



Is Yahweh a divine Delilah? An intertextual reading of 1 Kings 22 in light of Jeremiah 20 and Judges 16

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Abstract

It is commonly accepted that God is loving, honest, and would not purposefully deceive us to secure a harmful result or any result for that matter. 1 Kings 22:20, 22 and Jeremiah 20:7, 10 seem to represent texts that would suggest otherwise. The first is a text wherein a prophet (Michaiah ben Imlah) states to his king that God has facilitated the deception of four hundred of his other prophets, so that he (the king) may be enticed (or deceived) into his death. The second presents us with a text in which a prophet (Jeremiah) accuses God of enticing (or deceiving) him into the vocation of prophet. Finally, another text which seems to be related to these two is Judges 16:5, whilst this text would appear to have little to do with the others at first glance, after discussing the various connections between all three, a relationship between them will become more plausible. In this paper a literary (and descriptive) rather than a theological (normative) approach to the texts is proposed. It will address such matters as the juxtaposition of the words יכל and פתה as well as similarities in content both narratologically and formally. In doing so, it is theorized that a greater understanding of the specific terminology will be gained. Having discerned the meaning of the terms used, it is hoped that it will provide us more insights into what is happening, and the implications thereof within each text as a literary unit within a greater whole will be gained.

Keywords

Divine deceit; narratology; false prophecy; free will; intertextuality

1. Introduction

Chisholm (1998:11) sketches the scene for a discussion on divine deceit by writing that throughout the Bible we read of texts which explain how it is

impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2). James 1:13 states that God cannot be tempted by evil and that God would also never tempt someone. Numbers 23:19 says that God is not a man that he should lie. It is commonly accepted that God is loving, honest, and would not purposefully deceive us to secure a harmful result or any result for that matter. 1 Kings 22:20, 22 and Jeremiah 20:7, 10 seem to represent texts that would suggest otherwise. The first is a text wherein a prophet (Michaiah ben Imlah) states to his king that God has facilitated the deception of four hundred of his other prophets, so that he (the king) may be enticed (or deceived) into his death. The second presents us with a text in which a prophet (Jeremiah) accuses God of enticing (or deceiving) him into the vocation of prophet. Finally, another text which seems to be related to these two is Judges 16:5, whilst this text would appear to have little to do with the others at first glance, after discussing the various connections between all three, a relationship between them will become more plausible. One of the pertinent questions which confronts interpreters of the Kings' text is: "How are we to understand God's actions in deceiving Ahab to go into a war which would ultimately lead to his demise? This paper proposes that the Jeremiah and Judges texts may assist us in interpreting these acts taken in 1 Kings 22."¹

2. Mission and approach

That texts were redacted and edited by later scribes is a certainty, in this paper it will be argued that these texts are examples hereof. It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to determine *why* the above-mentioned texts² present features which would imply a common origin, rather it seeks to establish that such a connection exists, firstly, and secondly to determine whether this connection assists us in any way in understanding the content of God's deceitful actions with regard to the text in 1 Kings.

1 And, more broadly, Roberts (1986:220) asks the question "can one trust the gods?" He answers this, after making a distinction between gods and God, with a "no". He does however also state that one may not be too certain whether to trust Yahweh either, at least if you yourself are not a righteous person. The implications of his thoughts are clear, no more so than when he argues that the very fact that God felt the need to swear an oath indicates that the people of Israel had reason to mistrust him (Roberts 1986:212).

2 That is, 1 Kings 22, Jeremiah 20 and Judges 16.

In this paper a literary (and descriptive) rather than a theological (normative) approach to the texts is proposed. It will address such matters as the juxtaposition³ of the words the juxtaposition⁴ of the words יכל⁵ and פתה⁶ as well as similarities in content both narratologically and formally. In doing so, it is theorized that a greater understanding of the specific terminology will be gained. Having discerned the meaning of the terms used, it is hoped that it will provide us more insights into what is happening, and the implications thereof within each text as a literary unit within a greater whole will be gained. The focus of the paper, however, be on the 1 Kings texts and how the other texts could provide us with the necessary terminological guidance to interpret what is taking place in this seemingly troubling text.

