Think of the TV police drama Cold Case, but the venue is ancient Samaria, not Philadelphia. In the opening footage, it is the mid-ninth century B.C.E. The king of Judah and the king of Samaria are considering warfare 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 monarchs of Judah and Israel will prevail. As the opening footage continues, the Judean king, Jehoshaphat, turns to his counterpart. He calls for an independent endorsement for this possible encounter. “Is there not another prophet of יהוה here through whom we can inquire?” he asks King Ahab (I Kings 22:7). King Ahab then replies, pointing out that there is someone “through whom we can inquire of יהוה, but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune—Micaiah ben Imlah” (I Kings 22:8).

The Micaiah Mysteries

Ahab’s statement, on the face of it, is provocative, but it does not seem to contain a mystery. Yet, the fact is that there is no prior reference to Micaiah ben Imlah in the Bible. Why then, does Ahab claim such antipathy toward Micaiah, and is there any way to “solve” this biblical cold case? I suggest that there are some clues embedded in the biblical narrative that, when lifted up, point to some prior Ahab-Micaiah encounters.

When it comes to prophets and prophecy in the mid-ninth century B.C.E., the dominant figures are Elijah and Elisha. Their fame obscures the fact that there were other prophets living at that time. The most prominent among them was Micaiah ben Imlah. I Kings 22:1–28 centers on Micaiah and his confrontation with King Ahab.\(^1\) Within these verses are two very mysterious matters. King Ahab openly—though cryptically—indicates that he has some previous history with Micaiah, but there is no clear scriptural support for this statement. Micaiah-by-name only appears in this one chapter. A further mystery is that in his prophecy Micaiah refers to a heavenly convocation where מַשָּׂא is seated with the host of heaven standing nearby, and they are engaged in conversation. This is the only such description in the Bible. What was the basis for this imagery?

**Ahab and Micaiah: Prior Connections?**

Just prior to what will prove to be the final battle fought by King Ahab of Israel, he joins forces at Samaria with his near relative, King Jehoshaphat of Judah.\(^2\) As they plan their joint venture, Ahab’s four hundred court prophets, led by Zedekiah ben Chenaanah, prophesy in favor of this upcoming battle. When Jehoshaphat of Judah asks for a second opinion, Ahab mentions the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah, but also voices disdain for the man.\(^3\) The contemplated battle with Aram is time-sensitive; the kings need a prompt answer.

The difficulty with Ahab’s description of Micaiah is that, as noted earlier, there is no clear biblical basis for Ahab saying that Micaiah has ever spoken about him, much less that Micaiah spoke ill for Ahab’s fortunes on previous occasions.\(^4\)

A partial resolution to the mystery of a prior encounter is found in Josephus’s *The Antiquities of the Jews* and in some Rabbinic materials.\(^5\) These sources propose that it is likely Micaiah ben Imlah is the unnamed person who confronts Ahab following the second Israel-Aram war and its aftermath as described in I Kings 20:13–43. There the narrative explains, a “certain man, a disciple of the prophets” (I Kings 20:35) also described as a “prophet” (I Kings 20:13, 22, 38, 41) tells King Ahab that his life is forfeit because he (Ahab) did not kill the Aramean leader Ben Hadad, a line reminiscent of Samuel’s rebuke to King Saul (I Sam. 15). The last line in chapter 20 explains that “Dispirited and sullen, [Ahab] left for
home and came to Samaria” (I Kings 20:43). This might well be the reason why Ahab says he despises Micaiah (“I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune” [I Kings 22:8]).

The difficulty with Josephus’s and the Rabbis’ answers lie in Ahab’s statement that Micaiah “never prophesies anything good.” Apparently, there have been multiple occasions where Micaiah has opposed Ahab. Ahab actually confirms this when, a bit later, he says to Micaiah, “How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of יהוה?” (I Kings 22:16). The one instance in chapter 20 does not seem sufficient reason for such antagonism from Ahab. A single condemnation does not appear to rise to the level of “never prophesying” good. Where else, then, can Ahab have seen Micaiah? What are these “many times” of which Ahab speaks?

One possible solution is that Micaiah is the unnamed attendant who accompanies Elijah at the confrontation with the priest-like prophets of Baal and who likewise attends Elijah when the prophet flees from the wrath of Jezebel (I Kings 18:43–44, 19:3). This does not preclude other Ahab-Micaiah meetings, which never entered the biblical corpus.

