

## UNDERSTANDING "LYING SPIRIT" IN 1 KINGS 22:22

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### Abstract

*This research examines the concept of the "lying spirit" in 1 Kings 22:23 with a focus on its theological meaning and implications for understanding God's sovereignty and justice. In this passage, God is described as allowing a lying spirit to mislead Ahab's prophets as part of divine judgment. This phenomenon raises various questions about God's holy character amidst the use of lies to achieve His will. Through a historical-grammatical approach, linguistic analysis of the word רָחַץ (ruach), as well as a thematic study of divine sovereignty in the Old Testament text, this research finds that God's actions remain consistent with His just and righteous nature. God is not the originator of lies, but remains in His absolute authority, allowing humans to reap the consequences of their rejection of the truth. In addition, this research connects the relevance of this event to the challenges of integrity in a contemporary culture hit by the "post-truth" phenomenon. This research contributes to the study of Old Testament theology by offering a new perspective on the relationship between justice, truth, and divine sovereignty in ancient and contemporary contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Spirit of Lying, 1 Kings 22:23, Sovereignty of God, Evil and Righteousness, Old Testament Theology.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the biblical text, 1 Kings 22:23 records an interesting theological phenomenon, namely God's sending of a "lying spirit" (ruach sheqer) to deceive Ahab's prophets.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon raises serious questions regarding God's sovereignty, divine justice, and the involvement of evil spirits in the fulfillment of the divine plan. This issue challenges the common understanding of the holy and righteous nature of God, since God seems to permit lies as an instrument of judgment against those who rebel against the truth.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the overall biblical narrative, this story demonstrates the important principle that God is not only active in the revelation of truth, but also in the judgment of rejection of that truth.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in ancient Israelite theology, God's act of sending a lying spirit was

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<sup>1</sup> Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Kaiser, Walter C. *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Walton, John H. *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006

understood as a form of legitimate judgment against a king and nation who persisted in living in disobedience.

Understanding the meaning of this text also requires an exploration of the spiritual worldview of ancient Israel, in which the existence of spirits—both those carrying truth and lies—was recognized as part of creation that remained under divine authority. In the ancient Near Eastern world, the concept that gods-controlled spirit beings in carrying out judgment or testing their people was a common idea, but the Bible differentiates it by affirming God's holiness and justice as the primary motivation (Westermann, 1994). This research aims to analyse the theological meaning of the sending of the spirit of lies in 1 Kings 22:23, examine the concept of God's sovereignty in relation to the use of lies as a means of punishment, and explore the relevance of this concept in facing the challenges of the contemporary world which is characterized by the phenomenon of manipulation of truth in the "post-truth" era.<sup>4</sup>

The text of 1 Kings 22:23 raises deep questions about the relationship between God's sovereignty and the existence of lies in this world. How should God's people understand that God allows evil spirits to play a role in conveying lies, even though God Himself is the source of all truth? What theological meaning is contained in the role of the "lying spirit" sent by God to mislead Ahab's prophets? Apart from that, another important question is whether this text reflects the good and just nature of God, or does it instead raise a paradox in our understanding of God's holy nature?

This research aims to: Analyze the role of "lying spirit" in 1 Kings 22:23 and reveal the theological meaning contained in the sending of the spirit by God. Exploring the concept of God's sovereignty in relation to the sending of lies as part of divine judgment. Examining the theological implications of the concept of "lying spirit" in the context of understanding truth and lies in the Bible, as well as its relevance in the contemporary life of Christians. Make a theological contribution to the understanding of lies, integrity, and justice within the framework of today's Christian faith.

A number of studies have addressed the issue of divine justice and God's sovereignty in the Bible, but few have specifically examined the role of evil spirits in the biblical narrative as agents of divine judgment, as depicted in 1 Kings 22:23. Many researchers focus more on the themes of salvation and God's love, while the more complex aspects of the use of evil spirits for divine purposes remain less explored in depth. This research seeks to fill this gap by further examining how the spirit of lies, as part of God's action, can be understood in the context of the overall theology of the Bible. In addition, there is a void in contemporary literature that connects the theological understanding of lies in the biblical text with the phenomenon of "post-truth" in modern society. This research will make an important contribution in bridging this gap by examining how the principles contained in the text of 1 Kings 22:23 can be applied to understand the ethical challenges of today.

