and YHWH), who or what will be given, and into the hand of which king—Ahab, Jehoshaphat, or perhaps the king of Aram (see Walsh 1996, 345; Wray Beal 2014, 284; Miller 2014, 50). In consequence, it can be interpreted in more than one way, and yet, on account of its generality, each interpretation will appear true, and its outcome will be confirmed regardless of how the war progresses. Naturally, due to the specific circumstances in which the oracle is pronounced, that is, the kings' war council, its recipient—the king of Israel—reads it to his advantage. In his interpretation, he adds to it what is missing and what he would like to hear, namely, that he will be the victor in the war that he has planned. Thus, the king interprets the generic-sounding prophecy in a way that is favorable to him. In a similar process of speculation, the prophecy is given the status of a statement that comes from God. This demonstrates that the matter of inspiration is playing out in a tense confrontation between the expectations of the kings (recipients) who are looking for specific guidance from God and the rather vague prophecies being given by the prophets. The number of 400 prophets pronouncing the same prophecy also has its significance, especially when they are juxtaposed with the lone figure of Micaiah: a word attested to by many has a greater power of persuasion on the hearers than that of an individual. All these nuances related to the circumstances in which the prophecy is being pronounced put the issue of inspiration in a complex and ambiguous light.

The matter becomes even more complicated when, despite the sizeable gathering of the king's prophets, the omission of the name of YHWH in their oracle raises doubts in the mind of Jehoshaphat, who asks for another consultation—this time from someone who is not a member of that group. In contrast to his first request, he now specifically says that he wants to hear what a prophet of YHWH, that is, a prophet who is not one of those dependent on Ahab, has to say on the matter. To sustain his alliance with Jehoshaphat, the king of Israel must grant his demand. He has one more man at his disposal through whom he may

seek YHWH's advice. That man is Micaiah, son of Imlah, but the king hates him because "he never prophesies good concerning [him], but evil" (1 Kings 22:8). Focusing on his authority rather than on seeking the truth, Ahab is concerned that Micaiah's prophecy may thwart the war plans which he has already laid out (1 Kings 22:4) (see Walsh 1996, 346). Jehoshaphat, however, takes Micaiah's side, and the king of Israel is forced to call upon him.

As the messenger sets off to summon Micaiah, Ahab attempts to give credence to the favorable prophecy by staging a public hearing of all the prophets before the two kings, who, sitting on their thrones at the gate of Samaria, invest the event with an institutional dimension and thus raise the status of the prophecy and make it more difficult to challenge (see Moberly 2003, 6). The person playing the lead role in that performance is Zedekiah, son of Chenaanah: as the leader of the entire assembly, he is to act as a positive counterbalance to Micaiah, who is expected to arrive later. Zedekiah's speech is not addressed to the king of Israel, who has already made up his mind about going to war against Aram, but to the king of Judah, who is still hesitating. Therefore, Zedekiah changes the rhetoric of his prophecy by prefacing it with the messenger formula, which is used deliberately in this case to emphasize that he is going to speak on behalf of YHWH (something that was missing in the first prophecy and demanded by the king of Judah), thus preempting what Micaiah might say. Putting on the horns of iron (a symbol of invincible strength), he invokes the blessing pronounced by Moses to Ephraim, son of Joseph (Deuteronomy 33:17), and in a spectacular symbolic gesture (see Walsh 1996, 347), he announces: "Thus says the Lord,[6] 'With these [horns] you shall push the Syrians until they are destroyed'" (1 Kings 22:11) (see Monson 2009, 348–349). Overcome by the common enthusiasm, the remaining prophets encourage the king: "Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:12) (see Walsh 1996, 347). In this more specific version of the prophecy, the victory of the king of Israel is presented as an effect of YHWH's action. Is this how it has in fact been interpreted by the two rulers? In earlier conflicts with Aram, Ahab received two different prophecies: that of victory (1 Kings 20:13,14, and in particular 1 Kings 20:28) and that of disaster (1 Kings 20:42). The former became fulfilled when he

