

Lessons from the life of Elijah

19. "Thy life shall go for his life" (1 Kgs. 20, 21)

Stephen Whitehouse

After fading into the background for a while, Elijah returns to confront Ahab. The cause is Ahab's acceptance of the wicked scheme of Jezebel to engineer the death of Naboth, enabling Ahab to take over his vineyard. Though Ahab postpones judgement upon himself by repenting, doom is pronounced upon all his wicked house.

AFTER ALL the sins of Ahab and Jezebel, one may well imagine that God would immediately punish them for their wicked ways. Yet God's ways are unfathomable to man, for He has declared, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways" (Isa. 55:8). Ahab was going to be given another opportunity to serve God faithfully.

Ahab's victory over the Syrians

1 Kings 20 opens with Ben-hadad the king of Syria and his army besieging Samaria (v. 1). The name Ben-hadad was the standing title of the Syrian kings, meaning 'son of [the false god] Hadad'. This Syrian was so confident of victory that he proclaimed to Ahab, "Thy silver and thy gold is mine; thy wives also and thy children, even the goodliest, are mine" (v. 3).

Surely we would think that Ben-hadad was being employed by God to punish Ahab for his wickedness. However, God sent a prophet to inform Ahab that He would deliver him (v. 13). God was with Ahab, and to demonstrate this fact the king of Israel enjoyed an astonishing victory over Ben-hadad (v. 21).

God was also going to provide further assistance to Ahab; He warned him that "at the return of the year the king of Syria will come up against thee" (v. 22). Just as God had predicted, Ben-hadad returned with his great army (v. 26); but Ahab was not going to be left alone, God was with him. A holy prophet was sent to tell him again that he would be delivered (v. 28), and, just as was prophesied, the victory was Ahab's (v. 29) after his army had attacked on the seventh day, probably after the precedent of Jericho (Josh. 6:15).

However, Ahab made a fatal error; rather than killing Ben-hadad, he spared him (1 Kgs. 20:34),

just as Saul did with Agag of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3,9). This was in defiance of what had been Divinely commanded (1 Kgs. 20:28), and so a servant of God was sent to announce to the king, "therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people" (v. 42). Though Ahab had been given another opportunity to serve God, he had failed again and so he would face Divine retribution—his life would be taken from him.

Ahab left his scene of victory and returned home to Samaria where his wife awaited him. Knowing that one's life is to be taken is a burden which many would be unable to carry, and surely this knowledge would now weigh heavily upon his mind—or so you would have thought.

Ahab covets Naboth's vineyard

Moving on to 1 Kings 21, the opening verse reads, "And it came to pass after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria" (v. 1).

Naboth's name means 'fruits', and he was a Jezreelite, which means 'sown of God'. Are we being informed that Naboth was a faithful man, that God had sown His Word, Naboth in response had received it gladly, and through much effort and application he had "brought forth fruit" (Mt. 13:8)? His actions in this chapter would seem to suggest that this was the case. Also, the fact that Naboth maintained his faith in such an evil environment is testimony to his commitment to the God of Israel. This reminds us of the faith of Obadiah, who found himself in a similar situation (1 Kgs. 18:3,4,12).

Immediately we read that Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me thy vineyard" (21:2), and so the prediction of Samuel is realised (1 Sam. 8:14). The king had allowed "the lust of the eyes" (1 Jno. 2:16) to take hold of him. He was so obsessed with obtaining Naboth's vineyard that he was prepared to offer him "a better vineyard", or, if Naboth so desired, "the worth of it in money" (1 Kgs. 21:2). Then Ahab became "heavy and displeased" because Naboth replied, "I will not give thee the inheritance of my fathers". So Ahab, on hearing this, resorted to childish behaviour: "he laid him



PICTURE: TONY BENSON

The ruins of ancient Jezreel in the foreground, with Mount Gilboa in the distance.

down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread" (v. 4).

