

1 Kings 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Kings chapter 21. Now Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. And after this Ahab said to Naboth, Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house, and I will give you a better vineyard for it, or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money. But Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him. For he had said, I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers. And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face, and would eat no food. But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food? And he said to her, Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, Give me your vineyard for money, or else, if it pleases you, I will give you another vineyard for it. And he answered, I will not give you my vineyard. And Jezebel his wife said to him, Do you now govern

Israel? Arise and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the leaders who lived with Naboth in his city. And she wrote in the letters, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people, and set two worthless men opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, You have cursed God and the king.

Then take him out and stone him to death. And the men of his city, the elders and the leaders who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. And the two worthless men came in, and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth cursed God and the king. So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, Naboth has been stoned, he is dead. As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is not alive, but dead. And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to take possession of it. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria. Behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession.

And you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, Have you killed and also taken possession? And you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick your own blood. Ahab said to Elijah, Have you found me, O my enemy?

He answered, I have found you because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring disaster upon you, I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha, the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. And of Jezebel the Lord also said, The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country, the birds of the heavens shall eat. There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel. And when Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Have you seen how

[4 : 11] Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days, but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house.

The story of Naboth and his vineyard in 1 Kings chapter 21 is a further indictment of the reign of Ahab and the Umri dynasty. The story begins with Naboth, who owns a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of King Ahab. And Ahab, seeing the vineyard, wants it for himself to make a vegetable garden of it.

Yet when he requests the vineyard from Naboth, offering him another vineyard in exchange, or money even, Naboth refuses, The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. Here he seems to be referring to the fact that the land was not supposed to be alienated from the people to whom it had been given. Although productive land could be sold for a few years, it had to be returned at the time of the Jubilee. And to sell the land, unless you were in absolute poverty, was a denigration both of the gift of the Lord and of one's ancestors.

In 1 Samuel chapter 8 verse 14, Samuel had warned against the behaviour of the king. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants.

[5 : 22] Yet in this passage, Ahab requests the vineyard of Naboth. His request is fairly polite. It is certainly a gentler request than he reports to his wife when he goes back sullen and angry. Ahab's request, as reported to Jezebel, is a lot harsher. It does not contain the two reasons because it's near his house and that he wants to make a vegetable garden of it, and the language that is used is not as cushioned with politeness. Ahab also shares Naboth's response differently.

I will not give you my vineyard, a far more direct refusal, without any indication that there are religious qualms underlying his resistance. Ahab's being vexed and sullen recalls his response to the message of the prophet at the end of the preceding chapter. In his mood, he goes into a sort of sulk and won't eat any food, and Jezebel, his wife, tries to change his mood by promising that she will get the vineyard of Naboth. She writes letters in Ahab's name to the elders and the leaders of Naboth's city. Within the letters, she instructs the elders and the leaders to call a fast and to place Naboth at the head of the people, and then to put two people alongside him to accuse him of cursing God and the king, so that he can be stoned to death. It is always important to pay attention to the way that things are reported for a second time. For instance, when an instruction or command is given, and then the enactment of that instruction or command, or when a particular event occurs, and then it is recalled later on or reported to someone else. We saw this earlier on in the way that Ahab reported his interaction with Naboth to

Jezebel. Ahab wanted to appear tougher, and he wanted Naboth to appear more resistant and stubborn than either of them had actually been in the interaction itself. Here the command-response pattern of Jezebel's instructions and the leaders of the people's actions follow a pattern that would usually associate with divine commands and human responses, but here it's the command of the queen that is being observed to the letter. This suggests that whatever corruption exists in Ahab and his court, it extends throughout his kingdom too. The rottenness of rule extends to the local authorities as well.

When Naboth is stoned and Jezebel hears, Jezebel goes to Ahab and tells him to arise and take possession of the vineyard. The language of arising and taking possession recalls the initial conquest of the land under Joshua, and the fact that it is a vineyard that is taken is not accidental. Israel is compared to a vineyard in places such as Isaiah chapter 5 or Psalm 80. Nor for that matter is it accidental that Ahab wants to turn it into a vegetable garden. In Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 10 we read, For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables.

