Prophets, Kings and Honour in the Narrative of 1 Kgs 22*

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Cultures that depend on prophets and diviners to access the divine will are very familiar with the threat of charlatanism and the social conflicts between rivals. Ancient Israel was no exception, and these problems reared their heads at times in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. The famous narrative of 1 Kgs 22:1–38 is a key text for this theme, with its differing messages given by prophets to the kings of Israel and Judah, and this paper explores the text in a socio-historical perspective.1 The dynamics of prophetic conflict and the trustworthiness of prophetic speech, as it concerns this particular narrative, were conditioned by the values, status, and power of the characters involved. In this study, after briefly summarising the narrative’s setting and plot, three particular points of the story will attract particular focus: the kings’ consultation of prophets prior to battle (1 Kgs 22:2–9), the public delivery of prophetic oracles (22:10–12, 15–18), and the prophets’ attempt at discrediting their rivals (22:19–23, 24–25). We will examine issues related to the cultural value of honour, the social mechanisms which distribute it and the status it confers.

1 Overview of 1 Kgs 22

The story in 1 Kgs 22:1–38 opens with the royal preliminaries to battle and the consultation of prophets before attempting to regain control of Ramoth-gilead

* I wish to thank Prof. Becking and Prof. Barstad for accepting an earlier version of this paper for the Prophecy Network meeting in Utrecht, and for including the present version in this volume. The following abbreviations are used in this paper: AEM = Archives épistolaires de Mari, 1–2. J.-M. Durand, Archives épistolaires de Mari 1/1 (ARM, 26/1), Paris 1988; D. Charpin et al., Archives épistolaires de Mari 1/2 (ARM, 26/2), Paris 1998; CHANE = Culture and History of the Ancient Near East; KAI = H. Donner, W. Röllig, Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften, Bd. 1, Wiesbaden 2002; SAA = State Archives of Assyria; SAAS = State Archives of Assyria Studies.

1 This contrasts with, but does not reject, the more dominant trend which studies the passage with a theological approach. See Long in this regard: ‘The theological approach to prophetic conflict is neither incorrect nor inappropriate. But like any method, it limits while illuminating.’ B.O. Long, ‘Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict’, Semeia 21 (1981), 33.
in the Transjordan. The activities of the prophets tend to dominate interest in the passage, but the central figure nevertheless remains Ahab. He is named only in 1 Kgs 22:20 and 22:39–55, while the rest of the narrative simply refers to him as the מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל. However, the text is situated in the context of his reign, which is introduced in 1 Kgs 16:21–33 and concluded in 22:29–40. This unit comprises nearly a quarter of the books of Kings and demonstrates Ahab’s particular significance to the story.

The story begins with a visit from the southern monarch Jehoshaphat of Judah. We are not informed about Jehoshaphat’s reasons for visiting the northern kingdom but his presence would presumably be at Ahab’s behest, his kingdom being the stronger of the two at this particular time. Ahab believes he has rightful ownership of a contested border city (cf. Deut 4:43; Josh 20:8; 21:38; 1 Kgs 4:13) and begins a process of gathering strength in advance of a military campaign. After Jehoshaphat pledges his allegiance to Ahab and commits troops to his cause (1 Kgs 22:4), the narrative then takes a long detour in detailing the process by which they seek to divine the will of Yahweh regarding this affair.

Prophetic activity then unfolds in four episodic parts. First, a cohort of prophets are asked a yes-or-no question as to whether the battle should proceed (1 Kgs 22:2–9). Their answer is unanimous in the affirmative: עֲלָל וּיְתַן

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3 Identifying the king of this story as Ahab is admittedly problematic, and forms of this text may have originated from the reign of Jehu. We know from Assyrian royal inscriptions that a coalition of kings in the west, led by Adad-irī of Aram-Damascus and Irḫuleni of Hamath, resisted Shalmaneser III in 853 BCE during the 6th year of the latter’s reign (A.0.102.6 ii 26–29; A.0.102.8 15’-17’). Also in this coalition was an Israelite army led by Ahab of Israel (A.0.102.2 ii 91–92). Shalmaneser III later claims victory over the coalition and records tribute received from Jehu (A.0.102.12 29–31). Why would Israel and Aram form an alliance in 853 BCE, break this agreement and fight against each other, only to then re-ally against Assyria in 841 BCE? A.K. Grayson, Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC 11 (858–745 BC) (RIM, 3), Toronto 1996, 23, 36, 45, 60, 118; S. Yamada, The Construction of the Assyrian Empire: A Historical Study of the Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (859–824 B.C.) Relating to his Campaigns to the West (CHANE, 3), Leiden 2000, 156–61. On the difficulty of these problems, see W.T. Pitard, Ancient Damascus: A Historical Study of the Syrian City-State from Earliest Times until its Fall to the Assyrians in 732 B.C.E., Winona Lake 1987, 115; L.L. Grabbe, ‘Omri and Son, Incorporated: The Business of History’, in: M. Nissinen (ed.), Congress Volume Helsinki 2010 (VT.S, 148), Leiden 2012, 70; N. Na’a’man, ‘Was Ahab Killed by an Assyrian Arrow in the Battle of Qarqar?’, UF 37 (2005), 461–74. In support of an Aram-Israel conflict late in Ahab’s reign, see A.F. Rainey, R.S. Notley, The Sacred Bridge: Carta’s Atlas of the Biblical World, Jerusalem 2006, 202.