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[6] The messenger formula is a conventional way of introducing prior prophecies and attesting to their divine origin. See 1 Kings 11:31; 12:24; 13:2,21; 14:7; 17:14; 20:13,14,28; 21:19. Since it did not introduce a false prophecy in any of these episodes, the hearers are convinced that it carries the true word of God.

defeated the king of Aram, whereas the latter, of which he was reminded by Elijah when he intervened after the murder of Naboth, was suspended to a degree when Ahab humbled himself before God (1 Kings 21:19–29). Therefore, it seems that with regard to the next war against Aram, the king of Israel is convinced that—in accordance with his prophets' oracle—a favorable outcome is guaranteed by God. Does this mean that Micaiah's word will not be needed anymore?

Meanwhile, Ahab's messenger reaches Micaiah with the "message of the day"[7] that the prophet's oracle should be consistent with what the king's prophets have agreed upon (1 Kings 22:13). Those participating in the council are probably not aware of these behind-the-scenes instructions, but their uncovering puts into question the entire procedure for consulting YHWH. The inclusion of this scene in the structure of the story makes it difficult to resist the impression that the events have been prearranged by the king, reducing the inquiry about God's will to a religious manipulation. So, how does Micaiah act in this situation? He does not promise to tell the truth. Instead, he says that he will only announce what YHWH says to him (1 Kings 22:14) (see Wray Beal 2014, 284). By doing so, he points to the subjective nature of God's revelation and, importantly, to the need for an *up-to-date* consultation with Him, leaving the matter open and presuming that he does not yet know what God's word is going to be.

When Micaiah joins the war council, the king repeats the question previously posed to the 400 prophets, but he does this sarcastically so as to discredit the prophet in the eyes of the king of Judah. For that purpose, he changes the grammatical form from the singular to the plural: instead of asking "shall *I* go to battle" (Miller 2014, 50), he asks "shall *we* go, or shall we refrain," thus pointing to Jehoshaphat in addition to himself. Micaiah answers him in the same vein. However, instead of addressing the two kings, he only addresses Ahab and parodies the earlier prophecy of his prophets: "Go up and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king" (1 Kings 22:15, cf. 1 Kings 22:12) (see Rainbow 2019, 554–555). The name of YHWH is used sarcastically here (which should be taken into account when formulating the theory of inspiration). Obviously, the king could end the prophetic consultation at this point: even though he has sensed the sarcasm in Micaiah's voice (Rainbow 2019, 554–555), he has nevertheless heard what he expected to hear from the prophet. So, why does he continue the

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[7] In some translations of 1 Kings 22:5, the words "this day" or "today" are used with reference to the beginning of the war council, and the prophets' initial oracle is repeated in subsequent scenes, thus becoming the "message of the day."

hearing and demand that Micaiah only speak the truth in the name of YHWH (1 Kings 22:16)?[8]

There is a hint of surprise in the king's response because he did not expect that the one who had never prophesied good things about him would foretell success this time. Therefore, he allows for the possibility that the good prophecy might not necessarily be true (Talstra 2009, 368). His caution is dictated by the earlier prophecies of defeat spoken by other prophets (see 1 Kings 20:42–43; 21:21), and it is precisely to these prophecies that Micaiah is referring when he hastily pronounces disaster (1 Kings 22:17). This is a response to Ahab's last question, concerning the truth, rather than the first one, that is, whether to go to battle or refrain. In the prophet's vision, it is not the king who comes first but Israel: leaderless, scattered, and having no shepherd, whereas the prophecies of the court prophets only speak of the king and his splendor as the victorious ruler (cf. 1 Kings 20). Micaiah points to the central purpose of the search for God's revelation, which is the fate of the entire nation rather than the short-term needs of its king. What is at stake here is therefore the truth that pertains to Israel's identity in its historical transformations. God is more concerned about the people's safe return home than about the fate of the king and his territorial ambitions. The only reference to the king is the word "lord" (*adonai*), which alludes to the first prophecy of the 400 prophets. Micaiah uses it to reduce their initial message to a verbal balancing act that relies on the ambiguity of certain words. This indicates that the king's prophets may be "speaking less than the truth" and that the readers must therefore "contemplate the possibility that such a formal and symbolically resonant gathering […] may in fact be a sham, an elaborate fraud" (Moberly 2003, 6).