Thus, the research problem of this paper is: “Can Jeremiah 20:7, 10 and Judges 16:5 assist us in interpreting the actions taken by God in 1 Kings 22:20, 22?” the assumption being that if it *can* be done profitably, it in fact *should* be done. The paper seeks not to provide a solution for the difficult ethical and theological challenges which the Kings and Jeremiah texts bring forth; this will also not be accomplished. The paper expects to shed light on *what* is happening within the texts on a literary and intertextual level, rather than *why* the event⁷ is possible.

The question will be approached to a large extent intertextually.⁸ There will be an analysis of the similarities between the three texts and an evaluation of what these mean for our understanding of each text, especially with regard to the way in which the words generally translated as “entice/deceive/coax” and “succeed/conquer/be powerful” respectively, are used

3 A Juxtaposition which occurs in each of the three texts.

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5 Botterweck & Ringgren (1990:72) generally favor the following translations “be able” and “succeed.” Whereas, Harris, Archer and Waltke (1980:378) prefer either “prevail” or “overcome.”

6 Holladay (1988:300) identifies the Qal form with the following translations “be inexperienced,” “fool oneself,” “be naïve,” or “be open to deception” and in the Pi’el with either to “fool,” “deceive,” “seduce,” or to “persuade.”

7 In other words, the perceived deception of Ahab facilitated by God.

8 Here understood as Literary–critical analysis of intertextuality as described in (Carr 2010:180).

in these texts. Narratological similarities may include: plot, characters, context and theme. Formal similarities may include such indicators as: Shared vocabulary and structure, among others.⁹

3. Similarities: Arguing a textual relation

3.1 Similarities on a narratological level

In this section all of the texts will be analysed simultaneously, the different examples of continuity will be highlighted and discussed as they relate to one another.

Plot

Miscall (1998:540) describes plot as the events selected and the particular order in which they are presented. In all the texts we find an initial state of harmony. Jeremiah is told that Jerusalem will be strong and protected from others (Jer 1:18–19). Micaiah initially provides assurance to Ahab that he may go to war and that he will succeed when doing so (1 Kgs 22:15). Even the scene in Judges providing Samson's strength and initial cunning when giving Delilah false information would seem to be peaceful. Moreover, all of the actions which set the narratives in motion would likely have appeared to be quite just from the reader's perspective.¹⁰ Another note would be that all the protagonists seem to be at first reluctant to tell the truth; for Jeremiah it is clear;¹¹ Micaiah first provides an incorrect, but reassuring answer to Ahab, as does Samson on three occasions. Eventually, all the protagonists go on to tell the truth. Hereafter, we find three instances which all lead to

9 A full intratextual analysis of each pericope will unfortunately not be possible, given the time and space available for the paper. Only the particular verses identified earlier will be approached in that manner. The rest of the texts will be discussed as they relate to one another.

10 Butler (2009:349) explains that the ancient reader would have initially suspected that Samson may have finally 'come home' in a sense. A lover (who may have been Israelite) is finally named, and his affection is for the first time described as "love". Jeremiah is initially persecuted by Pashur (Fretheim, 2002:290) but it is commonplace for prophets who are doing the right thing to face such opposition in Biblical texts. Finally, even in the case of Ahab, Seow (1999:161) explains that the proposed war is certainly Ahab's to fight. Nelson (1987:147) goes even further by stating that one would actually expect God to support such a venture.

11 Jeremiah's entire lament is, after all, his attempt to escape having to proclaim the word which God has given him.

someone being imprisoned and others dying. Jeremiah's message after his lament in verses 7–11 precedes the Babylonian exile. Micaiah's vision of the heavenly court is followed by the death of King Ahab and Delilah's coaxing of Samson leads to the death of many a Philistine. As mentioned all three of the protagonists were sent to some form of jail before the disaster took place: Jeremiah is struck by the high priest Pashur and put in the stocks near the high gate of Babylon (Jer 20:2). Micaiah is likewise hit by the prophet Zedekiah on the jaw and placed in a "house of restraint" (1 Kgs 22:24, 27). Samson, who earlier made use of the jaw of a donkey to kill Philistines (Judg15:15–17), now also finds himself in captivity. Finally, all of the narratives feature characters who attempt to escape the will of God.¹² The flow and selection of events in these narratives are alike to such an extent that one would be hard pressed to deny that some sort of literary or redactional link exists on the level of the plot.

