THE PROPHET MICAIAH IN KINGS AND CHRONICLES

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INTRODUCTION

Chronicles is a product of the post-Exilic community living in Judea. Its purpose is to give shape and meaning to the returned community of Babylonian exiles in the fifth/fourth century BCE. Chronicles was probably written at that same time, although others argue for a mid-third century compilation, and its author(s) remain(s) unknown. The book serves as a kind of history of the people of Israel; but more than a simple historical document, the purpose of Chronicles is to interpret Israel's past and to understand its religious significance.

Chronicles features a very different approach than the earlier work of the Deuteronomist Historian[1] in Samuel-Kings. Chronicles focuses great attention on King David. Far more than his status as the political leader and head of the Davidic dynasty, David's major role was in establishing the Temple cult. As someone quipped, in Chronicles David prays a lot. The institutions of the Temple in Jerusalem, the cult, and their attendant personnel, primarily the Levites, are a major concern for the Chronicler. A key element of the Chronicler's thought is to promote the presence and glory of the deity, most often referred to by the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-V-H.[2]

In the words of Sara Japhet, the goal of the Chronicler "is a comprehensive expression of the perpetual need to renew and revitalize the religion of Israel"[3] for those former Babylonian exiles now living in Judah.

Following a long genealogical introduction, drawn from the Torah and the history recorded in Joshua through Kings (though excluding Ruth), Chronicles focuses on the history of the southern kingdom of Judah. The Chronicler turns away from the northern kingdom of Israel, for in the author's mind, "the Northern Kingdom was conceived in sin, born in iniquity, and nurtured in adultery."[4] One side effect of turning his back on the history and personalities

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of the kingdom of Israel was that the Chronicler could not (or chose not to) refer to the cycle of stories surrounding Elijah and Elisha so prominent in Kings (I Kgs. 18-19, 21; II Kgs. 1-2 – Elijah; I Kgs. 19; II Kgs. 2-13 – Elisha).[5] The Chronicler, however, did choose to refer to one prominent northern prophet, Micaiah ben Imlah, a contemporary of Elijah and Elisha. Chronicles essentially repeats the narrative of the Ahab-Micaiah confrontation, which appears in I Kings 22. The Chronicler includes this episode, despite the fact that it refers to the northern kingdom's ruler, Ahab, and that its locale is Samaria. The most probable reason for the inclusion is that this narrative also features Judah's King Jehoshaphat.[6]

AHAB-MICAIAH

In the single chapter in Chronicles where Ahab appears as a personality in his own right (II Chron. 18),[7] his presence is minimized when compared to the earlier history of First Kings, where Ahab is found in several chapters (18-22).

Since Ahab does not appear elsewhere in Chronicles, it is difficult to make sense of his statement to his southern counterpart, King Jehoshaphat, concerning the prophet Micaiah: *'I hate him* [Micaiah ben Imlah] *because he never prophesies anything good for me, but always misfortune'* (II Chron. 18:7, cf. I Kgs. 22:8).

The context for this statement is an event late in the life of King Ahab, a proposed joint Israel-Judah battle against their mutual enemy, the king of Aram. They plan to recapture the territory of Ramoth-gilead. Four hundred of the prophets based in Samaria claim that the kings of Judah and Israel will prevail. Then the Judean king, Jehoshaphat, turns to King Ahab. He calls for an independent endorsement for this possible encounter. *'Is there not another prophet of Y-H-V-H here through whom we can inquire?'* he asks (18:6, cf. I Kgs. 22:7). Ahab then replies, pointing out that there is someone, the aforementioned Micaiah ben Imlah, although *he never prophesies anything good for me*.[8]

What is the basis for Ahab's hatred of Micaiah? Where and when has Micaiah spoken ill of Ahab? Since Ahab only appears in this one chapter of Chronicles, the answer cannot be found in that book. Logically, we would expect it to be revealed in the earlier books of Kings, yet even a close perusal

of the relevant chapters provides no solution. Just as Micaiah ben Imlah only appears in this one chapter of Chronicles, so does he appear in only one chapter of Kings (I Kings 22).

To add to the mystery, when the prophet Micaiah is summoned to appear before Ahab and Jehoshaphat, he first seems to endorse the coming battle; he foretells success (II Chron. 18:14) in a tone that may be sarcastic. Ahab then upbraids Micaiah, saying: *'How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of Y-H-V-H*?' (vs. 15). This rebuke makes it clear that these two have met on several occasions in the past.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the historian Josephus (and, later, some rabbinic sources)[9] affirmed that the previous encounter between Ahab and Micaiah refers to the unnamed prophet who confronted the king of Israel, as depicted in I Kings 20:13-43. Since this involved the northern kingdom, Chronicles does not repeat the episode, thus making Ahab's statement even more enigmatic. In I Kings 20, the text notes that a *certain man, a disciple of the prophets* (vs. 35), told the king of Israel that he had forfeited his life because he (Ahab) did not kill the Aramean ruler Ben-Hadad, a statement reminiscent of Samuel's rebuke of King Saul (I Sam. 15). This unnamed man is several times described as a *prophet* (I Kgs. 20:13, 22, 38, 41). The end of chapter 20 relates that *Sullen and dispirited, [Ahab] left for home and came to Samaria* (I Kgs. 20:43). This might well be the reason why Ahab said that he despised Micaiah.