Ahab's reaction to the prophecy is key to the further course of the consultation and to the final decision concerning the war. He turns to Jehoshaphat, seeking confirmation that he was right in his judgment of Micaiah as someone who—as the king predicted—would pronounce disaster rather than success. He attempts to convince the king of Judah that the words of the prophecy are dictated by the prophet's personal resentment towards the king rather than by God's advice.[9] Since Micaiah has repeatedly prophesied evil, what Ahab is sug-

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[8] See also a similar situation in Jeremiah 42:1–6, where the leaders of the survivors of the Babylonian invasion repeatedly assure Jeremiah that they will abide by what the Lord says to them through him.

[9] Jeremiah's prophecy in Jeremiah 43:1–3 was met with a similar response. There, a conspiracy theory was devised, blaming Baruch for influencing the prophet's views.

gesting seems very plausible and undoubtedly sows the seeds of doubt in Jehoshaphat's mind. Still, the decision as to which of the messages—that of good or that of evil—comes from God is far from obvious to those participating in the war council. For Ahab, Micaiah's version of truth equals the evil that is to befall him (Talstra 2009, 368).

Undaunted by the king's opinion, the prophet continues his speech by presenting another vision, investing it with the status of the word of YHWH (1 Kings 22:19) that is addressed directly to Ahab (see Walsh 1996, 350). He leaves the kings' war council for a moment to attend God's council, where he sits as an observer and witness. How has he found himself there? Firstly, by breaking continuity with the hermeneutics of the oracles pronounced by the court prophets, which he did when—after Ahabs's intervention that he should only speak the truth in the name of YHWH—he mocked the prophets' favorable oracle and foretold a defeat as a result of which Israel would be kingless. Secondly, by changing the rhetorical structure of his speech. By asking his prophets a disjunctive question, that is, whether to go to battle or not, Ahab sets a trap not only for them but also for God and for himself. As the king, he sets the conditions that reduce God's answer to two options, thus reducing His sovereignty: He is to answer either "yes" or "no" to the king's question.[10] By transposing himself into God's consultative council, Micaiah emphasizes his independence from political power. He ignores the question of "shall we go or shall we refrain" and builds his vision in a dyadic structure whereby he puts the two options next to each other. In this manner, he distributes the risk and responsibility between the king who seeks God's will and the prophet who delivers God's revelation to him.[11] It is upon the king to choose which of the two options is inspired by God, and if both are, then which one is true.

During the spectacular performance in which Zedekiah runs around with horns of iron on his head, clearly signaling Ahab's expected victory over Aram, Micaiah portrays a different scene as an alternative to the kings' war council. He refrains from using the messenger formula employed by Zedekiah and instead offers an argument that encompasses the situation in which his prophecy of disaster clashes with the prophecy of victory pronounced by the 400 prophets. In his appeal directed to Ahab, "therefore hear the word of the Lord" (1 Kings

[10] A similar trap is set for Jesus by His opponents in Mark 12:14.

[11] I am referring here to the pertinent observations presented in Rainbow 2019, 537–557.

22:19), the key part is the "word of the Lord," which is what Jehoshaphat demanded at the beginning of the narrative (1 Kings 22:5). Micaiah juxtaposes the image of the kings sitting on their thrones at the gate of Samaria with the vision of the one throne on which God is seated, with the hosts of heaven on his right hand and on his left hand (see Walsh 1996, 350–351). The decisions made on earth as part of the *Realpolitik* are confronted with the decisions of YHWH, who looks at the historical events from above, from the perspective of social equity—violated by Ahab with regard to Naboth (see Sweeney 2007, 491). A rejection of His word will have consequences for both kings, since the prophecy of the extinction of Ahab's dynasty will partly include the descendants of Jehoshaphat (see 2 Kings 9–11).