Characters

Here also the consistencies are apparent. In both the Kings and Jeremiah text the protagonist is a prophet, whilst in the Judges text, Samson is described as a "Nazirite" of God. The word derives from a root meaning "dedicated/consecrated,"¹³ but it seems as though the two were still connected to one another.¹⁴ Furthermore, the antagonists are in all cases higher officials: for Jeremiah it is the high priest Pashur, for Micaiah it is Zedekiah and his prophets (and possibly Ahab, though it is unclear) and for Samson it would be the "lords/princes/governors of the Philistines." An interesting note would be that not once is the antagonist (or the protagonist, at least not explicitly) the one being accused of deceiving or coaxing/enticing anybody, this action is on each occasion reserved for a third party (twice God and once Delilah).¹⁵

12 Jeremiah wishes to escape the obligations of being a prophet; Ahab cloaks himself in an attempt to fool his enemies and escape his inevitable death; and, Webb (2012:405) argues persuasively, that this scene in Judges is merely another attempt by Samson to rebel against his separation to God.

13 See (Holladay 1988:232).

14 Harrison (1986:501) refers to Amos 2:11ff and notes the close relation between prophets and Nazirites, stating that the latter paralleled the former.

15 Operating on the presumption that the Governors if Philistine are to be regarded as the antagonists, rather than Delilah herself.

Context

All the narratives have political/national significance: Jeremiah's, which is related to exile, Micaiah's which ends in the death of Israel's king and the tale of Samson, who was a clear threat for the Philistine society and an asset to Israel. Each of the three addresses different time-periods in Israel's history, but each one is narrated in a context where the protagonist is perceived negatively and where enticement leads to abuse by the antagonists.

Theme

Miscall (1998:540) writes that a theme is an idea, or an abstract concept, which emerges from the narrative's presentation and treatment of the material. In all three texts we are confronted with what seems to be deceit/coaxing/persuasion and the influence it can have on the people of Israel, even its prophets, kings and judges. The central theme found in all three of these texts is that one would be best advised to always follow the word of God, despite or perhaps also due to attempted persuasion. This will become clearer after the formal analysis of the texts.

3.2 Formal similarities

All three make use of a juxtaposition of the two Hebrew words *כָּל* and *פָּתַח*, these three are the only such examples in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ These verbs are also used in the same form on each occasion. The former in the Pi'el, although in Jeremiah 20:10 we also have the Nif'al of *פָּתַח* (which is only used on one other occasion in the Hebrew Bible, namely, Job 31:9), and the latter *כָּל* is in the Qal every time. Jeremiah was struck (Hif'il of *נָכַח*)¹⁷, as was Micaiah (same form and word) and while Samson himself was not struck before being thrown in prison like the others, he does however *נָכַח* (in the Hif'il) the Philistines with a *לֶחִי* (jaw bone) in Judges 15:15, just as Micaiah is *נָכַח* on his *לֶחִי* by Zedekiah.¹⁸

16 With the obvious exception of Chronicles 18:21, which is the parallel of the Kings text.

17 For an interesting discussion on the social implications of this action see Botha & Weber (2008:291b)

18 Botha & Weber (2008:21a) also connect the theme of striking on the jaw to Micah 4:14;5:1 wherein the "judge of Israel" is pronounced a proleptic strike on the jaw, and to Psalm 3 verse 8 which also makes use of the concept.

In Samson's story we are told that Delilah received "eleven hundred *pieces* of silver," which is closely followed by a story of Micah, whose mother we are told had that same amount taken from her. According to Bodner (2003:534) these similarities do link Samson to Micah and Micaiah might have been identified with Micah when he makes use of his famous utterance in 1 Kings 22:28. Sweeney (2007:261) is of the opinion that the aforementioned was undoubtedly a gloss and that it did in fact serve that purpose. This connection is admittedly less direct, but it does serve as another drop inside of a pool of consistencies between the texts.

Based on the list of likenesses both formally¹⁹ and on a narratological level, the conclusion will be drawn that there is indeed an intertextual, literary relation between these texts.²⁰ How exactly it came to be, that is, which author borrowed from which, or if they all share a common editing tradition is unclear at this point. The space allowed for this work also does not give sufficient opportunity to discuss this matter, but that there is an intentional connection between them seems to be an entirely prudent conclusion and that they ought to be read alongside one another seems equally true. What this means for our reading of 1 Kings 22 will be discussed in the rest of the paper.