We may well ask what was wrong with Ahab's request. Was Naboth unreasonable in holding out against the king? Ahab was the king, and surely he should be respected and obeyed. The answer is simple: the land was *not* Naboth's to sell, nor Ahab's to buy, and Naboth knew that (v. 3). The land was owned by God, Who had declared, "The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is Mine" (Lev. 25:23). Furthermore, God had already commanded, "every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers" (Num. 36:7). And it is evident that Ahab was aware of this, since he was not prepared to challenge Naboth's response; he remained silent.

In light of this, in sharp contrast, it is encouraging to be reminded that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to establish his Kingdom no man will be able to lay claim on another's inheritance (Ezek. 46:18). During the Kingdom age equity will be the order of the day. We all pray for this time to come soon.

"Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased"

There Ahab lay, depressed and sulking, and in entered his wife, Jezebel, who asked him, "Why

is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread?" (1 Kgs. 21:5). This was a woman who "stirred up" (v. 25) the evil imaginations within the king's heart. Would he tell her that the God of Israel had forbidden him to seize the inheritance of his neighbour? No, instead he told her that Naboth had said to him, "I will not give thee my vineyard" (v. 6).

Again, Ahab was economical with the truth when speaking to Jezebel, just as he had been concerning the prophets of Baal on Carmel (19:1). He made no mention of Yahweh, but instead spoke of Naboth as if he had been some disobedient servant.

After hearing of her husband's misery, Jezebel rhetorically asked, "Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel?". He was the king, and he should do that which was "right in his own eyes" (Prov. 12:15)! She then calmed his troubled spirits by stating, self-assuredly, "arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (1 Kgs. 21:7). Jezebel was going to take matters into her own hands.

Surely with this treacherous woman we are reminded of "that woman Jezebel" (Rev. 2:20) who symbolises the apostate system which influences and manipulates kings, princes and governments of the earth, and, through her words

of subtle persuasion, wins over their hearts and minds (18:3).

“Carry him out, and stone him, that he may die”

But how could she possibly obtain the vineyard when her husband had failed so miserably? We now read of a diabolical plan which she treacherously designed in order to wrest the vineyard away from Naboth: “she wrote letters in Ahab’s name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth” (1 Kgs. 21:8). The use of the signet ring in sealing a letter was the pledge of its authenticity and authority (Est. 3:12), so this was forgery. Also, these men dwelt with Naboth, so they were his neighbours, his brethren. Naboth was about to be “wounded in the house of [his] friends” (Zech. 13:6).

But what did she write in these letters? She demanded that the elders and nobles “Proclaim a fast” (1 Kgs. 21:9). Thus the objective was to give the impression that the city was under, or being threatened by, a curse because of some undiscovered sin (Deut. 21:9; 2 Sam. 21:1), and this must be removed or prevented by public humiliation (1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Chron. 20:3; Joel 1:14; 2:12). They were then to “set Naboth on high among the people”, putting him on trial. But this was not to be a fair hearing. Quite the contrary; instead they were to “set two men, sons of Belial . . . to bear witness against him” (1 Kgs. 21:9,10).

Concerning the term “sons of Belial”, in Deuteronomy 13:13 the RV translates this as ‘base fellows’, and the margin, ‘sons of worthlessness’. This is the sense in which the phrase is used everywhere in the Old Testament. Thus they were to call upon worthless individuals who would be prepared to swear by anything. Note also that stoning under the Law demanded at least two witnesses (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), so Jezebel ensured that she complied with the Mosaic code. This murder was to be committed under the cloak of religion.

But what crime could they possibly accuse Naboth of? They were told to say, “Thou didst blaspheme God and the king” (1 Kgs. 21:10). Under the Law, blaspheming God was punishable by death (Lev. 24:16), and if found guilty of blaspheming the king then Naboth’s estate would be confiscated from him.¹ Such a plan would achieve Jezebel’s aim; the vineyard would be Ahab’s. In order that there were no hitches they

must ensure that there was no opportunity for Naboth to defend himself; her men were swiftly to “carry him out, and stone him, that he may die” (1 Kgs. 21:10). Her plan was executed to perfection; the two men falsely accused Naboth, and they “carried him forth out of the city, and stoned him with stones, that he died” (v. 13), making sure that they strictly conformed to the Mosaic Law by executing him outside the walls (Lev. 24:14).