Micaiah's position is extremely difficult. His meeting with Ahab is not taking place in a private setting (cf. Jeremiah 38:14–16) that would offer him some sense of security. Instead, "he must face a meeting in a formal, public, symbolically charged context whose every dimension underlines the authority of the hostile king" (Moberly 2003, 6). He feels the pressure to conform to the expectations of the two rulers and, at the same time, has to confront the enthusiastic reception of the favorable oracle of the 400 prophets. Despite that, he continues his prophecy, anticipating the accusation that the king has not had the opportunity to know all the truth and therefore embarked on the path towards disaster. He uses the same communicative strategy as Nathan did towards David in 2 Samuel 12:1–4, which essentially means not stating the obvious and instead making the point in an implicit manner (see Moberly 2003, 9). Thus, he cannot repeat the previous oracle, because it has been rejected. Rather, he needs to put the king in a position where he has to make the choice himself. Micaiah does not portray God as someone who, by virtue of His omniscience and supreme authority, passes judgment on the king. Quite the opposite, he presents God in a role similar to that of Ahab, sitting on His throne (as the monarch) and asking his council: "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" (1 Kings 22:20). How should this question be interpreted? Does it contain a predication about God, or should it be read as an element of the discourse that is taking place between those participating in the story? In his commentary on the scene in question, Walter Brueggemann says that this is a statement about God and, as such, points to a certain feature of His character which needs to be taken into account in the construction of biblical theology. By deceiving Ahab with the use of the lying spirit in the mouths of his prophets, God turns out to be untrustworthy in this event (see Brueggemann 1997, 360–362). However, in his

interpretation, Brueggemann has devoted too little attention to the structure of the story and the course of events that it describes, disregarding the entire rhetorical aspect of the narrative and the position of the narrator. If the question is taken merely as a statement about God, then there are two options: one may either (a) start defending God as someone who cannot deceive anyone because it is contrary to His nature as a veracious person, thus shifting the blame to the historical context and the imperfection of this phase of revelation, or (b) attack Him as an untrustworthy figure, stripping the text of its authority as sacred or inspired word. Such interpretative strategies reflect implicit hermeneutical assumptions adopted in biblical theology, whose primary objective is to make statements about God which are abstracted from the narrative structure of the text (see Talstra 2009, 358).

A narrative analysis that takes into account the development of the story and the rhetorical aspects of the dialogues contained within it offers a different perspective on the events and on the role of YHWH. Micaiah's first oracle foresaw disaster. If he had not gone further, it would have been read in the spirit of Elijah's oracle in 1 Kings 21:20–26, and there would have been no issue as to the trustworthiness of a God who deceives the king. However, that oracle was rejected by Ahab, who chose to consider his prophets' oracles as true instead. In fact, it is these prophets that the vision from God's council is pointed against. In Micaiah's view, God does not intend to deceive the king, for if He did, he would not have revealed it, because no one betrays their true intentions before putting them in motion (Miller 2014, 53). Rather, God tries to show who is truly deceiving the king: his own prophets whom he retains at this court and who have a personal interest in telling him only what he wants to hear instead of what God wants to tell him. God's resolution in 1 Kings 22:22–23, which associates disaster with the lying spirit who speaks through the mouths of the king's prophets, does not precede the vision; it takes place after it (see Talstra 2009, 369). By pronouncing his oracles in that order, Micaiah foretells that defeat is inevitable if the king follows what his prophets are telling him. This stands in opposition to the thesis presented in some commentaries that God had planned Ahab's death in advance and used deceit to bring about what He had intended. Micaiah forces the king to confront the problem of using religious language to confirm previous decisions and only invoking God's name to invest those decisions with divine credence. The temporal sequence of events revealed by the structure of the story is important here, because the king had wanted to go to war for Ramoth-gilead before he commenced the prophetic consultation at Jehoshaphat's request.