4. Formal analysis

This subdivision will discuss each text on a formal level. These discussions will not be purely intratextual, but will address, as far as it is possible, all of the highlighted verses in the texts separately.

4.1 Jeremiah 20:7

Stulman (2005:199) explains that whilst the verb יָלַח has a wide semantic range (he provides "strengthen", "seizing", "compelling", "taking hold of" and "overpower" among others) and occurs often, the verb פָּתָה is only found in twenty-five pericopes throughout the *Tanakh* and is also much less varied in its translations. He also makes connections with the

19 Moberly (2003:22) also notes that "the dates and originating contexts of Jeremiah and of the Micaiah story (as a constituent part of the Deuteronomistic History) are also likely to be close to each other."

20 Structurally the consistencies were made clear in the discussion of the plot earlier.

Judges and the Kings text as is done in this paper but sees more value in connecting this text with Ezekiel 14:9, which explains that prophets who speak falsely do so due to Yahweh deceiving them. Although the Jeremiah text uses the same word for deceive, there is no indication that Jeremiah is acting as a false prophet in this case – quite the opposite, in fact. However, this line of thinking could be taken further as Roberts (1986:219) does, by adding a text from Micah 3:8, which also explains that sinful prophets are at risk of being deceived. Again, one looks in vain for evidence suggesting that Jeremiah had acted sinfully prior to his accusation of being “deceived.” Fretheim (2002:290) explains that the word יָלַל generally, when applied to God refers to God’s word, that is God’s victory is fundamentally related to his word. This seems to be the most probable case here as well. Jeremiah is conquered in the sense that he cannot but proclaim the word of God, despite the effects thereof being negative for him personally.²¹ He is, as McConville (2002:57) describes, “compelled to speak” or as O’Connor (2011:83) explains: “consumed by the power of the divine word.”

Stulman (2005:199) also mentions different interpretations for the imagery surrounding Jeremiah’s accusation directed towards God: Heschel thinks it is predominantly sexual, something like forceful rape,²² based on such texts as Exodus 22:16 and Deuteronomy 22:25. He is of the opinion that due to Jeremiah’s feeling of powerlessness and shame he uses these metaphors. Because of the context of Jeremiah’s lament, it hardly seems appropriate to read a form of sexual deception into the text. There are stronger parallels elsewhere which would better explain the event. Another possibility which Stulman refers to is proposed by O’Connor, who argues that by deceiving him Yahweh has in fact made Jeremiah to be a false prophet, such as those mentioned above. Such a conclusion has already been dealt with but can be contrasted with Roberts (1986:218) who states that it is Yahweh’s slowness in executing his judgement that leads Jeremiah to feeling that he has been deceived. It is difficult, however, to define what kind of deception is implied by such a conclusion. Is Jeremiah sure that the word he is proclaiming is true, but feels that God has deceived him with regard to the timeline? Or

21 Even God experiences weariness when attempting to hold back his judgement as seen in 15:6 (Fretheim 2002:292).

22 Based also on the usage of the word זָנָה which is associated with the rape of a woman in the texts mentioned.

that Jeremiah is, himself, experiencing doubt with regard to the trueness of the word itself? Neither seems to me to be supported by any textual evidence. Huey (1993:192) provides the most persuasive argument in this case by stating that Yahweh never truly deceived Jeremiah; he warned that people might resist his words in 1:8, 19 and 12:5. Jeremiah is not accusing God of providing a false word to him, but rather of coaxing/persuading him into the vocation of prophecy, which does not seem at all implausible but does, admittedly, do little to alleviate the discomfort which readers might experience with God bending people to His will.²³ McKane (1986:470) presents a similar case, namely, that Jeremiah was never charging Yahweh with deceit; rather he was merely expressing his bedazzlement with the prospect of holding the prophetic office, thus he says Yahweh was merely encouraging him (effectively) to become a prophet.²⁴ In conclusion, then it would seem at this point more accurate to this writer to rather translate the verb פתה with “persuade,” “coax” or even “compelled”. This is the nature of the accusation which Jeremiah is levelling at Yahweh. His complaint is not directed towards the word which Yahweh has given to him, but rather towards his obligation to pronounce that word. His chief grievance is that he must be a prophet, that he must speak such an ominous message to his people, not that the message itself is incorrect. Furthermore, it is also not by means of deception that God managed to make Jeremiah a prophet.²⁵ Holladay (1986:558) is correct in noting that it is Jeremiah’s experience as proclaimer of Yahweh’s word, which has led him to feeling unduly influenced: “He is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t speak out that word.”