## METHODOLOGY

This research methodology uses a qualitative approach with text analysis methods to interpret the passage of 1 Kings 22:23, especially related to the concept of "lying spirit" (רוח שקר ruach sheqer). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore deep theological and historical meanings in biblical texts that are rich in symbolism and cultural context.[16] This analysis will be carried out in the following steps: Historical-Grammatical Hermeneutic Approach The text of 1 Kings 22:23 will be analyzed using a historical-grammatical

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

hermeneutic approach, which focuses on understanding Hebrew in its historical context. Researchers will examine the meaning of key words such as "ruach" (רוּחַ) and "sheqer" (שָׁקֶר), as well as the use of these terms in other biblical texts. Understanding the historical and cultural background of Israel at that time will also be the main focus for understanding the context of this prophecy.[17]

After analyzing the text linguistically, the researcher will identify the main themes that appear in the text, such as divine justice, God's sovereignty, and the consequences of sin. The theme of the "spirit of lies" will be examined in relation to broader theological teachings, including the understanding of truth and falsehood in the Bible. In addition, this research will examine how these concepts are applied in the broader context of the Biblical narrative.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The passage of 1 Kings 22 has been the object of study by biblical scholars because of its narrative and theological richness, especially in depicting the battle between truth and falsehood through prophecy.<sup>5</sup> Classic studies such as those conducted by Montgomery (1951) and Gray (1970) highlight the role of Mikhaya bin Yimla as a prophet who dared to oppose the political pressure of King Ahab.<sup>6</sup> They emphasize Micah's moral courage and place primary focus on the socio-political dynamics of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

On the other hand, modern studies such as those proposed by Brueggemann (2000) examine this article from the perspective of political theology, showing how prophecy is used or misused to legitimize power.<sup>7</sup> However, most of these studies pay little attention to an in-depth analysis of the term "spirit of lies" (רוּחַ שָׁקֶר) that appears in this passage. The concept of how God permits or sends a lying spirit has not been studied sufficiently from a linguistic, historical and systematic-theological perspective. This lacuna suggests the need for further research to understand the meaning, function, and implications of the presence of the "spirit of lies" in the divine plan as described in 1 Kings 22:23.

In Old Testament theology, the term "ruach" (רוּחַ) has a wide range of meanings, including "wind," "breath," "human spirit," to "Spirit of God" depending on the context of use. According to Harris, Archer, and Waltke, ruach in the Hebrew text is used more than 370 times, with semantic variations that reflect the dynamics of physical and spiritual life.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, ruach can refer to the Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets and led God's people (e.g. Isaiah 11:2), but on the other hand, this term can also refer to evil spirits who work within the limits of divine sovereignty (e.g. Judges 9:23). In the context of 1 Kings 22:23, "ruach" refers to a spirit entity that God permitted to bring false messages to false prophets. This shows that in the Hebrew conception, not all manifestations of spirit originate from the motivation of truth, but can also be divine instruments to carry out punishment or fulfill His

<sup>5</sup> Montgomery, James A. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*. T&T Clark, 1951

<sup>6</sup> Block, Daniel I. 1997. *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Kings*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, dan Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 Vols. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.

will against rebellious humans. Thus, the meaning of ruach here reflects the complexity of the relationship between divine action and human response in salvation history.

The word "sheqer" (שֶׁקֶר) in the Hebrew Bible is generally translated as "lie," "falsehood," or "deception." According to VanGemeren, sheqer reflects any form of deviation from the truth that is intended to mislead or deceive. In the Old Testament, lying was condemned as a serious offense against God's righteous and faithful character (Psalm 31:18; Zechariah 8:16-17).<sup>9</sup> Lies are not only seen as ethical violations against fellow humans, but also as acts of rebellion against divine truth itself.

In the context of 1 Kings 22:23, the use of the term sheqer implies that the message the false prophets received was completely contrary to God's will and truth. Although God permits the spirit to carry a false message, this does not diminish His attribute of holiness, but rather shows how God, in His justice, hands over those who reject the truth to the consequences of their choices (compare Romans 1:24-25). Therefore, analysis of the concept of sheqer is important to understand the dynamics between truth, lies and divine justice in this text.

In ancient Israelite culture and Near Eastern settings in general, the existence of spirits—whether divine, human, or evil—was an integral part of the religious worldview. According to Walton (2006), nations such as the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Canaanites believed that the spirit world interacted actively with human life, influencing political, social, and spiritual events. In these beliefs, spirits can be used as agents to bring truth or mislead, depending on divine will or other spiritual machinations.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the views of surrounding nations who often perceive evil spirits as entities that work autonomously, the Hebrew Bible confirms that all spirit creatures, including those who carry lies, remain under God's sovereign authority (Job 1–2). In the context of 1 Kings 22, the sending of the "spirit of lies" does not mean that God is the source of evil, but rather that He permits the manifestation of evil as part of judgment on a rebellious nation. Thus, Israel's understanding of the spirit world shows that God remains in absolute control over all aspects of reality, including supernatural reality.<sup>11</sup>

Within the framework of Biblical theology, God's sovereignty is understood as His absolute authority over all creation, including power over truth and over the consequences of lies resulting from human rebellion. Several key texts such as Isaiah 45:7 and Amos 3:6 show that no event, including disaster or deception, occurs outside of God's knowledge and permission.<sup>12</sup> However, the Bible clearly distinguishes between God's active action in bringing about good and the act of allowing humans to reap the consequences of their sin. In 1 Kings 22:23, the presence of a lying spirit is permitted to carry out divine judgment against the stubborn and truth-rejecting Ahab, as Paul also describes in Romans 1:24–28, where God "gives up" humans to their lusts as a consequence of their free choice. A study by Frame

<sup>9</sup> VanGemeren, Willem A., ed. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 Vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, dan Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 Vols. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. 1997. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>12</sup> McLaren, Brian D. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*. New York: Convergent Books, 2019.