Although there is some merit to Josephus's and the Rabbis' explanation, when Ahab says to Jehoshaphat that Micaiah '*never prophesies anything good*,' it is apparent that there have been multiple occasions where Micaiah has opposed Ahab. To what, then, does Ahab refer?

One needs to turn to Kings to offer a possible answer to this matter. I Kings 18 relates the Ahab-Elijah-prophets of Baal contest on Mount Carmel. On that occasion, an attendant accompanies Elijah. Elijah sends this figure out to seek whether there is any hint of the coming rain, which will end the three-year drought. Six times the servant goes and looks westward toward the Mediterranean, but sees nothing. Finally, on the seventh occasion the servant reported *'A cloud as small as a person's hand is rising in the west'* (I Kgs. 18:44).

Nothing more is said about this unnamed attendant in that chapter. In the next chapter an attendant, presumably the same person, accompanies Elijah when the prophet flees from the wrath of Jezebel. They travel south from Samaria as far as Beersheba in Judah. There Elijah leaves his servant behind (I Kgs. 19:3) and travels alone into the desert, eventually reaching Mount Horeb where he will experience a theophany with God.

At the Baal prophets' episode, when King Ahab meets Elijah, he dismisses him in scathing language. *Ahab caught sight of Elijah,* [and] *Ahab said to him, 'Is that you, you troubler of Israel?'* (I Kgs. 18:17). On a later occasion, Ahab describes Elijah as an enemy (I Kgs. 21:20). Ahab detests Elijah, and Elijah's opposition. In like manner, Ahab associates that opposition with people connected with Elijah, and in particular (I suggest) Elijah's unnamed attendant, Micaiah.[10] There is some support for this idea in rabbinic literature: the Midrash names Micaiah as one of the four students of Elijah.[11]

THE USE OF THE TERM Y-H-V-H

There may be an additional reason why this particular Ahab episode was included in Chronicles. As stated before, an important element in the Chronicler's approach is promoting the glory of God. The Chronicler prefers Y-H-V-H above other names for the deity. While the author sometimes uses the term God by itself or Y-H-V-H God, simply Y-H-V-H is used more often. As shall be explained below, the confrontation of Micaiah and Zedekiah lent itself to clarify how Y-H-V-H communicates, either through word or through spirit.

In II Chronicles 18, as in the earlier parallel narrative in I Kings 22, there is a distinction between the "Word of Y-H-V-H" and the "Spirit of Y-H-V-H." Although Ahab rebukes Micaiah to his face, the Micaiah-Ahab confrontation actually plays out between two prophets, Micaiah and Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, leader of the four hundred court prophets who predict a successful battle for Ahab and Jehoshaphat (II Chron. 18:5, 10-11). Ahab is present, but he is essentially a passive observer of events.

When Micaiah speaks his true prophecy to the kings of Israel and Judah, he uses very deliberate language. He says, *'Indeed, hear now the word of Y-H-V-H'* (vs. 18). Micaiah prophesies destruction and disaster for the proposed battle at Ramoth-gilead. This is when Zedekiah ben Kenaanah strikes Micaiah

and claims that he (Zedekiah) really speaks for God. Zedekiah says to Micaiah, *'However did the spirit of Y-H-V-H pass from me to speak with you?'* (vs. 23). Micaiah retorts, *'If you ever come home safe, Y-H-V-H has not spoken through me'* (vs. 27).[12] There is a clear contrast between *the word of Y-H-V-H*, the term for prophecy used by Micaiah, and the term used by Zedekiah, *the spirit of Y-H-V-H*." [At] the heart of the matter [are]: two views of prophecy, divination by 'YHWH's spirit' and divination by 'YHWH's word'. . . true prophecy is rational and unaffected by the deceptive spell of the 'spirit.'"[13] Micaiah makes no claims about the four hundred court prophets; he does not suggest that they are self-deluded, or that they are motivated by some sense of personal gain. Rather, Micaiah regards those four hundred, including their leader Zedekiah ben Kenaanah, "as pawns, serving YHWH's ends . . . they are unlike the false prophets denounced by the literary prophets"[14] such as Micah (2:11).