In the vision of God's council, Micaiah goes back to that very moment, mimicking the kings' war council at the gate of Samaria. To understand the phenomenon of inspiration portrayed in the narrative, it is important not to overlook the time shifts in its structure. By using the word "entice," Micaiah tries to expose the hidden motives behind the king's question and the favorable oracle of his prophets. He reveals to them the truth that both the king and his prophets are engaged in a cynical game in their own interest rather than in the interest of Israel. So, does God Himself deceive Ahab to carry out His plan of destroying him (Moberly 2003, 10)? Jonah's example demonstrates that a disaster foreordained by God can be revoked—in that case due to the conversion of Nineveh. Therefore, the narrative raises a fundamental hermeneutical problem: someone has found themselves in a situation in which they need to tell between two conflicting voices which represent opposing views and, at the same time, claim with equal force to speak in the name of God (Moberly 2003, 15). The king must decide which of the two sides is telling the truth with regard to the matter at hand. Ahab's prophets are not simple and naive men who speak in good faith in the name of a God who has wrongfully deceived them (Moberly 2003, 23). Both the king and his prophets are entangled in a complex web of economic, political, and religious dependencies and motivated by different things in their actions. As for God, He does not act upon people without regard for their historical situation. Rather, His word enters their circumstances with all the repercussions, uncovering hidden intentions. Therefore, Micaiah's task is to expose the use of the language of divine revelation as an instrument of deceit to serve political power. Here, it is the close relationship between prophecy and politics that lays bare the falsity of the prophetic revelation, thus undermining the court prophets' claim to divine inspiration (see Block 1997, 434[12]).

As he listens to Micaiah, Ahab learns about the events that took place at God's royal council. He has all the information he needs to make the right decision. Should he give credence to the oracle given by the 400 prophets who depend on him, or should he trust the word of Micaiah, who has on many occasions demonstrated his independence (see Talstra 2009, 371)? He even has an inkling that Micaiah's prophecy is true, but he chooses to follow the path shown by the court prophets. What are his reasons? Having set the war machine in motion,

[12] The author analyzes a similar situation described in Ezekiel 14:1–11, and in particular in verses 9–11, where a reference is made to a prophet who lets himself be deceived by a man who seeks God's advice through him.

he cannot take a step back without compromising his reputation and authority as the king. This, in turn, means that prior to the Assyrian/Babylonian disaster, every king was caught in a web of institutionalized social, economic, and religious dependencies which prevented him from accepting the truth pronounced by the prophets. Thus, the books of Kings describe the failure of prophecy in confrontation with political power.

Micaiah's vision is not left unanswered. Zedekiah responds to it on behalf of the group of prophets of which he is the leader. He has to defend not only his reputation as a prophet of YHWH, but also his position in the royal court. Since he considers himself a true prophet of YHWH (Sweeney 2007, 491), he feels offended by the suggestion that his prophecy is inspired by the lying spirit. So, he demonstrates his anger by publicly striking Micaiah on the cheek (1 Kings 22:24). This act of physical violence is a continuation of the symbolic action with the horns of iron and is a manifestation of the power of force over the power of argument. To justify his use of violence, Zedekiah addresses a sarcastic question to Micaiah in order to ridicule and humiliate him in the eyes of those listening, especially the kings who witness this prophetic confrontation: "How did the Spirit of the Lord go from me to speak to you?" (1 Kings 22:24).

Which theory of inspiration is behind this question? According to Zedekiah, the chief theologian of the house of Ahab, there is one spirit of YHWH, and it cannot go from prophet to prophet to convey two conflicting oracles. The chronology of the prophets' speeches during the kings' war council clearly indicates that the spirit first spoke through Zedekiah, therefore it could not have been present in what Micaiah later said. This view of inspiration is construed from a position of power: it is backed by political authority and given religious credence by the remaining prophets. Micaiah is alone, completely alienated. He has nobody to stand behind him (cf. the case of Jeremiah and the list of individuals who stood up for him in Jeremiah 26). King Jehoshaphat, who initially appeared to be on his side, remains silent. His silence is meaningful because it suggests that he has let himself be convinced by Ahab and his prophets.

