

Hard Words

By David H. Roper

In I Kings 22 we learn about the life of an amazing and not-too-well-known prophet, Micaiah the son of Imlah. Most of you know of our legendary longshoreman philosopher, Erie Hoffer. He was interviewed a year or so ago, and offered his comments on our society. He was asked about the use of aptitude tests for placing people in various positions--in employment and in school. Hoffer's comment was that we did not need better aptitude tests; what we needed was better rectitude tests. What he meant was that here in America we did not need greater skill, but greater integrity. We need tests to determine who the righteous men and women are so we can put them into positions of leadership. We need to know who the upright, honest people are, whom we can trust.

These people are in short supply. But there is one man in scripture I would like on my side if I ever got in a fight. He is Micaiah ben Imlah. He is a man of integrity, a man you can trust, a man you know would side with the truth, no matter what it would cost him. His story occurs only in 1 Kings 22 and in the parallel passage in Chronicles, then he disappears. We know nothing of his ultimate fate, nor of his family. There is nothing said about his death or his ministry anywhere else in scripture, but there is enough in this passage to let us know that he is the kind of man you would trust with your life. Verses 1-4 give the setting for Micaiah's prophecy.

And three years passed without war between Syria and Israel. And it came about in the third year, that Jehosaphat the king of Judah came down to the king of Israel. Now the king of Israel said to his servants, "Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, and we are still doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Syria?" And he said to Jehosaphat, "Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?" And Jehosaphat said to the king of Israel, "I am as you are, my people are your people, my horses as your horses."

The king of Israel was Ahab, referred to in verse 20. The king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah was Jehosaphat. If you can envision in your mind a map of Israel, draw a line across the top of the Dead Sea. Everything south of that line would be Judah, where Jehosaphat was king. Ahab was the king of the Northern Kingdom. Jehosaphat, the king of the Southern Kingdom, is described in scripture as a good king. He is one of the few kings who bore that particular designation. His father was Asa, who, likewise, is called a good king. Asa purged all of the elements of idolatrous worship out of Judah. He deposed the queen mother Maacah, who had brought in alien idolatrous religion, and he handed over to Jehosaphat a kingdom that was relatively pure and free of idol worship. Jehosaphat carried on that reform.

However, Jehosaphat had one weakness. He did not always tell the truth. Jehosaphat's philosophy was "Peace at all costs." He was the kind of person who hated to cause unrest, so sometimes he would compromise and temporize in order to maintain peace. It was Jehosaphat's dream that Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and Israel, the Northern Kingdom, be reunited. He sought an alliance with the Northern Kingdom in order to accomplish that union. But it was God's will that the kingdoms be disunited for a period of time. God ultimately would put them together in his own time and in his own way. But Jehosaphat wanted that to be accomplished in his own lifetime, so he formed an alliance with Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom. To do this, he secured a wife for his son, Jehoram, from the Northern Kingdom. She was none other than Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. Jezebel was the wicked queen who dominated Ahab the king of Israel and brought into Israel all of the terrible practices of the Canaanites--male and female prostitution, child sacrifice, and all of the atrocities and inhumane practices associated with Canaanite worship. Jezebel brought those practices into the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and it was her daughter, Athaliah, who married into the royal family of Judah and brought all those practices into the Southern Kingdom, as well. Oscar Wilde says that every daughter gets to be like her mother; that is her tragedy. And Athaliah was very much like her mother. Besides setting up this alliance and political marriage, Jehosaphat aligned himself with Ahab in warfare against the king of Syria. We are given this account in the first four verses of

chapter 22.

Now, to get these kings straight: in the south is Jehosaphat, the good king; and in the north is Ahab, who is married to Jezebel. Ahab is not called a good king. He is an evil king; the kings of Israel were uniformly evil. There was not one good king to sit on that throne. Chapter 21, verse 25 says, "Surely there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him." He was a weak, vacillating man; his wife ruled.

In addition to being weak, Ahab was treacherous. We are told in chapter 22 that he intended to go against the king of Syria to reclaim certain property that he felt belonged to him, namely, Ramoth-gilead, which was across the Jordan River. This was the trans-Jordan side, the east side of the river, a portion that originally had been part of Israel's inheritance but now was in the hands of the Syrians. Ahab wanted it back. The problem (as we know both from scripture and from extra-biblical comments), is that Ahab and the king of Syria, Ben-hadad, had formed an alliance. They were not at war. For three years they had been friendly. But, despite this pact, Ahab treacherously planned to take Ramoth-gilead. By any judgment, this was an evil thing to do.

Jehosaphat allied himself with Ahab in this enterprise because he hated to disrupt things. Jehosaphat wanted to keep peace. He wanted union to be established between Judah and Israel, so he agreed to commit arms and troops to Ahab and to go into battle against the Syrian army.