23 A noteworthy comment is provided by Miller (1994:726) who notices the way in which the lament proper (verses 7–10) is enveloped by the words and forming an *inclusio* and neatly wrapping the rest together. He agrees that the word “enticed” would imply being enticed into something and on this occasion, it is the prophetic enterprise. He asks the question “if the primary force of the verb is deceit, then what is the deception?”

24 McKane also notes the language and explains that Jeremiah might be making use of a rhetorical device by presenting the following case: His adversaries can only be correct if Yahweh is in fact a deceiver, by doing so, says McKane, he emphasizes that they cannot be right.

25 This opinion is shared by (Craigie 1991:273).

4.2 Jeremiah 20:10

Miller (1994:726–727) argues that the thematic word in this verse is יכל: he states that Jeremiah's enemies wish that he would be enticed so that they may prevail/overcome him – and this after God had promised that they would not do exactly that (see 1:18). Carroll (1986:400) points out the irony of their wishes in that they are hoping for what Jeremiah has proclaimed already happened.²⁶ Fretheim (2002:291) argues that Jeremiah finds himself in a situation where he is on the one side beset by the word of God and on the other, he is beleaguered by persecutors. Thus, Fretheim argues that the issue for God is to overcome Jeremiah's silence. Craigie (1991:274) states that in this verse Jeremiah's enemies are now (using the same vocabulary as he did) hoping that he will be persuaded so that they can overcome him. Again, it must be said as Roberts (1986:218) comments that Jeremiah's enemies are hardly thinking of sexual seduction (as was suggested by Heschel) and writes that the Nif'al indicates that these people, who refer to their own actions in the Qal, most likely do not even have human attempts to trick Jeremiah in mind.

McKane (1986:469) warns against reading the words פתה and יכל in the same way throughout. He is of the opinion that these two do not function identically on both occasions. It seems that McKane is indeed right in asserting that the two words no longer function in the same way as earlier. The persuasion/coaxing, to which Jeremiah was referring in verse seven is not the same as what his enemies desire. Their hopes seem to be that Jeremiah has indeed been or will be misled/deceived by God, so that they may overcome him (cf. O'Conner's theory earlier). Here the (false) hope is that God will, in fact, deceive Jeremiah rendering him a false prophet. Given their wishes in this regard we can confidently discern that this form of deception has not taken place at this point. It can, therefore, not be said that Jeremiah is deceived as is the case in Ezekiel 14:9. Another possibility would be that the writer of the story is simply alerting the reader by way of similar vocabulary and a stark contrast how Yahweh's word has overcome Jeremiah and forced him to speak the truth, whereas his enemies seem to be hoping for quite the opposite. What is quite clear, from this analysis,

26 Craigie (1991:274) points to the similarity in the vocabulary being employed in this case.

is that Jeremiah cannot accurately be said to have been deceived in any real sense, and certainly not in the sense that he ought to be regarded as a false prophet. Rather, he feels that he has been persuaded by God to place himself (or that God has placed him) in a position which he finds unbearably taxing in the present moment.

4.3 Judges 16:5

In this text commentators²⁷ hardly seem to notice the specific vocabulary being used (i.e. פתה and יכל) and their relation to the other texts being analysed in this paper. Given the fact that there is inherently less discomfort with regard to apparent deceitful behaviour of human beings than there is when such actions are attributed to God, a certain level of complacency is to be expected. Again, it will be argued, that we are not dealing with deception in this case, certainly not in the formal sense. Delilah is not tricking Samson into telling her the truth, the text does not even state unambiguously that she is seducing him into it. This is also why most translations already provide “coax/persuade” as the correct translation. And, in my estimation, there appear to be no real contentions or textual indicator which would support a contrary translation of the present text. All the literature analysed seemed to agree about the notion that we witness persuasion rather than deception in these texts.²⁸ Consequently, it would seem again that when יכל is used together with פתה, we have something to do with the word of God. However, in contrast to the Jeremiah story, Samson is not being tempted into or by the word of God, but away from it. Jeremiah was persuaded into being God’s messenger in the sense that God’s word was so powerful that he could not keep it in. Samson on the other hand is persuaded away from it.²⁹ Moreover, these words are not

