“How Could a Holy God Make Prophets Lie?”

Please explain the text of 2 Chronicles 22:18-22. The Lord put a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets to lie. How does that conform to God’s holy nature?

Thanks for your question. This story is recounted in both 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 18. The question, as you rightly ask, is how such a story can be consistent with God’s holy nature?

There are a number of important observations to make about this passage. First, observe that in 1 Kings 22:1-12, Ahab asks Jehoshaphat if he would be willing to go to war with him to retake Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat agrees, but wants first to inquire of the Lord. Ahab brings out 400 false prophets, who tell him what he wants to hear. It is clear that these are not true prophets of the Lord because Jehoshaphat asks Ahab if there isn’t a prophet of the Lord that they might yet inquire of (see vv. 7-8). This is important, for Ahab has essentially attempted to call a bunch of false prophets before him who will merely tell him what he wants to hear (and has already decided to do).

Second, notice what happens when Micaiah (a true prophet of the Lord) is called. Of course, initially Micaiah sarcastically tells the king what the false prophets are also saying. It’s clear that he says this sarcastically because the king reminds him to only tell him the truth in the name of the Lord. At this point, Micaiah, the true prophet of the Lord, tells the king the whole truth of God; namely, that the king’s venture will not succeed and that the king himself will die in battle. In other words, the Lord, through His true prophet, tells the king the whole truth at this point. He even tells the king that He has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of

the king’s (false) prophets. The Lord, through Micaiah, here tells King Ahab the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Third, notice that Ahab disregards the true prophet of the Lord, spurns his advice, and instead willfully chooses to follow the advice of his false prophets (the very prophets that Micaiah has just told him are speaking lies and falsehoods). The Lord has actually told Ahab the whole truth, but Ahab chooses to follow the advice of lying false prophets, rather than the advice of Micaiah, a true prophet of the Lord (as Ahab himself acknowledges Micaiah to be—see v. 8).

Notice, then, that God nowhere lies to Ahab here. In fact, he pointedly reveals to Ahab the whole awful truth about what will happen if Ahab goes ahead with his plans. It’s true, of course, that God does permit deceptive spirits to speak through Ahab’s false prophets. But it’s important to remember that He reveals this truth to Ahab through His true prophet, Micaiah. It’s also important to bear in mind that, given God’s sovereignty over everything that happens, whenever lies are told or evil spirits (or men) do something, God has sovereignly permitted them to do so. God created human beings and angels as free, rational, morally responsible creatures. Since such creatures are truly free, they are free to do good or evil. Whenever a free creature chooses to do something evil, God must sovereignly permit that creature to do so. However, as we see repeatedly in the Bible, God can take even the evil and sinful choices of His creatures, and bring about good from them (remember the story of Joseph and his brothers; see, in particular, Genesis 50:15-21).

In conclusion, then, although much more could be said, this is how I would briefly attempt to interpret this fascinating story. I hope this is helpful to you. God bless you!

Shalom in Christ,

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