(2017) confirms that God's sovereignty does not make Him the moral cause of sin, but rather shows how His justice and holiness are expressed in allowing humans to face the consequences of their decisions.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, understanding the "spirit of lies" does not diminish God's holiness, but rather shows how divine justice works in the context of human rebellion.

After the data is collected through the methodological approach explained above, this study will analyze several important aspects of 1 Kings 22:23, especially related to the concept of a "lying spirit" sent by God.<sup>14</sup> In this section, the researcher will analyze the Hebrew Analysis: רוּחַ שָׁקֶר (Ruach Sheqer) The phrase "lying spirit" (רוּחַ שָׁקֶר) consists of two keywords: רוּחַ (ruach) which means "spirit," "wind," or "breath." This term in the Old Testament context often indicates a spiritual entity, either from God (Isa. 11:2) or from other sources such as in Judges 9:23. שָׁקֶר (sheqer) means "lie," "deception," or "deceit." This word describes something that is actively misleading and contrary to God's truth (cf. Zechariah 8:16-17).

How God's sovereignty works in the context of the "lying spirit" sent to mislead Ahab's prophets. The understanding that God permits lies as part of judgment, not as the moral source of the lies themselves, will be analyzed in the light of divine justice.<sup>15</sup> Researchers will relate this to the teaching in Romans 1:24-25, where God "gives up" humans to their desires, and how this shows aspects of divine justice and punishment that are visible in His decisions. this phrase describes a spiritual entity that God actively permitted to deceive false prophets. This action was part of God's form of punishment for Ahab who rejected divine truth.

This chapter is the climax of the long conflict between the true prophet and the corrupt royal power. Mikhaya son of Yimla stands as an antithetical figure to the court prophets who delivered pleasant messages to please Ahab. In the heavenly vision (vv. 19–22), God convenes a divine council, similar to the descriptions in Job 1 and Isaiah 6. God asked who would lead Ahab astray, and "a spirit" appeared to offer himself to be a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets.<sup>16</sup> God gives permission. This interpretation emphasizes that: God remains sovereign over everything that happens, including acts of deception. The Spirit does not work outside the limits of God's control. The deceived prophets were part of a plan of divine judgment against Ahab.

God's decision to allow a lying spirit to be a means of carrying out His will raises a theological challenge. However, texts such as Isaiah 45:7 ("I created the light and created the darkness...") and Amos 3:6 show that nothing happens without God's knowledge and permission.<sup>17</sup> In Romans 1:24-25, Paul explains the same principle: God gave humans over to false thinking when they rejected the truth. From the perspective of Reformed theology, as explained by Frame (2017), God in His sovereignty is not the moral cause of sin, but still uses even evil for His just and holy purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Geoffrey. 2014. "The Wiles of the Lord: Divine Deception, Subtlety, and Mercy in I Reg 22." *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 126, no. 1: 45–58.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, Archer, & Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, Driver, & Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1906.

<sup>16</sup> Cogan, Mordechai & Tadmor, Hayim. *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Paul, Romans 1:24–28 (konsep "penyerahan" sebagai penghukuman).

The understanding that spirits can be sent by God as executors of divine plans was also known in ancient cultures. In Ugaritic and Mesopotamian literature, divine courts in heaven often involved gods or messengers who carried out the decisions of the supreme god.<sup>18</sup> However, in contrast to Near Eastern polytheism, the Bible asserts that one Almighty God controls the entire spirit world.

## CONCLUSION

This research delves into one of the Bible's more perplexing theological puzzles: how can a holy God send a "lying spirit" to deceive, as described in 1 Kings 22:23? By examining the Hebrew terms *ruach* (spirit) and *sheqer* (lie), alongside historical and cultural contexts of ancient Israel, the study reveals something profound about divine sovereignty. Rather than compromising God's holiness, this episode demonstrates how God permits humans to experience the natural consequences of their choices when they persistently reject truth. The story of King Ahab, who preferred comforting falsehoods from his court prophets over Micaiah's uncomfortable truth, speaks directly to our contemporary struggle with "post-truth" culture. God never originates falsehood, but in His justice, sometimes allows deception to become the punishment for those who have already chosen to embrace lies.

When we wrestle with difficult passages like 1 Kings 22:23, we're reminded that God's ways often challenge our simplistic moral categories. This research shows that God's permission of a lying spirit reflects not divine duplicity but perfect justice—a sovereign ruler allowing the natural consequences of human rebellion to unfold. Far from undermining God's holiness, this account reinforces it by demonstrating that persistent rejection of truth leads to spiritual blindness. As we navigate today's confusing information landscape where "truth" seems increasingly subjective, this ancient text offers timely wisdom: our willingness to embrace uncomfortable truths reflects our spiritual condition. The paradox of the lying spirit ultimately points us toward deeper reverence for divine justice that operates beyond our limited understanding, inviting us to cling more desperately to truth in an age that increasingly devalues it.

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<sup>18</sup> Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2006.

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