27 None of the commentaries utilised for the analysis of the Judges text mentions either the Kings or the Jeremiah examples. These commentaries are: Soggin (1981); Webb (2012); Moore (1966); Butler (2009); and Olson (1998). The same is true for the Kings commentaries. However, this is not the case for the Jeremiah commentaries which often connect these texts, but also seldom refer to the Judges text (cf. Carroll (1986); Holladay (1986)).

28 One could add in this case a certain degree of betrayal, however, even such an assertion could not be accepted unequivocally.

29 Although it must be conceded that Samson was never explicitly told that he may not share the secret of his strength.

being applied in a manner that would suggest deception so much as they would persuasion or perhaps in the case of Samson enticement.

4.4 1 Kings 22:20–22³⁰

This text has been the subject of thorough debate in years gone by and still is to this day.³¹

Brueggemann (1997: 360–361), cognizant of its apparent theological implications and clearly disturbed by the text, comments that 1 Kings 22:20–22, is surely a “primitive” prophetic tale. He says that the reader of the text is imagined into a discussion in “the divine council,” which he explains is a cabinet meeting of Yahweh’s heavenly government. He theorizes that: “The purpose of the narrative, and the purpose of the discussion in the divine council, is to assert Yahweh’s decisive hostility toward Ahab and the dynasty of Omri and to assert Yahweh’s hand in the governance of history – even royal history.” He believes that the conversation in Yahweh’s court is unambiguous. He says that what is being planned is a massive deception of the king and that Yahweh in this instance obviously exercises no covenantal self-restraint, but rather is determined to have Yahweh’s own way no matter what the cost – even if it means deceptive violence. An ominous analysis, no doubt, yet perhaps there is more to be gleaned from the texts.

30 It should be noted that although the focus of this section will be placed on the terminology and interpretation of a specific divine action in the text, there are nonetheless countless other challenges which have, unfortunately, been deemed to lie beyond the scope of the present paper – despite their being fascinating to read.

31 Carroll (1991:43–44) writes that among the elementary truths of theology the claim that the gods do not tell lies is most certainly an example. He is of the opinion that if the gods lie, then we are all in trouble because, he says, we will never be able to be certain about anything connected with our religious foundations. “God is truth”, he writes, is a foundational claim of every religious system and a certitude embraced by every member of a theological community. He then goes on to give an overview of the content of 1 Kings 22 and states: “I suppose a desperate theologian might want to make subtle distinctions between encouraging others to lie and lying oneself, but both practices seem to be on the wrong side of truth-telling.” Chisholm (1998) employs a certain type of utilitarian logic which attempts to do away with the moral challenges by placing them into the broader framework of God’s greater plan – an ends-justify-the-means-approach. Both Moberly (2003) and Mayhue (1993) attempt semantic arguments about the difference between active deception and deception by omission, while stressing the bad character of king Ahab in each case. Finally, the discussion above will clearly show how troubling the implications of the text are for commentators on the text.

More sympathy for the character of Ahab is garnered through a comment by Sweeney (2007:260), who writes of the difficult position which Ahab has been placed in: seemingly the only criterion that he had to discern the true prophet from the false one was to see whose message became true in the end.³² Seow (1999:164), however, notes how Micaiah's vision resembles that of Isaiah (Isa 6:1–8) and explains that it does in effect point to Micaiah as being a true prophet. It is doubtful, however, that the intended reader (whoever that may have been) would have presumed this to be case. Moreover, there is no indication in the text that the prophets whom Ahab initially consults are in any sense to be regarded as untrustworthy.³³ In fact, they are receiving their word from Yahweh, in this case that word just happens to be false.