At the Baal prophets’ episode, when King Ahab meets Elijah, he addresses him in scornful tones: “Ahab caught sight of Elijah, [and] Ahab said to him, ‘Is that you, you trouble of Israel?’” (I Kings 18:17). On a later occasion, Ahab describes Elijah as an enemy (I Kings 21:20). Just as Ahab detests Elijah’s opposition to him, so Ahab associates that opposition with people connected with Elijah, and in particular, I suggest Elijah’s unnamed attendant, Micaiah.6

The confrontation with King Ahab, which is played out between Micaiah and Zedekiah ben Chenaanah, the leader of the four hundred court prophets, takes place in a very public area, at the entrance of the gate of Samaria (I Kings 22:10). This open-air public meeting in itself contains several clues. The locale echoes a similar event some years earlier—namely the aforementioned altercation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. There also Ahab is present, but essentially a passive observer of events. In that episode at Mt. Carmel, the prophets of Baal dance and hop to attract their god’s attention. In like manner, at the time of Micaiah, the four hundred prophets associated with Ahab of Israel were prophesying before both King Jehoshaphat of Judah and Ahab. They were
claiming a future victory for the kings. The two kings attend this spectacle, but they have no active role.

When Micaiah speaks to the kings of Israel and Judah, he uses very deliberate language. He says, “I call upon you to hear the word of יהוה” (I Kings 22:19). Micaiah prophesies failure and disaster for this venture. Then Zedekiah ben Chenaanah strikes Micaiah and claims that he (Zedekiah) really speaks for God. He says to Micaiah, “Which way did the spirit of יהוה pass from me to speak with you?” (I Kings 22:24).

Micaiah answers, “If you ever come home safe, יהוה has not spoken through me” (I Kings 22:28).7

Micaiah’s use of the term יהוה is another clue. It echoes the frequent use of the Tetragrammaton in I Kings 17 where it appears no less than fourteen times (2 x 7, a biblically significant number) associated with his mentor Elijah.8 Indeed, when Micaiah actually shares his true prophecy with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, he invokes the divine name seven times.9

Furthermore, Micaiah’s final statement, which proclaims the proof for the truth of his prophetic words, “If you ever come home safe, יהוה has not spoken through me,” is another clue; it is reminiscent of Elijah’s challenge to the populace at the Baal-prophet confrontation, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If יהוה is God, follow [God], and if Baal, follow him” (I Kings 18:21). In Micaiah’s case, he is saying, how long will you keep hopping between two opinions, my reporting of God’s word or that of Zedekiah and his court-prophet associates?10

This particular phrase, the “word of יהוה, (as opposed to the “spirit of יהוה, the phrase used by Zedekiah)11 is associated with both Elijah and Micaiah.12 It strongly speaks to their close association, even if this is not specifically stated.

The Heavenly Encounter: God and the Host of Heaven

The second mysterious event in chapter 22 is Micaiah’s image of a heavenly encounter where יהוה is sitting on the divine throne. God is in active dialogue with the host of heaven who are standing in attendance to the right and to the left. It is the only biblical description of a unique individual “spirit” (רוּחַ), who volunteers to take on a task and then is sent by God in this way to confound mortals.13
The notion of God surrounded by a heavenly host is not uncommon in the Bible. We see it in Isaiah 6:1–2, the seraphim; Jeremiah 23:18–22, false prophets; Ezekiel 1, the vision at the Chebar Canal; and Psalms 103:21 and 148:2. “In Deuteronomistic writings, [however] the heavenly host is the term for the celestial bodies worshiped by foreign nations (cf. e.g. Deut 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; Jer 8:2; 19:13; 33:22) [and they are] forbidden to Israel.”

Here the author of this Kings passage draws on material found elsewhere in the Bible, particularly the scene of elders or prominent citizens gathered in the public square. In the present case, it is God who is in conversation with the heavenly host, seeking their advice and counsel: “תתקס וַתְּהִי asked, ‘who will entice Ahab so that he will march and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said thus and another said thus.” When one spirit volunteers for this mission, God asks, “How [are you going to accomplish this]?” (I Kings 22:20–21). This dialogue is reminiscent of the meeting between Abraham and the Hittite elders of Kiryat Arba/Hebron in the public square when the patriarch purchases land from Ephron (Gen. 23). This divine gathering in Micaiah’s statement also recalls the description of the meeting between Boaz and the elders of the city of Bethlehem in the public square in the book of Ruth (Ruth 4:1–2). In both instances, there is dialogue and the central character seeks a definitive outcome. The suggested public square image for the heavenly encounter in itself is a clue; it ironically mimics the scene where the two monarchs, Ahab and Jehoshaphat, are in “the public square” at the opening of the entrance to the gate of Samaria.

In the post-biblical period, the Rabbis understood this heavenly convocation as a court of law. People stand to the left and right of the judges, those on the right vote for innocence, those on the left, for guilt.