But there is a bit of uneasiness in Jehosaphat's mind. He is a little uncertain whether this is God's will. In verse 5 he says, "Inquire first for the word of the Lord." Have you ever acted like this? I have, many times. I have made my plans, decided this was God's will, and then it suddenly occurs to me that I need to ask God to endorse my plans. So I inquire of the Lord, "Lord, is this what you want me to do? It must be, because I've already committed myself. Now will you strengthen me in this undertaking?" That was Jehosaphat's position.

Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" And they said, "Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." But Jehosaphat said, "Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of him?"

If you have a revised Standard Version or a New American Standard translation you will notice that in verse 6, when the prophets replied, "Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king," that, with the exception of the letter "L", the rest of the word "Lord" is in lower case letters, signifying use of the generic name Adonai, rather than Yahweh. In verse 7, when Jehosaphat says, "Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD...", the entire word "LORD" (Yahweh) is in capitals. The point is this: These 400 prophets were not prophets of Yahweh; they were prophets of Asherah, Jezebel's personal appointees, her picked priests, priestesses, and prophets of Baal and Asherah.

Some months before this, Elijah had taken on the 450 Baal prophets and vanquished them. He had invited the 400 prophets of Asherah, as well, but they did not show up. But they show up here. It is these 400 prophets of Asherah who say that the Lord (that is, Adonai, the generic name for Lord) has said, "Go; and you will succeed." But Jehosaphat smelled a rat. He realized that these were not the prophets of the LORD (Yahweh). So Jehosaphat said, "Is there not here another prophet of the LORD of whom we may inquire?" Ahab's response is found in verses 8-12.

And the king of Israel said to Jehosaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. He is Micaiah, son of Imlah." But Jehosaphat said, "Let not the king say so." [In our idiom that would be, "You don't say!"] Then the king of Israel called an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah." Now the king of Israel and Jehosaphat king of Judah were sitting each on his throne, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them. Then Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah made horns of iron for himself and said, "Thus says the LORD, 'With these you shall gore the

Syrians until they are consumed.'" And all the prophets were prophesying thus, saying, "Go up to Ramoth-gilead and prosper, for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king."

We are introduced at this point to Micaiah, the son of Imlah, who is evidently the only man who is standing against Ahab. 1 Kings says that there were a number of people who had not yet bent the knee to Baal; but there were few prophets who spoke out against Baal worship. Elijah was one, Ahijah was another, and Micaiah was a third. We know from this account that Micaiah had been thrown into prison because he dared to speak out against the king. He had been a spokesman for the Lord in Israel, and had suffered because of it. Now he is taken from prison and brought before the king. He is the one man Ahab hates and fears, because Ahab wants people to tell him what he wants to hear.

In the New Testament Paul refers to people like that as those who like to have their ears scratched. They have itching ears. Those of you who have dogs know that when a dog's ear itches and you scratch it, he inclines his ear toward wherever the scratching is coming from. That describes Ahab. He wanted people to scratch his ears. He wanted them to tell him what he wanted to hear, and anything else was evil. If they told him what he had already made up his mind to do, then that was good news. Any other news was bad news. When anyone dared to speak the truth, he did away with them.

Actually, Micaiah was a little on the lucky side, because most people who spoke the truth to the king were killed. That was Jezebel's policy. She exterminated any dissonant voices. Anyone who did not agree with national policy was killed. Micaiah had been protected and placed in prison, where Ahab thought he could no longer do any harm.

Verse 10 describes the setting for Micaiah's appearance. We are told it took place at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria. One of the ancient Jewish writings, a portion of the Talmud, tells us that Ahab had written the names of the gods they worshiped over the gate, and this would be the first thing Micaiah would see as he approached this scene--the names of the gods of the Moabites and the Canaanites, all the deities they worshiped at this time. In front of the gates there was a large level area, and seated there would be most of the population of Samaria. This was a royal occasion. On thrones placed before the gates were Jehosaphat, the king of the South, with all of his royal finery and council, and Ahab, the king of Israel. In front of them were the 400 prophets of Asherah dancing about, gashing themselves, and unanimously predicting success for Ahab.

Verse 11 introduces Zedekiah, who is described as one who prophesies in the name of the LORD. He was a Hebrew prophet, but he was a false prophet. He fashioned for himself iron horns, placed them on his head, and rushed from one side of this open area to the other, pretending to gore imaginary enemies, and said, "Thus Israel shall gore her enemies." This was an audiovisual aid, if you please. Now I am not saying that false prophets always use visual aids, but here was one who did. He was dramatizing a prediction that Ahab knew Moses had made.

In one of the final chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses had predicted that the tribes of Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh would be like a wild ox that would gore their enemies. Of course, the foundation for that statement was that these tribes would follow the Lord. If they followed the Lord, they would gore their enemies. Zedekiah overlooked that basic conditional fact and reminded Ahab of Moses' promise that Israel would prevail. Ephraim and Manasseh were the central tribes of the Northern Kingdom, and so those tribes would be representative of the tribes of Israel and, like a wild ox, would gore their enemies.

