

## **MICAHIAH'S COURAGEOUS STAND**

### **Teaching-Learning Resources**

#### **BAPTIST LEADER**

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#### **Background Scripture: 1 Kings 22**

#### **Key Passage: 1 Kings 22:5–8, 13–19, 26–28**

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In this lesson of Part II, “Decisions That Shaped the Nations’ Future,” the focus of attention is on a unique prophet in Israel, Micaiah, who appeared but once in a dramatic confrontation with King Ahab. The previous lessons have featured well-known personalities, including Saul, David, Solomon, and Elijah, who appeared repeatedly in the narratives of Israel’s history. All that is known about Micaiah is recorded in 1 Kings 22:8–28 and the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 18:7–27. He was a prophet of courage and conviction, but at the same time he had a strange theology. We can understand Micaiah only within the context of the history of King Ahab and his having been cursed by the prophets of Yahweh. Therefore, our study commences with a survey of King Ahab and his problems.

The biblical tradition indicates that King Ahab was unable to do anything well. His marriage to Jezebel did not produce the anticipated political and economic benefits that were generally the result of political marriages with non-Israelites. Jezebel’s aggressive behavior resulted in more than an unhappy marriage. It led to reciprocal murderous maneuvers by religious leaders committed to Baal and Yahweh and a serious economic recession brought on by a drought for which Elijah claimed credit. But only a few of Ahab’s problems

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were with Elijah, “the troubler in Israel” (1 Kings 18:17), and this prophet’s control over the weather.

Ahab had external enemies as well as internal ones. His northern neighbor, Ben-hadad, king of Syria (sometimes called Aram, since its inhabitants were Aramean), capitalized on Ahab’s weakened condition in an attempt to expand his wealth and political influence. Ben-hadad led a coalition of thirty-two “kings” of city-states in a siege of Ahab’s capital city, Samaria. Ahab was obviously militarily intimidated, and he decided to acquiesce to Ben-hadad’s demands rather than fight. Ahab handed over to Ben-hadad his gold, silver, women, and the other members of the royal family, as he had been instructed by the enemy.

But Ben-hadad wanted more than the wealth and women of the royal court; he wanted to plunder peacefully the entire city of Samaria. Ahab, supported by the elders of the city, refused Ben-hadad’s demand for a peaceful plunder of Samaria. Hearing of Ahab’s refusal to open the city, Ben-hadad planned to assault the city by force.

But at this point, the prophets of Yahweh rallied to Ahab’s support. One of the prophets of God announced to Ahab: “Thus says the Lord, Have you seen all this great multitude? Behold, I will give it into your hand this day” (20:13). While Ben-hadad drank himself tipsy and intoxicated himself with overconfidence, Ahab and the prophet organized and launched a surprise attack on the besieging forces.

It was an easy victory for Ahab and the Israelites, but Ben-hadad was successful in escaping. Samaria was no longer besieged, but the enemy forces had not been crushed; they had simply been driven off. The prophet of the Lord warned Ahab: “Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do; for in the spring the king of Syria will come up against

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you”(20:22).

Until the attack by a foreign enemy, the prophets of Yahweh and Ahab had been at war with each other within Israel; but the attack against Israel united the religious factions, and Ahab was willing for a time to affirm that Yahweh was indeed the God of Israel.

But Ahab’s harmony with the prophets of the Lord did not last long. Just as the prophet had promised, Ben-hadad marched southward in the spring against Samaria. But there was no fear in Israel. The prophet had announced that because Ben-hadad believed that Yahweh was only a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys (20:23, 28), Yahweh would prove that he was the Lord of all by defeating the Syrians by the hand of Ahab. The words of the prophet came true: “And the people of Israel smote of the Syrians a hundred thousand foot soldiers in one day” (20:29). (The word “thousand” was most likely a technical term for a military unit of unknown numerical size, and the Hebrew text may simply mean “one hundred units.”)

However, Ben-hadad escaped again from the attacking Israelites. He hid himself in the city of Aphek, where he was eventually discovered by Ahab’s forces. But Ahab, apparently in a move to deescalate the Syrian-Israel hostilities, recognized Ben-hadad as his brother, set him free, and reestablished economic ties with his neighbor: “So he [Ahab] made a covenant with him [Ben-hadad] and let him go” (20:34).

The general Israelite population may have been surprised at this gesture of goodwill by Ahab to his enemy, but the prophets of Yahweh were enraged. One of them disguised himself to enact a dramatic parable wherein the king would be tricked into pronouncing [page 31] judgment on himself: “. . . your life shall be for his life . . . so shall your judgment be.