Ahab is seeking to re-Canaanize and also to Egyptianize the land. He is becoming like a new pharaoh. We should also observe the ways in which patterns of the fall are at play here as well.

[8 : 20] The vineyard connects with the garden. The language of a garden is found here, and not many other places in scripture. There are Garden of Eden themes here. The wife is trying to get her husband to eat. There is a seeing that something is good in taking it.

Later, after taking the fruit, Ahab will be confronted in the garden by Elijah, the messenger of the Lord, and then he and his dynasty will be expelled from rule. Jezebel is a far more active character than Eve though. Although Eve gives the fruit to Adam, Jezebel is a great deal more active in this whole process. Ahab comes across as sulky and weak, while Jezebel is a conniver and a schemer, and one who is a very active and able manipulator.

She is a sort of fusion of the characters of the woman and the serpent together. She is the dragon lady who has pursued the prophets of the Lord and consumed many of them, and she is a woman who is very gifted at getting men to do her evil work for her.

In the Gospels, we have a similar situation, where Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas, is able to manipulate him to kill John the Baptist. Jezebel is an archetypal female villain, a woman who uses her influence over men to incite them to wicked actions.

An inverse of Jezebel, of course, is Queen Esther, who uses her influence to save her whole people. We should notice other similarities here. There is another story in the history of the kings of Israel, which involves a king spending time in bed, a king looking out and seeing something near to his palace that belongs to someone else that he wants to take, the sending of messages to evil men who will assist to kill a righteous man who is providing an obstacle to the will of the king, all followed by a confrontation by a prophet of the Lord and repentance.

[10:00] The other story, of course, is the story of David and Bathsheba. Naboth's vineyard, among other things, stands for the nation of Israel itself. And Naboth himself might have some significance in this picture.

Naboth's name itself might be related to the word for prophecies. In the story, he is the one who presents the claim of the Lord upon the land to Ahab, who is wanting it for his personal possession and his re-canonisation project.

Jezebel killing the prophets of the Lord to enable her husband to paganise the land is pretty much exactly how things had been happening to that point. However, like the blood of Abel, the blood of Naboth calls out from the land and the Lord sends Elijah to confront Ahab.

There will be blood for blood. In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick up his blood. And Jezebel shall be eaten by the dogs within the walls of Jezreel. The two previous great dynasties of Israel, Jeroboam's dynasty and Baasha's dynasty, had both been destroyed by the Lord, their houses completely wiped out.

The same is going to happen for Ahab. And Jezebel this time is included in the judgment. She incited Ahab. Ahab was the worst of all the kings of Israel, but he would never have reached such levels of wickedness had it not been for the Sidonian queen Jezebel.

[11:15] In many respects, it's the weakness of Ahab that stands out. For much of his reign, it's Jezebel who's really calling the shots. He may have the power, but Jezebel is the one that's directing it.

However, this chapter ends with a remarkable surprise. Ahab has already been confronted by the Lord. On a number of occasions, he has been given several opportunities to repent. But on this occasion, he actually does repent.

And the Lord refrains from bringing the disaster that he has promised upon Ahab himself, saying that he will bring it upon his son instead. In the Lord's announcement of this to Elijah, we might see something of a challenge to the prophet's excessive zeal.

Like Jonah with his message to Nineveh, Elijah seems to want to have the punishment of the Lord meted out against his enemies. The idea that the enemies might repent, and not receive punishment for their sins immediately, seems unfair to him.

However, although the Lord is gracious with Ahab, the punishment ultimately falls. In 2 Kings chapter 9 verses 21 to 26 we read, So that the arrow pierced his heart, and he sank in his chariot.

[12:47] Jehu said to Bidkar his aid, Take him up, and throw him on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. For remember, when you and I rode side by side behind Ahab his father, how the Lord made this pronouncement against him.

As surely as I saw yesterday the blood of Naboth, and the blood of his sons, declares the Lord, I will repay you on this plot of ground. Now therefore take him up, and throw him on the plot of ground, in accordance with the word of the Lord.

A question to consider. Where does Jesus use an allegory of Israel as the vineyard? What parallels might we see with the story of Naboth?