This scene is what Micaiah saw as he walked from his dungeon. He blinked his eyes to clear his vision as he was brought out into bright sunlight, and this was the first scene that met his eyes.

Then the messenger who went to summon Micaiah spoke to him saying, "Behold now, the words of the prophets are uniformly favorable to the king. Please let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably."

The social consensus of that was that Ahab would succeed. So the officer who went to get Micaiah said, "Micaiah, don't make any waves. Whatever you do, don't disturb the status quo. Do you realize that everyone is agreed? You

will be odd-man-out unless you agree with the word of the prophets." In verse 14, Micaiah replies,

"As the LORD lives, and what the LORD says to me, that I will speak."

I really admire this fellow. In our experience it would be as though we were commanded to appear before the President of the United States, a number of visiting dignitaries, heads of state, and all the religious leaders of our day (apostate religions) in Washington, D.C. As we were brought into the presence of that august assembly, we would be counseled to play it cool--don't make any waves. After all, what could one person do against this sort of combined effort? Micaiah says, "As the LORD lives, what he says to me, I will speak."

I think Micaiah had a great sense of humor. He must have been a mischievous sort of fellow. As he was brought before the king (verse 15) the king asked him, "Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?" That was the same question that he had posed to the false prophets. Micaiah answered, "Go up and succeed, and the LORD will give it into the hand of the king." That was exactly what the false prophets said. Micaiah told Ahab what he wanted to hear. But notice Ahab's response in verse 16,

Then the king said to him, "How many times must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?" I suspect there was something in Micaiah's tone of voice that told Ahab that Micaiah was putting him on, pulling his leg. You see, Ahab knew the truth. No one had to tell him. God had already spoken to his heart. He knew that because Micaiah was a prophet of God he would speak the truth of God. His reputation was established. Micaiah was known as the sort of man who would not bend his knee to anyone but God. He always spoke the truth; he did not care who he offended. Micaiah prophesies in verse 17,

"I saw all Israel Scattered upon the mountains, Like sheep which have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace.'"

Micaiah predicts the death of Ahab--the shepherd is the king. The prophet goes back into the history of Israel to quote Moses' words about the shepherd who would come, and the tragedy of there being no shepherd in Israel. Both Zedekiah and Micaiah quote Moses. Micaiah saw in this vision that the king of Israel, the shepherd, would die in his attempt to take Ramoth-gilead. The troops would be scattered and, though they would safely return, the battle would be disastrously lost.

Then the king of Israel said to Jehosaphat, "Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil? [I knew he'd say that! Why did you want to bring this fellow out here anyway? Didn't I tell you he'd say that? He doesn't like me.]" And Micaiah said, "Therefore [because you think this way, that it is merely a question of my word against yours], hear the word of the LORD..."

The issue was not Micaiah's word, or Ahab's word, or the words of the prophets; the issue ultimately was settled on the basis of what God had said. Micaiah did not care what anybody else had said--God had spoken. Therefore, hear the word of the LORD!

"...I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on His right hand and on His left."

These prophets were called seers because they saw things. Micaiah had seen a vision of God sitting on his throne with his court arrayed around him. When you have seen God on his throne, you are not threatened at all by Ahab or Jehosaphat on their thrones. Micaiah had seen the LORD, therefore he was not intimidated or threatened by any man. As he stood before the monarchs of Israel and Judah, Micaiah was not threatened, because he had seen the LORD.

We do not see visions today. Scripture tells us that God "spoke in various ways to the prophets," but in these days he has spoken to us in his Son. The word about Jesus is the prophetic word. Today it is by reading the scriptures that we see the LORD lifted up and on his throne. We learn who God is and discover his sovereignty from the Word. When I am reading the Word, when I am fully convinced who God is, when I am saturated with the truth

about God as it is revealed in the Word, then I am not intimidated by people. But when I am not doing this, I am intimidated. The world grows larger, other people's power seems much more impressive, and I am much less likely to speak out until I see again the LORD. Then all other power seems insignificant. Other people are no longer a threat. Micaiah saw the LORD, and that is what stiffened his spine. That is what enabled him to speak as he did in the face of all this opposition. He continues to describe his vision in verse 20,

"And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said this while another said that. [A discussion broke out among the heavenly council.] Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' And the LORD said, 'How?' And he said, 'I will go out and will be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.'"

In that one word Micaiah dismisses the prophecies of the 400 prophets of Asherah; he has alienated Ahab; he has alienated Zedekiah; he has alienated all the prophets because he has identified their message with that of the deceitful spirit. He continues in verse 23,

"Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you."