At face value everything would seem to have been done legally, yet this was an evil crime shrouded in religion. The evil was not limited to the murder of Naboth; his sons also suffered a similar fate in order that no dynasty remained (2 Kgs. 9:26).

“Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth”

As soon as Jezebel received news that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, she joyfully commanded her husband, “Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (1 Kgs. 21:15). The coveted object could now be seized!

When Ahab heard the news he “rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it” (v. 16). Ahab took no care to ask how Naboth had met his death, he simply approved of everything his wife had done. Ignorance was bliss! In this connection, Josephus writes, “And Ahab was pleased with what had been done, and sprang up from his bed, and went to see Naboth’s vineyard”.² In other words, there was no time to lose, Ahab could not restrain himself any more, he now had to take possession!

“And the word of the LORD came to Elijah”

What was God doing throughout this sorry affair? Had He allowed the death of a faithful man to go unnoticed? Let us rest assured that God had silently observed the entire incident and was now going to respond: “And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite” (v. 17). Observe that God found His prophet, just as He had done before (17:2,8; 18:1).

We are not informed where Elijah was when “the word” came to him, and there are no details of how Elijah had been occupied since meeting

-
1. It is worth noting that, among the Sanhedrin, if a man was condemned to death then his goods came to his heirs, but if he was accused of treason against the king then the inheritance ceded to the king himself.
 2. *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VIII, ch. 13, 8.

Naboth as a type of Christ

Like Naboth, the Lord Jesus:

- had a vineyard (Mt. 21:33)
- suffered from those who desired his inheritance (v. 38)
- was tempted to part with his inheritance but refused (4:9,10)
- was falsely accused by those who sought his death (26:59)
- was charged with blaspheming "God and the king" (v. 65; Lk. 23:1,2)
- was put to death by violent hands, slain "outside" the city (Heb. 13:12)
- his murderers were charged (Acts 2:22,23)
- they were ultimately destroyed by Divine judgement (Mt. 21:41; 22:7).

Thus both men were rightful possessors of a wonderful inheritance and both suffered at the hands of the wicked, ultimately losing their lives through the shedding of their innocent blood.

Elisha (19:21). The prophet may well have been involved in reviving the school of the prophets (cf. 20:35; 2 Kgs. 2:3,5) while Ahab was engaged in war with the king of Syria. Whatever his employment, God now desired that Elijah complete yet another mission in order that Ahab "knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 5:21).

But what was God going to command the prophet to do? "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel . . . behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth" (1 Kgs. 21:18). God knew exactly where Ahab would be, nothing was concealed from His sight, just as the psalmist declares: "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry"; but "The face of the LORD is against them that do evil" (34:15,16).

"Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?"

Elijah was the instrument, the mouthpiece, of God's anger, and Ahab would now be sorely punished. This was not a task for the faint-hearted, for Elijah was instructed to challenge the king with, "Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?" (1 Kgs. 21:19). As Isaiah testifies: "Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?" (29:15).

Elijah continued with God's sentence: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine" (1 Kgs. 21:19). The Law was to be applied to the letter, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Ex. 21:24); Ahab's blood would also be licked up by the dogs.

Of interest, the Septuagint adds, "and the harlots shall wash themselves in thy blood". If this

translation is adopted then it is fitting that, since through Ahab's marriage with Jezebel spiritual corruption had been brought into the land, at the end of his life his blood would be mingled with those who morally practised her harlotry. Significantly, in the verse in which Ahab's eventual death is recorded, the words, "and they [the Israelites] washed his armour" (1 Kgs. 22:38), are rendered by both the Septuagint and RSV as, "the harlots washed themselves in the blood". This is a fine example of *lex talionis*,³ and the words, "he which is filthy, let him be filthy still" (Rev. 22:11), come to mind.