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. . . Thus says the Lord, ‘Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people’” (20: 39–42).

Here was the first death sentence pronounced on Ahab by one of the prophets of the Lord. So we see that the prophets of the Lord were still advocating the continuation of holy war, with the extermination of the enemy leader, at least, if not the annihilation of all the troops. Just as Saul’s sparing the life of Agag caused God to repent and take the kingdom away from Saul, so Ahab’s gesture in behalf of peaceful relations with his northern neighbor resulted in the forecast of doom for his dynasty. Ahab had nothing to say in his defense; he could do nothing well—so he “went to his house resentful and sullen, and came to Samaria” (20:43).

But Ahab’s going home to his wife, Jezebel, made things worse rather than better. While working around the house, Ahab did a little gardening. Desiring more land for his garden, he wanted to buy a tract of land from his neighbor, Naboth. But Naboth wanted to retain the land he had inherited from his fathers. He declined to accept Ahab’s offer either of another piece of land or money. Disappointed, Ahab went home moody and depressed. His wife, Jezebel, decided to cheer her husband up (after a bit of ridicule: “Do you not rule Israel?” [see 21:7]) and promised him, “I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

Secretively using the king’s official seal, she wrote letters to her agents so that Naboth could be framed on charges of blasphemy and sedition. The scheme worked most effectively, for when Naboth was attending a religious festival, he was accused of cursing God and the king. Without trial he was taken outside the city and stoned to death. This murder

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devised by Jezebel was nevertheless Ahab's responsibility since his official seals were used, and Elijah was forced once more "to trouble" Ahab.

Elijah pronounced a severe judgment against the king: ". . . I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. . . . Any one belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat" (21:21-24; see also 21:19).

One can well imagine how confused Ahab must have been with this second death sentence on him and his family. First, he was condemned for not killing Benhadad; then he was condemned for the murder of Naboth which he did not commit. Confusion led to despair, and despair culminated in "repentance." As a result of his "humility before God" the evil which was to fall on him was postponed until after his death: "Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the evil upon his house" (21:29).

### **The Biblical Setting**

Following these two death sentences upon Ahab and the one temporary reprieve, the prophet Micaiah appeared on the scene. Micaiah may have been completely unaware of the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab over Naboth's murder, but Ahab evidently knew Micaiah well. Ahab was to confess to his Judean colleague, Jehoshaphat, that Micaiah never had anything good to say about him (22:8). Micaiah may have been the unnamed prophet who had pronounced the first death sentence on Ahab (see 20:39-42), but this is only conjecture. The fact is simply that Ahab disliked him for his consistently negative message and unfortunately gave little

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credibility to his messages.

The immediate context of Micaiah's confrontation with Ahab was a mini-summit meeting of Ahab with his southern royal counterpart, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Jehoshaphat appeared to have been desirous of reestablishing close fraternal ties with the kingdom of his kin in the north. Ahab, taking full advantage of Jehoshaphat's overtures for goodwill, recruited him for a joint attack on the Syrian-held city of Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat agreed to assist: "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses" (22:4). But first Jehoshaphat wanted a divine oracle to determine if Yahweh favored this attack on the Syrian forces.

Willing to oblige Jehoshaphat, and perhaps just as anxious to find out for himself, Ahab summoned the four hundred prophets of the Lord and asked them explicitly: "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I forbear?" (22:6). The response of the prophets was far less explicit than the king's question. There was something vague about the response—much more vague than the English translation suggests. They simply replied: "Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." The response to the question did not indicate whom or what the Lord would give; nor did it indicate which king would be on the receiving end. It could have been the king of Syria. (The English translation inserts the pronoun "it" into the response, and thereby obscures the deliberate vagueness of the prophetic answer.)

Jehoshaphat was not satisfied with the vagueness of the prophetic response. He wanted the advice of another prophet of Yahweh. With much less enthusiasm Ahab agreed to call upon his prophet-critic, Micaiah, but he indicated to Jehoshaphat that he knew he would not receive a good word from Micaiah. Nevertheless, Ahab summoned Micaiah. The mes-

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senger who was dispatched to bring Micaiah took it upon himself to inform Micaiah what the other prophets had said. He himself interpreted the vague response in favorable terms and advised Micaiah to speak with the majority so that there would be a unanimous opinion from all the prophets.

Meanwhile, the other prophets agreed that the original ambiguous response to the divine oracle was not as indefinite as it seemed. Victory was assured for Ahab and his southern Judean ally, Jehoshaphat. Into this scene of supra-patriots and religious zealots stepped the independent and courageous Micaiah.