Ahab said that Micaiah never said anything good; he only spoke evil. The officer, when he fetched Micaiah from the prison, said, "Speak good." Micaiah spoke what sounded in Ahab's ears to be evil. So Micaiah said, "Ahab, that is God speaking evil. God has deceived you." Isn't that strange? Does that sound like the God we know from the New Testament? As a matter of fact, it does. Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, where Paul describes the man of sin, the instigator of the great apostasy at the end times.

[The lawless one will come] **"...with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness."**

If men insist upon believing a lie, after a while God lets them believe their own lie. He gives them over to their own deceit. He lets them have what they want. Ahab had many opportunities to hear the truth--from Ahijah, from Micaiah, and from other prophets of this period. But he turned his back on them, and God gave him what he wanted. He allowed him to be deceived. Verse 24 continues,

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?" And Micaiah said, "Behold, you shall see on that day when you go into an inner chamber to hide yourself."

Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us that at this point, Zedekiah said to Ahab, "Micaiah must be wrong, because Elijah predicted the dogs would lap up your blood where Naboth died (Samaria), and Micaiah is predicting that you will die at Ramothgilead." To prove his point, Zedekiah struck Micaiah in the face. "He could not be a prophet of God, because God would strike me dead if he were." Notice Micaiah's grace. He does not respond in kind, he does not retaliate; he lets God defend him. He says, "You will know, when you go to hide yourself in the inner room." We are not told what happened to Zedekiah, but, reading between the lines, we know that there will be nothing short of a lynch mob when the army is disastrously defeated at Ramoth-gilead. They will be out to get Zedekiah and the prophets who predicted their success. Evidently this is what happened. Micaiah's point is, "I will not defend myself. God's Word will defend me. God will be vindicated when his Word comes true."

Evidently shaken by Micaiah's words, Ahab disguised himself as a common soldier and went into the battle. Jehosaphat was told to dress in his royal robes so he would draw the fire. But the king of Syria told his soldiers to kill Ahab, and not to kill any of the other soldiers. He had had enough of Ahab's treachery. The soldiers, thinking that Jehosaphat was Ahab, pursued him. Jehosaphat cried out, and Chronicles tells us that God delivered him and

he was not injured. But a soldier in the Syrian army, drawing his bow by chance, fired an arrow into the air and it struck Ahab, and he died. The last part of chapter 22 tells us,

So the king died, and was brought to Samaria, and they buried the king of Samaria. And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood (now the harlots bathed themselves there), according to the word of the LORD which he spoke.

Both predictions were fulfilled. Ahab was slain at Ramothgilead, his body was taken back to Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood where they had licked up the blood of Naboth. Both the predictions of Elijah and Micaiah were fulfilled to the letter. God vindicated himself. Now we do not know what happened to Micaiah. We know that he was taken back to prison, and he may have languished and died there. But we do know what a tremendous impact Micaiah had upon his time, because he changed the course of Jehosaphat's life. The book of 2 Chronicles 19:4 says that immediately after this battle,

...Jehosaphat lived in Jerusalem and went out again among the people from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim and brought them back to the LORD, the God of their fathers. And he appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city. And he said to the judges, "Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness, or partiality, or the taking of a bribe."

Jehosaphat was a different man. He feared God instead of men. He pursued truth instead of peace. The course of that nation was changed because of one man's insistence, his willingness to put his life on the line and act according to the will of God.

Now what does this ninth-century prophet have to say to us today? We, like Micaiah, live at a time when men question the idea of absolutes and ultimate authority. In many places they deny it outright. If you think this is not so, then either you are not going to school, or you have not read contemporary literature. Right across the board, people are challenging the concept of absolutes.

If you take a stand on the Word of God, you are going to be strange. You are going to be odd-man-out. You are going to be unappreciated. People will not like you; they will not listen to you or take you seriously. Yet, that is what God has called us to do. We are to be his men and women, basing our lives on the Word of God, living according to the truth, speaking the truth as we have opportunity. James says that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable. We cannot live according to Jehosaphat's former philosophy, peace at all costs. It is the truth at all costs. There may be times when we have to speak the truth and the truth will cause disharmony. But if we are truly God's men and women, we will speak the truth. We will speak it in love, for there is never an excuse for being harsh and strident, brash and unloving. The servant of God must not strive, but must be gentle and patient with all men, in meekness instructing those who oppose them. There is never any excuse for being ungracious.

God wants us to speak the truth to those in his body and to those outside, who have lost the concept of truth. He has give us grace to fulfill that assignment. The God who is on the throne lives in our hearts. It is his strength that we rely upon to speak the Word to our generation.

Father, our hearts quail at an assignment of this magnitude. There is not one of us who feels adequate for it, or who particularly wants that responsibility. And yet you have called us to be people of the Word, who speak the Word in season. Grant to us the grace to be obedient. We thank you in advance that that grace is available to us, to meet every demand upon us. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.