



First Kings - Chapter Twenty One

V 1 Kings 17:1-22:40 - Elijah and Ahab (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty One

An apparently reinvigorated Elijah appears again in Jezreel to denounce a new and heinous crime, i.e. the killing of Naboth on the orders of Jezebel so that Ahab might acquire his vineyard, and to foretell the destruction of Ahab's family for all its sins.

V.e 1 Kings 21:1-29 - Jezebel's Wicked Scheme

Refer to the chapter summary above.

V.e.i 1 Kings 21:1-16 - Naboth's Vineyard

Ahab tries to purchase Naboth's vineyard in order to make a vegetable garden next to his home but Naboth would not sell his ancestral land. While Ahab sulked, Jezebel hatched a plot to have Naboth falsely accused of blasphemy and subsequently stoned to death in order that Ahab might possess the land he desired.

¹ Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.

1 Kings 21:1

Excavations at Tel Jezreel have unearthed a fortified acropolis from the 9th Century BC. The construction at the site is large and elaborate, with the dressed masonry typical of royal palaces of that era. The archæologist at this site concluded that it was built by either Omri or Ahab, and that it was the auxiliary residence for the king of Israel. It would be the place where his descendants will die in line with Elijah's prophecy in v.21 below; refer to 2 Kings 10:1-17.

² And Ahab said to Naboth, ‘Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.’

1 Kings 21:2

Give me your vineyard. This account begins as a simple attempted land purchase transaction. Ahab wanted the vineyard near his royal house in Jezreel so that he might have it as a vegetable garden. He was willing to trade for the land or to pay for it.

The Hebrew for vegetable garden occurs elsewhere in the OT only in Deuteronomy 11:10, where a contrast is offered between Egypt as a vegetable garden requiring human care, and the Promised Land which the Lord cares for. Israel is also sometimes portrayed in the OT as a vine under God’s special care, for example: <<*The Lord rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgement with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts*>> (Isaiah 3:13-15). With these wider observations in mind, Ahab’s desire to replace a vineyard with a vegetable garden may express, albeit unconsciously, a deeper desire to make Israel ‘like Egypt’ – to blur Israel’s special identity as God’s chosen people.

³ But Naboth said to Ahab, ‘The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.’ ⁴ Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, ‘I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.’ He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

1 Kings 21:3-4

The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. The land of Israel belonged not to the families who technically ‘owned’ it but to God, who had brought the Israelites into the land in fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise and had, through Joshua, allocated its various parts to the tribes as their inheritance, e.g. Genesis 17:8, Leviticus 25:23, and Joshua 13:1-7. Individual Israelites could not sell land in perpetuity, and a complex set of laws kept land in the family and prevented its accumulation in the hands of a few; refer to Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Ahab’s offer is therefore evidence of his disregard for God’s law.

Ahab went home resentful and sullen. This seemed entirely characteristic of Ahab. He seemed to be a spineless, pouting man who reacted this way when he

met any kind of adversity. His actions can best be described as childish and this was not the first time he had acted in this way. He did the same when the prophet chastised him for making a treaty with Ben-hadad: <<*The king of Israel set out towards home, resentful and sullen, and came to Samaria*>> (1 Kings 20:43).

⁵ His wife Jezebel came to him and said, ‘Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?’ ⁶ He said to her, ‘Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, “Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it”; but he answered, “I will not give you my vineyard.”’ ⁷ His wife Jezebel said to him, ‘Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.’

1 Kings 21:5-7

Do you now govern Israel? Jezebel wrongly assumes that a king should use government power for personal gain. As this narrative shows, the real driving force in the kingdom of Israel is Jezebel, the one who took decisions and instigated actions: <<*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow’*>> (1 Kings 19:1-2), not the passive Ahab, and she is contemptuous of her husband’s unwillingness to behave as a despotic king.

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. ⁹ She wrote in the letters, ‘Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; ¹⁰ seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, “You have cursed God and the king.” Then take him out, and stone him to death.’

1 Kings 21:8-10

So she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal. This shows that Ahab was in agreement with what Jezebel did and had to know something of her plot. She involved Ahab by the use of his seal on the directives to the local magistrates. The use of the king’s royal, dynastic, administrative or even personal seal to gain his authority would require Ahab’s collusion.

This is illustrated in the account where the Persian King Ahasuerus gave Esther and Mordecai permission to use his seal for national proclamations protecting the Jewish people: <<*Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai, ‘See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have*

hanged him on the gallows, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.' The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. He wrote letters in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed them with the king's ring, and sent them by mounted couriers riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd>> (Esther 8:7-10).

