

Poetic Justice

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1 Kings 22:23

(BHS)

וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה
נָתַן יְהוָה רוּחַ שָׁקֶר
בְּפִי כָּל־נְבִיאָיִךְ אֲלֶיךָ
וַיְהִי דְבַר עָלֶיךָ רָעָה:

(NASB)

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.”

In line 2 the basic meaning of the verb is “to give,” “Yahweh gave a lying spirit.” The word “give” is a key word in the larger narrative, beginning with 21:1, “Give me your vineyard!” You may remember *ruach* is “spirit.” *Sheger* is falsehood, a deliberate lie. The last word of the verse is *ra’ah*. This is one of those general words that can be glossed with a wide variety of more specific English words. Its basic meaning is evil or harm. I like the NASB choice of “disaster.” Yahweh put a lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets to entice Ahab to his death—and it worked.

Some Christian ethicists won’t allow that it is ever appropriate to lie. So Rahab deceiving the king of Jericho, or the midwives dissembling before Pharaoh, are not seen as examples to emulate. After all, the basic argument for inerrancy is that God is the God of truth. God doesn’t lie, so the Bible has no error. But here, in our verse, there is a paradox.

Once or twice a year I teach this passage, and I ask my students to consider why God perpetrates a falsehood there. I send them home to work on that problem until next class. There are many ways to answer. After all, God left them with one prophet as a witness. And Ahab wasn’t actually fooled; he immediately knew it was a deception and pressed Micaiah for the truth (22:16). But there is a better explanation.

The real answer is that putting a lie in the mouths of the prophets was poetic justice. You see, Ahab benefitted from Jezebel's actions in the previous story. She had put a lying spirit in the mouths of some thugs, who falsely accused Naboth, causing his death (1 Kings 21:10). She then stole Naboth's property for Ahab. So Ahab's demise being executed through deceit was exactly what he deserved. The God of all justice made sure that the manner of Ahab's unlawful gain was the manner of his downfall. This sort of analysis may not satisfy the ethical question, but it is the point of the narrative.

We live in a moral universe, laden with consequence. Sacred history such as 1 Kings 22 makes it abundantly clear that no one will escape the consequences of their evil deeds. We believe that what we do and say has a weight to it, a significance that carries into eternity. You will be judged for every careless word (Matt 5:22). But this is a particularly religious and Christian point of view. Secularists do not believe this, and thus live as if there will never be an accounting for their deeds and words.

It is hard to keep eternity in mind every minute of every day. We will backslide. We will say and do things that are inconsistent with what we claim to believe—as if we insanely put out of our minds the notion that we will be judged for those things. Jesus said that “whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12:3). If Jezebel had believed that, she might not have so cavalierly murdered a child of God. Despite this, at times we all take license with our deeds and speech, as if we don't believe. We tend to live as if we are secularists. I know that I do.

Christian, continue to preach the gospel to yourself. Be reminded of who you are and what you believe. Then go forth each day, recommitted to live consistently with that great Truth. The effort will continue your whole life, until Jesus returns and you are judged for everything you said and did. “Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?” (Rom 2:3). Even if you don’t keep eternity in mind every moment of every day, he does.

Something to think about.