How then would Ahab respond on hearing Elijah's sentence? He simply replied, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" (1 Kgs. 21:20). Remember that on a previous occasion the king had already accused Elijah of being the one who "troubleth Israel", and on that day the prophet had countered with, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house" (18:17,18). It is also clear from Ahab's opening statement that he was somewhat surprised to see Elijah. Maybe he thought that Elijah was in permanent hiding, or had even died in exile. Yet in these few words we see that he was acknowledging, probably unknowingly, that something untoward had been committed. It was almost a confession. He had a guilty heart and his conscience could not remain silent.

The prophet responded, "I have found thee" (21:20). The king's scheming crime had been unravelled, the cloak of mystery removed. The king stood condemned as both murderer and

3. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, "This is the supposed law of retaliation, whereby a punishment resembles the offence committed, in kind and degree".

thief. Remember the words, "be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). Elijah told the king that he had found him, not because he was Ahab's "enemy", but because he had "sold [himself] to work evil in the sight of the LORD" (1 Kgs. 21:20), words repeated in verse 25 for emphasis. The king had continually given himself up to all manner of wickedness in blatant defiance of Almighty God.

"Behold, I will bring evil upon thee"

After all the patient waiting of God for Ahab to repent, He was now prepared to wait no longer: "Behold, I will bring evil upon thee" (v. 21). Though Jezebel had been the real perpetrator, the inventor of this crime, evil would be brought upon the king because he was supposed to be God's representative, His minister of justice over the people.

Elijah continued with God's sentence: "I will take away thy posterity, and will cut off from Ahab every male in Israel, both bond and free" (NKJV; cf. 14:10; 16:3). All men, of every kind, would be removed; not a male would be left within his family; the house of Omri would be brought to an end.

Ahab's utter destruction is now confirmed; his house would become "like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah" (21:22). The houses of Jeroboam and Baasha, two of his predecessors, had been utterly eliminated (15:29; 16:11). But why would Ahab experience such an end? Because God had been "provoked . . . to anger" (21:22) through his worship of the heathen gods, particularly those of the Zidonians and the Amorites (v. 26), and their associated immoral practices.

God also had a stern message for Jezebel, his evil accomplice: "The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (v. 23). What an alarming message! It should firstly be noted that dogs were an abomination in Israel (Deut. 23:18) and very much considered to be unclean animals (Isa. 66:3). To be called "a dog" was a term of contempt and abasement, a mark of great humiliation (1 Sam. 24:14; 2 Sam. 3:8; 9:8; 16:9). So to be eaten by such could scarcely be imagined!

This prophecy was later fulfilled to the letter; after Jezebel's corpse had been trampled under foot by horses, the dogs devoured her remains, and only "the skull, and the feet, and the palms

of her hands" (2 Kgs. 9:33-35) remained. It is as though not even the dogs could stomach the evil thinking of her mind and the abominable works of her hands and feet (cf. Isa. 59:7), so wicked was she!

"Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me?"

How would Ahab react to this? "He rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth". He did not justify himself, he simply "went softly" (1 Kgs. 21:27). The RSV renders this as, "went about dejectedly", and the NKJV, "went about mourning", while Josephus says he "went barefooted". It was a public demonstration of his repentance.

Observe that it was God Who declared that Ahab had humbled himself (v. 29), though these words are actually left out of the Septuagint. If the AV translation is accepted then we must conclude that Ahab's repentance was sincere. However, it would be fair to say that his remorse was temporary at best, since we do not read anywhere of him restoring the vineyard to any of Naboth's surviving relatives. In fact, we later find Ahab saying of a servant of God, "I hate him" (22:8). Our God commands, "rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God" (Joel 2:13); and, though Ahab's garments were rent, his heart was not.

But because of Ahab's public act of humility, God would "not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days" (1 Kgs. 21:29). The words of God through Ezekiel are as relevant in our generation as they were for Ahab: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11; cf. 18:23). As Jesus taught, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Lk. 15:10). The king would not have to suffer the anguish of witnessing the slaughter of his own children and the complete ruin of his house.

But the murder of Naboth would be righteously avenged; Ahab's dynasty would be brought to an end. Let us therefore have confidence in our God, for the apostle encourages us: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). The message is simple: God loves His children and is exceedingly jealous over them.

(To be continued)