Epilogue

Although there are many references to prophets and prophetic guilds in the mid-ninth century B.C.E., Elijah and Elisha dominate this period. Their fame obscures the fascinating episode described in I Kings 22, which features Micaiah ben Imlah in his confrontation with King Ahab, just prior to Ahab’s defeat and death in battle. Ahab indicates that he had many prior experiences with Micaiah.
The Bible, however, like an unsolved murder case, is silent about this matter. Yet there are certain clues that offer hints towards a resolution of the mystery. In the TV police drama *Cold Case*, the mystery is solved conclusively, guilt is assigned, and often a confession elicited. Although one cannot ultimately prove this contention, this article suggests that Micaiah is the unnamed attendant from an earlier encounter in the book of Kings who appears several times with Elijah and that he also is the unnamed prophet from an earlier encounter who confronts Ahab in I Kings 20. Further, it explains some possible context for this chapter’s unique description of a heavenly encounter between God and the heavenly host.

**Notes**

1. The narrative is repeated, with minor variations, in II Chronicles 18.

2. Athaliah, Ahab’s daughter (or possibly sister) is married to Jehoram [Joram], the son and heir of Jehoshaphat (II Kings 8:18, 26; II Chron. 18:1).

3. It is obvious why Ahab does not even make mention of the name of Elijah, arguably the best-known prophet of that generation. First, with good reason, Ahab utterly despises Elijah, for that prophet has been a continuing critic of the monarch and his policies. Second, Elijah has a habit of disappearing from view and perhaps no one knew where he was.

4. Ahab’s statement about Micaiah (lo yitnabei, he never prophesies) is ambiguous, it could mean on one, or more occasions. Later the monarch makes it clear that they have a long history. See I Kings 22:16.


6. In principle, the nameless attendant in chapter 18 and early 19 could be Elijah’s successor, Elisha ben Shaphat. This identification, nevertheless, is unlikely. It is only when Elijah is on Mt. Horeb that God specifically tells him to commission Elisha. The designation of Elisha-as-attendant comes at the close of I Kings 19. At that point, Elisha specifically says to Elijah that he needs to take leave from his parents (I Kings 19:20). The sense of this small episode is that the Elijah-Elisha relationship is a new one.

7. Micaiah’s words, “if you ever come home safe, הִזַּי has not spoken through me” are followed by the statement, “He said further,
'Listen all you peoples.'” These latter words suggest similar language to Elijah’s statement to the Israelites gathered on Mt. Carmel (see further in this article). Yet, they also provide a misleading clue, because these words are identical with the opening words of the prophet Micah a century later, cf. Micah 1:2a, “Listen all you peoples,” which led some to think that Micaiah was the same person as Micah. “Some later scribe, confusing Micaiah ben Imlah and Micah of Moresheth because of the similarity of names, made a marginal cross-reference to the Biblical book of Micah, thinking it contained further prophecies of the prophet. Eventually, the marginal gloss crept into the text of the narrative.” Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings, Berit Olam* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1996), 352.

8. I Kings 17:1, 2, 5, 8, 12, 14 (twice), 16, 20 (twice), 21 (twice), 22, 24.
9. I Kings 22:19 (twice), 20, 21 (twice), 23 (twice). Micaiah’s use of the Divine Name in the verses prior to this are either a comment to the messenger sent to bring him to where the kings are gathered at the gate of Samaria, part of Micaiah’s initial dissembling to the kings, or Micaiah’s remark to Zedekiah and the kings (I Kings 22:14 (twice), 15–17, 28). Micaiah’s true prophecy begins with the important formula, “Hear the word of ḫw (I Kings 22:19).

10. “Micaiah does not claim that the 400 prophets are self-deluded or that they are motivated by personal gain; they appear as pawns, serving YHVH’s ends . . . they are unlike the false prophets denounced by the literary prophets [cf. Jer. 5:13; Mic. 2:11].” Mordecai Cogan, *1 Kings* (Anchor Bible 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 498 n. 3.

11. “[At] the heart of the matter [are]: two views of prophecy, divination by ‘YHVH’s spirit’ and divination by ‘YHWH’s word’…true prophecy is rational and unaffected by the deceptive spell of the ‘spirit.’” Cogan, *1 Kings*, 497.

12. For example, I Kings 17:2, 8, 16, 24; 18:1, 31; 21:17, 28.
13. In Judges 9:23 God sends an evil spirit (*ruach raah*) to incite the people of Shechem against Abimelech, but in this episode in Kings, the figure of the spirit is individualized, and delineated in a much clearer fashion. See Cogan, *1 Kings*, 492 n. 20 for a fuller discussion.