**Interpreting the Scriptures**

**1 Kings 22:5-7—“Inquire first for the word of the Lord. Is there not here another prophet of the Lord of whom we may inquire?”** [page 32]

The word “inquire” used in these passages is a technical term for consulting an oracular medium in order to ascertain the will of God. Through the Davidic period, the oracle involved the priest’s consulting the ephod or the Urim and the Thummim (the exact meaning of these terms is still unknown; note the biblical references in Exodus 28:15–16, 29–30). This priestly oracle was phased out with the rise of the prophetic movement. The older oracle permitted a direct question and an explicit answer. The precision of a clear “yes” or “no” answer was not built into the oracular medium used by Ahab’s prophets. Consequently, there was the need for input from more than one prophet. A vague response from the oracle demanded prophetic interpretation of the oracle; consequently there was sharp disagreement between the interpretation given by Zedekiah, spokesman for the four hundred prophets, and Micaiah.

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As noted above, the oracular response “Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king” is very vague. Jehoshaphat could well have understood this to mean his defeat: “Go up; for the Lord will give you into the hand of the king of Syria.” As Micaiah’s interpretation of the divine will indicated, and as the actual course of events demonstrated, this latter interpretation is precisely what happened. No wonder that Jehoshaphat wanted another word from a different prophet of Yahweh!

**1 Kings 22:15—“Go up and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.”**

Micaiah quoted these words of the prophets’ interpretation of the oracle exactly as the prophets had stated them (v. 12). But they were not the words of the original oracle (v. 6). Micaiah’s unexpected agreement with his prophetic colleagues was obviously a rhetorical device to unnerve the king. Ahab sensed the insincerity of these words on the mouth of this prophet and demanded the truth. But when Micaiah quoted the true word of God to him, he did not believe it and refused to be directed by it.

**1 Kings 22:17—“I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd . . . ‘ These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’”**

The oracular vision of Micaiah consisted of two parts: verse 17 and verses 19-23. The first part, quoted here, is clear and credible; but the second part is incredible and was perhaps incredible even to Ahab and Jehoshaphat, causing all the more the fatal credibility gap.

In his report of the second part of his vision Micaiah alleged that God consented for a spirit from the heavenly host



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to transform itself into a “lying spirit” in the mouth of all of Ahab’s prophets. Micaiah did not state that the God of Israel was a liar, but he did implicate Yahweh as an accomplice in a deceptive scheme to entice the prophets away from the truth.

We are fortunate to have the testimony of James 1:13–14 to put Micaiah’s theology into its proper perspective, for James states, “For God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” But Ahab did not have the benefit of the epistle of James; nevertheless he was not too convinced of Micaiah’s theology about God’s being a conspirator with liars.

Micaiah’s story about what happened in heaven may have been his attempt to resolve a real problem on earth. He did not question the integrity of his fellow prophets; instead, he raised questions about the integrity of God. By allowing for the fact that his fellow prophets were as honest and sincere as he was, he assumed that their interpretation of the oracle was as true as the oracle itself. But we cannot be too harsh on Micaiah, for he, too, did not have the benefit of the words from James 1:13–14. In the light of James, questions about integrity can no longer begin with God, but with man.

The first part of Micaiah’s vision came true. After Ahab had ordered Micaiah’s imprisonment, he set forth to attack Ramoth-gilead. But despite Ahab’s most careful efforts to participate safely in the battle as an anonymous soldier (he made Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, wear his robes, as though he were the king of Israel), a random lucky shot by an enemy soldier struck him down mortally wounded (1 Kings 22:34).

**Applying the Lesson to Life**

Micaiah's courageous stand before King Ahab is a model for responsible Christian action directed toward the shapinog of any nation. Micaiah opposed Ahab for something more than the thrill of defying authority.

The prophets respected authority since they had their own authority to intimidate and dictate to the kings of Israel. The prophetic movement was not an antiauthoritarian movement. To the contrary, since they perceived themselves to be the conscience of political and religious authority, they were interested in the proper performance of political leaders. It was a case of power confronting power.

Micaiah's courage was demonstrated more by his personal stand, which ran contrary to the "official" position of his fellow prophets. He was willing to stand above religious loyalties when truth, honesty, and conscience demanded it. One cannot fail to notice that Micaiah was oppressed by his fellow prophets as well as by the political powers. Ecclesiastical loyalties may conflict with what one knows to be true; and one's religious colleagues (both clergy and lay persons) may become adversaries defending partisan positions. Not only did Micaiah have the courage to defy the king, but he also was bold enough to disagree with and depart from the majority position of his religious peers. He enjoyed the freedom fired by truth. For such a believer, bread and water can be a banquet (1 Kings 22:27).