Cook (1976:222) questions how literally we ought to take the vision of Micaiah, he explains that it might be a type of parable.³⁴ This, however, does not seem likely as the text presents the vision as the cause of what happens in the real world, a parable would not function in this way. Furthermore, if the one is parallel to the other that would mean that Ahab is in fact likened to God in this instance, which is dubious given the Biblical author's negative sentiments towards Ahab.³⁵

It has been suggested by many of the commentators that the narrative tells us something of the intransigence or recalcitrance of Ahab, namely, that he was determined to go to war regardless of the divine will and simply seeking some form of “rubber stamp” to convince his hesitant ally, Jehoshaphat,

32 Fritz (2003:220) likewise explains that “the truth of prophecy is manifest in its fulfilment.”

33 Contra Montgomery (1967:334) who implies that Jehoshaphat may have been asking for a “real” prophet of Yahweh.

34 A similar notion is provided by Moberly (2003:23) who suggests that the heavenly court might be revealing the true nature of the earthly court, with this he means that Micaiah might simply be using this vision as a type of parallel to show the nature of the royal court on earth.

35 Another approach would be to question the identity of the spirit as Mayhue (2003:163) does when he argues that it was Satan who deceived the prophets, whilst DeVries (2003:268) rather feels that we ought to understand the spirit here as the personified spirit of prophecy. This matter proves complex enough to write an entire paper on in its own right. Due to this and the fact that it does not relate to the subject of this paper no final conclusion will be drawn on the matter. Mayhue however does provide an interesting discussion on this particular topic.

to join his military expedition. The following should be considered when evaluating these assumptions:³⁶

1. God, seeking to influence Ahab sends a lying spirit (רוח שקר) to interfere with the message of the prophets whom he consults. Clearly, had Ahab been so determined to go to war, and so unconcerned with the genuine will of God then such a step would be redundant, indeed, entirely unnecessary as Ahab would have gone to war in any case.
2. Although never stated as the goal, Jehoshaphat evidently is convinced that the war is divinely sanctioned as he unreservedly joins the expedition. In fact, Ahab is the only one of the two who seems to have any reservations about the certainty of the message. Thus, he attempts to avoid death by disguising himself (v. 30). It seems, therefore, that Jehoshaphat (and not Ahab) was the only one completely convinced by the prophetic actions.³⁷

From these two points we can draw two conclusions upon which to build the further analysis: (1) Ahab must have been open to persuasion and had not already made up his mind regarding the venture; (2) the truth was not easily discernible, even for the seemingly pious, as Jehoshaphat having evaluated the evidence clearly thought the action to be just.

Having argued previously for a translation of פתה as “persuade,” “coax,” or the perhaps too strong “compel” when used in combination with יכל as in the other texts, it must be tested whether it also plausibly fits into the present context.

Firstly, what would the function of Micaiah’s vision be if the goal were simply to deceive Ahab into going to war? Rather than disturbing, it appears, in my estimation to be an extremely accommodating feature of the tale. God, clearly having persuaded Ahab to go to war at this point, and with Micaiah initially echoing the message of the other prophets (v. 15) nonetheless presents Ahab with the truth. Such a vision does not support the

36 Cf. Seow (1999:166); Nelson (1987:150); Brueggemann (2000:267), *inter alia*.

37 Perhaps one could argue that Ahab experienced such a level of hubris that he felt that even if it was not the will of God, he could still thwart the divine plans. However, even in this case then the deceit would not be necessary. Clearly, if that were his attitude then the divine council was a waste of time.

goal of securing Ahab's demise. At best it's an opportunity for him to avoid that fate, at worst it's a measure to expose his biases to the reader. Secondly, Ahab does not act as a headstrong, close-minded war monger. He appears to be open to suggestions and even doubt. He fulfils Jehoshaphat's desire to gain prophetic approval (v. 5); after Jehoshaphat's dissatisfaction with this judgement he has Micaiah, whom he knows to be hostile towards him, to be fetched (v. 9); he questions Micaiah's initial positive pronouncement and demands the true word of Yahweh (v. 16); and he goes into the war weary of the fact that he may well die, despite all of prophetic affirmations he received (v. 30). These are not the actions of a "loose cannon" who simply needs to be tricked into doing something, rather he is better understood to be an individual unsure as to the outcome of the future. Were he truly deceived, then no precaution would be necessary when going into war. It must be emphasised that Ahab must have been open to both going to and not going to war. Else why would God deem it necessary to interfere? Ahab, therefore, just as the consensus indicates for Samson, and as I have argued is the case for Jeremiah was "persuaded" by God into making a specific decision. God did not resort to deception in this regard, in fact, the truth was even given to Ahab through Micaiah's vision. This would seem a peculiar action for a deceptive deity to take. Perhaps, it could be said that just as Ahab was open to either option, so also God had not ruled out the possibility that Ahab might perhaps repent and see the light.