Proclaim a fast. Jezebel's plan to have Naboth executed on false charges requires a public setting, elders and nobles who take lightly their responsibility to be the guardians of justice contrary to their calling to office according to Deuteronomy 19:11-13 and 21:1-9. It also required the collusion of two scoundrels, worthless men who are prepared to function as the two witnesses required by OT law as stated in Deuteronomy 19:15-21.

The only compulsory fast in the OT was on the Day of Atonement: <<This shall be a statute to you for ever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord>> (Leviticus 16:29-30). On that day a scapegoat had to be found for the sins of Israel and here it is as if Jezebel wants to make Naboth into that scapegoat in order to justify her sinful actions.

Fasts can be held voluntarily and are normally used to demonstrate a person's commitment to the prayer they are submitting to the law. The prophet shows how such false fasts result: <<Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high>> (Isaiah 58:4). They have no place in the Lord's presence.

Alexander Maclaren noted three types of dangerous characters in this chapter:

1. Ahab who was wicked and weak.
2. Jezebel who was wicked and strong.
3. The Elders of Jezreel, who were wicked and subservient.

Seat Naboth at the head of the assembly. This was a treacherous plan; first, to set Naboth in a high place of honour and then to destroy him with lies from the mouths of scoundrels.

You have cursed God and the king. Jesus was charged with similar crimes, accused of offending both God and Cæsar: <<*Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king’*>> (Luke 23:1-2), as was Stephen: <<*Then they secretly instigated some men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God’*>> (Acts 6:11). Naboth, just like Jesus, was completely innocent of such accusations and was murdered without cause. The stoning of Naboth over a piece of land for a vegetable garden shows the brutal and amoral character of Jezebel and Ahab. Second Kings 9:26 indicates that the crime was even worse than this, connecting the murder of Naboth with the blood of his sons. It is likely that the entire family of Naboth was murdered, so no heirs were left to claim his property.

¹¹ The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, ¹² they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. ¹³ The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels 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. ¹⁴ Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, ‘Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.’

1 Kings 21:11-14

So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death. Death defiled the place where it occurred and it was normal for acts of capital punishment to be conducted outside the city perimeter in order to prevent the whole city from being declared unclean. Had Naboth been guilty of the crime then his punishment would have been in keeping with the law: <<*Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him*>> (Leviticus 24:14).

The author of the letter to the Hebrews best illustrates why this happened to Jesus and the response of those who follow him: <<*For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured*>> (Hebrews 13:11-13).

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, ‘Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.’ ¹⁶ As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

1 Kings 21:15-16

Go, take possession of the vineyard. The implication appears to be that the king may confiscate the property of an executed criminal, a custom that is known from non-Israelite texts but for which there is no provision in Mosaic Law. This serves to emphasise the extent to which Ahab and Jezebel are moving outside the sphere of God’s law and custom and introducing foreign ideas.

When Israel had first asked for a king to rule over them the judge and prophet Samuel warned them that kings would steal their vineyards: <<*He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers*>> (1 Samuel 8:14).

Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it. This added evil to evil. Even with Naboth dead, the land did not belong to Ahab or the royal house of Israel. It belonged to the heirs or family of Naboth. Ahab probably claimed the land as a royal right because the crown seized the land of any executed criminal.

Normally, the estate of the deceased would pass to his sons or closest living relatives, but here Ahab takes it. Tradition has it that Naboth had no living sons at the time of his death, most likely they too were killed on Jezebel’s orders, and that Ahab was a near relative, perhaps his nephew. Therefore, he would have inherited the vineyard legally. However, this relationship is uncertain and it may be that Ahab simply stole the land from Naboth’s family. After all, no one could dispute the claim under such a despotic regime.

V.e.ii 1 Kings 21:17-29 - Elijah Pronounces God’s Sentence

Elijah is instructed by the Lord to inform Ahab that he, Jezebel and all their male descendants will die as a result of Ahab’s wickedness, especially with regard to the way he acquired Naboth’s vineyard. Hearing these words, Ahab put on sackcloth and humbled himself before the Lord. Therefore, God said that the disaster would not befall Ahab’s family until after Ahab was dead.

¹⁷ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: ¹⁸ Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹ You

shall say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?’ You shall say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.’

1 Kings 21:17-19

Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel. Elijah reappears here and is given instruction by the Lord to once again go to his old adversary. He responds immediately without consideration for his own safety. Ahab ran out to get his new possession - the land gained by betrayal, lies, and murder, and instead he ran into the prophet of God. There is no escaping from the Lord’s gaze, as David had confirmed: <<*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*>> (Psalm 139:7), and Jonah also later discovered: <<*But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up*>> (Jonah 1:3-4).