Micaiah's response is not an attack on Zedekiah but a continuation of the earlier prophecy: he foretells disaster to the court prophet, too, saying that he will share the fate of the king for whom he has foretold success (1 Kings 22:25) (see Walsh 1996, 351). Ahab understands the meaning of this prophecy, which is why he has Micaiah put in prison and left there on bread and water until he comes back in peace (1 Kings 22:26–27). Thus, he confronts the oracle of disaster with the certainty of victory. And yet, Micaiah has the last word, undermining Ahab's

confidence and indicating with a conditional sentence that the fate of his oracle and the fate of the king are intertwined and depend on God: "If you return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me" (1 Kings 22:28). With this sentence, he opens his prophecy to empirical verification by future historical events. In this respect, his prophecy differs considerably from the oracles of the court prophets, which are declarations closed to any form of verification by experience and thus—even in their linguistic formulations, despite the references to the name of YHWH—do not make the course of future events dependent on God (cf. Jeremiah 23:9–32). Micaiah knows that God cannot stop the prophets from prophesying on His behalf, but He can test the veracity of their oracles in accordance with Deuteronomy 18:22: "When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken." In that manner, the criterion of fulfillment links God's word with history, binding the events being foretold to their future consequences (see Brueggemann 2001, 195).

2. Truth and Inspiration in 1 Kings 22:1–28

In the ancient Middle East, the use of religious ideology in the service of political power followed a set pattern in which a king's victory was his god's victory, and his defeat was a defeat of the gods (see 1 Samuel 4). Micaiah's vision overturns this order: Ahab's defeat is not YHWH's defeat (which could then make Him appear inferior to the gods of Aram), because it has been foreseen by Him. Without that vision, the sequence of events recounted in 1 Kings 22 could lead to the conclusion that losing the battle for Ramoth-gilead is tantamount to YHWH being defeated by the gods of Aram. By foretelling Israel's failure, Micaiah's prophecy protects God's authority from negative consequences (see Quine 2018, 206 ff). This is because all the consultations concerning the war against Aram are conducted before the decisive battle, which means that religion is being used in service of the ideology of war. This, in consequence, raises the question of whether all religious statements are true and reliable. YHWH does not want or intend to misguide Ahab; rather, He hopes to cause remorse and dissuade the king from going to battle. He has been giving the king some hints which the latter should have recognized if only he was listening carefully. He does not reveal the whole truth at once, but does so gradually, beginning with the false promise of victory. The whole truth is to be revealed to the king at the right time (see Miller 2014, 48–49).

God is present in two prophetic discourses: one coming from Zedekiah, who represents Ahab's 400 prophets, and the other from Micaiah, who is referred to as a prophet of YHWH. Both the former and the latter speak in the name of YHWH, which puts the two kings in a position of uncertainty because they have to choose which oracle they should trust. What criteria can they apply to determine which prophecy is true? The ambiguity in Micaiah's response to Ahab's first question, that is, whether he should go to battle, should have already alarmed the king—not only because Micaiah repeated the earlier oracle of the court prophets, but also because of the history of the king's earlier encounters with Elijah and the anonymous prophet in the context of the first war against Aram (1 Kings 20). Both prophets, being independent of the royal court like Micaiah, foretold disaster (1 Kings 20:42; 21:21), but the king prefers not to recall that because neither oracle has yet been fulfilled. Conversely, the prophecy of victory over Aram foretold in 1 Kings 20:13 was fulfilled immediately. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Ahab follows the favorable prophecy because the criterion of fulfillment acts in its favor. The timespan between the prophecy and its fulfillment is short, which is why the good prophecy is so alluring. The forecast of disaster needs more time to become fulfilled, which is why Elijah, as he was foretelling disaster to Ahab, reminded the king of what had happened to the house of Jeroboam and the house of Baasha (1 Kings 21:22–24). Thus, with regard to the prophecy of disaster, the criterion of fulfillment has been met by invoking the events of the past. And yet, the king of Israel is unwilling to heed history's lesson, even though the pattern of disaster has repeated itself more frequently than that of success. It appears that his position of power and the previous victory make him susceptible to deception. His prophets are unable to read history in a longer perspective, either, and remain complacent due to the recent victory. The lying spirit that was put into the mouths of the court prophets feeds upon this short-term history, which makes it impossible to extract meta-historical patterns that reveal themselves in the longer term.