5. Conclusion

The proposed relation between the three texts under investigation seems to be valid. There are simply too many congruencies in both content and theological message to assume otherwise. Furthermore, reading these texts together provides us with a much more informed opinion on how to translate the words פתה and יכל when they are used together as in the three texts analysed, namely "coax/persuade" and "prevail/overpower" respectively, with the latter being related to the word of God. It also provides us with a greater appreciation for the nuances which accompany the juxtaposition of these two terms as opposed to their separate use in other texts in the Hebrew Bible.

Although, the texts in question appear to describe persuasion rather than deception they do not provide clarity on the relation between possible deception and false prophecy. Even if Ahab, himself, might not have been deceived it seems as though his prophets may have been. The divine agent in the heavenly council of Micaiah's vision promises to be a רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר (lying spirit) in the mouths of the prophets.³⁸ Ahab, however, is never the object of a verb related to deception. It is false prophecy (caused by Yahweh) in conjunction with Ahab's inability to recognize true prophecy that leads to him being persuaded into death. In contrast to the Jeremiah text, Yahweh does not persuade Ahab on His own, and this is also why one may argue that it was due to Yahweh being aware of the way in which Ahab will react, rather than forcing him against his will to enter war. The example of "overpowering" found in this text could also be understood as Yahweh explaining to the spirit that he will overcome the prophets. Reading this act in relation to the other texts leads to the conclusion that one needs to interpret this in terms of God (or the spirit in this case) prevailing by way of God's word.

It was stated at the beginning of the paper that the focus will be descriptive, however, many of the theological, normative questions remain unanswered. Although it lies beyond the scope of this paper, there are extremely pertinent and seemingly untouched theological challenges posed by the texts analysed here: what does Yahweh's interference in human affairs, particularly when related to their decision-making, mean for the conception of free will in the Hebrew Bible? Or as Stulman (2005:200–201) sketches it, what is the relation between human freedom and divine sovereignty/prerogative? Barton (2014:224–226) provides a discussion of the Micaiah ben Imlah as well as certain Jeremiah texts,³⁹ but never addresses the implications for free will. It should be borne in mind, however, that not only do the individuals concerned have their actions influenced by God, but they are

38 Chisholm (1998:12) concludes "God's commitment to truthfulness does not mean that He never uses deceit as a method of judgment on sinners". Shemesh (2002:95) believes that neither God nor the prophets utter an outright falsehood, and that the Bible recognizes that occasionally deception is necessary.

39 Read here with the 'hardening of the pharaoh's heart' in Exodus 8:32 and 10:20, as well as Isaiah 6:9–10, and Ezekiel 20:25–6. He also refers to 1 Kings 13.

equally seen as responsible for the actions (both positively and negatively) they undertook due to said influence.⁴⁰

There is no sense in which the responsibility of Ahab, or in similar circumstances that of the Pharaoh in Exodus 8:32, or the hearers of Isaiah's message in Isaiah 6:9–10 is in any way mitigated by the impairment of their faculties through the divine interference. Likewise, it does not seem as though Jeremiah is to be regarded any less of a prophet despite the fact that he prophesies against his will. All parties are held equally responsible for their actions regardless of God's impact in determining what they do.

This occurrence certainly warrants further study, it seems to me rather unlikely that one could simply dismiss the topic of free will as a given in the Old Testament as Barton (2014:70) referring to Knight (1980) does when he writes that "One might expect any modern treatment of ethics to include a detailed discussion of free will as the precondition for human responsibility, but in the case of ancient Israel the theme seldom emerges. By and large the idea that human beings are free to respond or not respond to moral imperatives is taken for granted in the Old Testament." Nor does it seem, in my estimation to be prudent to state that moral freedom is presupposed in the prophetic literature as Barton (2014:71) does. The matter appears to be far more complex than one may initially expect.

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40 O'Connor (2011:85) briefly discusses the complex interrelation between human responsibility, sin and divine punishment, all of which can seemingly function despite divine meddling in decision-making.

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