This contrast between word and spirit is used by other prophets as well. Jeremiah (5:13) states that the false prophets *will become like the wind* [using the same word as Micaiah used for spirit, *ru'ah*], *for the word is not with them.* It may also be hinted in God's words to Elijah, *'Y-H-V-H is not in the wind* [*ru'ah*]*'* (I Kgs. 19:11). The term *spirit of Y-H-V-H* is used in the Bible to denote emotional inspiration, sometimes leading to irrational behavior, such as Saul being overcome by *the spirit of Y-H-V-H* in I Samuel 10:6, and an urge to kill David with his spear in I Sam. 19:9. In the Pentateuch, Abraham and Moses always receive *the word of Y-H-V-H* (Gen. 15:1, 15:4, Deut. 5:5), never *the spirit of Y-H-V-H*. By way of contrast, ambiguous heroes are described as being inspired by *the spirit of Y-H-V-H*, Jephthah in Judges 11:29, and Samson multiple times (Judg. 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, 15:14).[15]

CONCLUSION

The Book of Chronicles is a sympathetic portrayal of the Kingdom of Judah, despite some of the faults of its monarchs. In II Chronicles 10-36, references to the rebellious northern kingdom are all but excised from the text. A prominent exception is II Chronicles 18, which repeats, with small emendations, an episode late in the life of King Ahab of Israel, also found in I Kings 22. On that occasion, Ahab rebukes an otherwise unknown prophet of Y-H-V-H, Micaiah ben Imlah. In his censure of Micaiah, Ahab makes clear that

they have a long history of confrontation, although the Bible is apparently silent about that history. This article suggests the basis behind Ahab's accusation. It also distinguishes between the (false) "spirit of Y-H-V-H" and what Micaiah calls the true "word of Y-H-V-H."

NOTES

1. The Deuteronomist Historian refers to the person(s) responsible for the history that covers Deuteronomy through the Book of Second Kings. The dating for this work is a matter of debate, though there is some consensus that it is an Exilic document.

2. There are more than "five hundred occurrences of the Tetragrammaton in Chronicles, and it is the divine name used more often than all the other names combined": Ralph W. Klein, *1 Chronicles: A Commentary [Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible]* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) p. 82, n. 3.

3. Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993, [The Old Testament Library]) p. 49.

4. Jacob M. Myers, *I Chronicles* (AB 12; Garden City: Doubleday 1965) p. xxxiii.

5. The reference in II Chronicles 21:12-15 to a condemnatory letter from the prophet Elijah to King Jehoram is probably apocryphal, or the attribution of Elijah's name to that of a lesser-known prophet.

6. The Chronicler was impressed that it was "the king of the Davidic line [that] insisted upon calling in this prophet of Y-H-V-H . . . It is quite possible that [the Chronicler] wanted to emphasize the interest in and insistence upon the orthodox religion of Yahweh by the king of Judah as opposed to the unrecognized religion of the north": Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles*, AB 13 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) p. 105. The Chronicler's "veneration for Jehoshaphat led [the author] to incorporate all the available material dealing with that king": R. J. Coggins, *The First and Second Book of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p. 214. See also Japhet, 756.

7. Ahab as a figure appears only in II Chronicles 18. References to the House of Ahab appear in II Chronicles 21 and 22.

8. In this passage, as in the parallel passage in Kings, Micaiah is never directly referred to as a prophet, unlike other instances in Chronicles: *David said to the prophet Nathan* (I Chron. 17:1); *the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz* (II Chron. 26:22); *the prophetess Huldah, wife of Shallum* (II Chron. 34:22).

9. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, book 8, ch. 14. See also Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928, 1982) p. 311 n. 36, listing *Seder Olam* 20 which identifies the nameless prophet as Micaiah. In addition, see *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 14:15, and TB *Sanhedrin* 89b.

10. The unnamed servant in chapters 18 and 19 could be Elisha ben Shaphat, Elijah's successor, but this is unlikely. Elisha is not mentioned until the theophany of Mount Horeb when God specifically informs Elijah to commission Elisha, which then takes place at the close of I Kings 19. On that occasion, Elisha informs Elijah that he (Elisha) needs to take leave of his parents (vs. 20). The common sense understanding of this passage is that the two men have not met previously.

11. J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Midrashim*, vol.1 (New York: Noble, 1915) p. 173, Hupat Eliyahu, part four, number 47.

12. Micaiah's words, *'If you ever come home safe, Y-H-V-H has not spoken through me,'* are followed by the statement, *He said further, 'Listen, all you peoples.'* These last words suggest a Micaiah connection to Elijah, for they are similar to those used by Elijah when he speaks to the Israelites gathered on Mount. Carmel (I Kgs. 18:21-24). In addition, there is an echo here of the Elijah-prophets of Baal episode, "the theme of 'one' versus the 'many', the individual against the multitude" (Japhet, 759).

13. Mordecai Cogan, *I Kings* (Anchor Bible 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001) p. 497.

14. Cogan, 498, n. 3.

15. See also Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 2:45.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	Psalms	146 – 150
	Proverbs	1 – 23
August	Proverbs	24 – 31
	Job	1 – 20
September	Job	21 – 42
	Song of Songs	1 – 6
October	Song of Songs	7 – 8
	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 12
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 10
November	Ecclesiastes	11 – 12
	Esther	1 – 10
	Daniel	1 – 12
	Ezra	1 – 4