This dual temporal perspective of short-term and long-term history offers a solution to the problem of the reliability of religious language in the Bible. Interpretations that characterize God as an untrustworthy figure in certain stories, including 1 Kings 22:1–28, which cater to the postmodern sensitivities, typically disregard the rhetorical aspects—such as the status of the narrator. God does not appear in the Bible without mediation by a narrator who presents the plot of the story to the readers, even if that narrator is completely invisible (as if the story was telling itself). Therefore, the question is not whether and when God

is trustworthy, but whether the narrator who tells us about God or conveys His words is always reliable, and why the biblical authors felt the need to introduce the figure of an unreliable narrator who conveys "God's message." The interplay between the reliable and unreliable narrator in a biblical text forces the reader to interpret the text in such a manner that he or she engages in the discussion between the two narrators and has to decide whose side to take (see Miller 2014, 53–54). This is not simply a question of false and true prophecy but of different forms of religion, hence the importance of the status of the prophets in confrontation with political power. The prophets evoke a crisis where none had been perceived and typically stand in opposition to political power (see Brueggemann 1997, 624–625). Therefore, the close relationship between religion and politics has to raise suspicion—also when someone in the service of the latter speaks of God in very elevated words.

In view of the above, one might ask what degree of truth has been assigned to the unreliable narrator, and, if his existence is accepted, why he has been introduced into the structure of the biblical narratives in the first place. It seems that the Hebrew Bible has no issue discrediting a religious tradition that pertains to (pagan) idols, but matters become more complicated with regard to a prophecy which—within the framework of the biblical monotheism—associates the name of God with a specific political option, thus encroaching on His sovereignty. From the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, inspiration has a varied nature and contains a varying amount of truth that is determined by the literary structure of the book and the rhetorical strategies used in it. In consequence, from the perspective of the development of the story and the dialogues that take place within it and are interpreted by the readers, another important question is whether anyone in the story has been misled or deceived. An analysis of the structure of the text and the discourse that it carries makes the story similar to a court case in which it is not God who is being tried but the kings and the readers. The purpose of Micaiah's first, favorable prophecy, which he repeats after the court prophets, is to provoke the king to accept the revelation containing everything about truth and lie that he needs to make the correct decision (see Talstra 2009, 368–369). Even though the oracles of the king's prophets invoke the name of God and refer to the future, they are closed statements which cannot be challenged. In other words, they are not open to debate. Conversely, Micaiah's prophecy is an oracle that is open to empirical verification and anticipates fulfillment by God.

Conclusion

The narrative of 1 Kings 22:1–28 is not really about false and true prophecy or an untrustworthy God who attempts to deceive the king in order to carry out a death sentence on him. By juxtaposing the two oracles, that of success and that of disaster, it is rather about having to make the right choice. Importantly, this choice does not concern God but the actions of a prophet whom God makes responsible for revealing what is about to happen: "tell them the truth about the lies being spoken in my name and the consequences that they entail." Therefore, it is important not to abstract the words of YHWH from the structure of the story. The king is informed about the background of the favorable prophecy: it is the lie told by the prophets who depend upon him. For that reason, the question of whether to accuse God or defend Him should not even be considered, because a prophet who does not depend on political power has conveyed the truth about the lie hidden in the "good" prophecy (Talstra 2009, 370–371). The intention of this episode is, therefore, to expose the ambiguity of religious language in its most prestigious and authoritative form: prophetic speech. We do not challenge the religious language as long as it fits within the bounds of doctrinal correctness, and we do not trace its connections with the political power or economic interests that stand behind it and make up its historical context. When a religious leader makes a statement on some issue with a clear political or economic interest, we do not challenge the content of his statement, because it is formulated in a language that invokes God. Thus, the narrative in question brings to light the issue of the opaqueness of religious language, the use of which, from the formal point of view, does not guarantee that the truth which it expresses is intended by God and comes from Him.

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