Have you killed, and also taken possession? Elijah did what few other men had the courage to do - confront this wicked, brutal, and amoral king and queen of Israel. He pointedly charged them with the two crimes of both murder and theft of Naboth’s land. It should be noted that Elijah confronted Ahab over the sin of Jezebel and her wicked associates, i.e. you killed. God clearly held Ahab responsible for this sin as husband, as king, and as beneficiary of this crime.

In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood. Ahab died in battle and was buried in Samaria (1 Kings 22:34-37), not outside Jezreel ‘in the place’ where Naboth was stoned; and yet, when dogs in Samaria licked up his blood washed from his chariot, the authors declare that to be according to these words (1 Kings 22:38). There are two main ways to explain how the prophecy and its fulfilment are related:

1. The prophecy was fulfilled in stages, first by Ahab’s death and then by the death of his son Joram, whose body was in fact thrown into Naboth’s vineyard (2 Kings 9:25-26), which also is according to the word of the Lord.
2. The Hebrew words translated ‘in the place where dogs licked up’ could be taken as ‘in place of dogs licking up,’ i.e. Ahab will suffer a similar fate to Naboth. Either solution is possible, although the first seems to account better for the way the text draws attention to the prophecy, and for the delay of punishment due to Ahab’s humble response in v.29.

²⁰ 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, ²¹ I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; ²² and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. ²³ Also concerning Jezebel the Lord said, “The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.” ²⁴ 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 air shall eat.’

1 Kings 21:20-24

Have you found me, O my enemy? In fact, Elijah was a friend to Ahab, trying to get him to repent and return to the Lord. It was Jezebel who was more of an enemy to him and his eternal soul. To the widow of Zarephath Elijah was an angel of light; whilst to Ahab he was an enemy. It is a person’s character and deeds that determine whether Elijah will be a friend or an enemy.

Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you. By opposing God Ahab has sold his soul to the devil. Paul describes it as being a slave to sin: <<*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin*>> (Romans 7:14).

I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. This was a severe judgement against anyone, particularly against a king. A king’s legacy was in his posterity succeeding him on the throne, and here God announced an end to the dynasty of Omri, Ahab’s father. His dynasty would come to a dead end just like the dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha.

The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. Although the prophecy of judgement was focused against Ahab, it did not forget Jezebel. Her end would be both horrible and disgraceful.

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 air shall eat. It was considered a terrible thing in Israel not to be afforded a proper burial; Deuteronomy 28:25-26 and Jeremiah 16:4 capture the horror well.

²⁵ (Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. ²⁶ He

acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites.)

1 Kings 21:25-26

Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. Ahab's sin was multiplied not only because of the sin itself, but because by his permission, his wife stirred him up to do it. This is similar to what God said to Adam in pronouncing the curse after the sin in the Garden of Eden: <<*Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life*>> (Genesis 3:17). Apparently, God holds husbands who follow their wives into sin to a special accountability.

He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites. In likening the sin of Ahab to the sin of the Amorites, God prepared the ground for the future eviction of Israel from the Promised Land. As the Amorites were cast out of Canaan for their continued idolatry and rejection of God, so would the northern kingdom of Israel. There is also an interesting parallel with the way God gave the Amorites time to either repent or complete the cycle of the sin against the Lord: <<*And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete*>> (Genesis 15:16).

²⁷ When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. ²⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ 'Have you seen how 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 on his house.'

1 Kings 21:27-29

When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh. For all his wickedness, Ahab received this prophecy of judgement exactly as he should have. He understood that the prophecy of judgement was in fact an invitation to repent, to humble himself, and to seek God for mercy.

Because he has humbled himself before me. God honoured Ahab's initiative. This shows the power of both prayer and humble repentance. If Ahab had not humbled himself in this way, then the judgement would have come in his own lifetime. This shows that God gave the prophecy of judgement as an invitation to repentance, and God opened to the door of mercy when Ahab properly responded to that

invitation. Ahab was the worst of kings (vv.25-26), adding to Jeroboam's sin the worship of Baal; refer to 1 Kings 16:30-33. However, the great sinner demonstrates penitence at this point, and avoids God's judgement on his house in his lifetime.

There is no record of Jezebel's humility or repentance. Therefore it can be expected that God's judgement will come upon her exactly as he had announced through Elijah.

This also reveals something of the character of God's mercy: it is given to the undeserving. By nature, the innocent do not need mercy. Ahab was a great sinner, but he received great mercy in this life through humble repentance. The worst sinner should not disqualify himself from receiving God's mercy, if that sinner should only approach God in genuine, humble repentance.