

## 1 Kings 21

### Limits of the Text

1 Kings 21 is a complete literary unit. It begins with Ahab wanting Naboth's vineyard and ends with him repenting for the way in which he acquired it.

### Plot

- Background – Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21:1-4).
- Crisis – Ahab murdered Naboth (1 Ki 21:5-16).
- Resolution – God condemned Ahab (1 Ki 21:17-26).
- Conclusion – Ahab repented (1 Ki 21:27-29).

### Towards Authorial Intent

The **plot** reveals that God did not allow Ahab to get away with murder and theft of property—even when done by proxy (i.e., Jezebel)—but rather judged him harshly.

The author of Kings used **dialogue** throughout the text to convey his purpose. Jezebel suggested that kings should be able to have whatever they want (1 Ki 21:7); yet Elijah condemned Ahab as a murderer and a thief who was worthy of death. This was a typical event in the reign of the king who sold himself to do evil more than anyone (1 Ki 21:20,25), yet God informed Elijah that he noticed Ahab's repentance and relented on the timing of his judgment (1 Ki 21:29).

### External Context

This is the second of three chapters centered on Ahab's disobedience. In the last chapter he let Ben-hadad go free; in the next he went to war after God's prophet told him not to.

## Interpretation

21:1 Now Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2 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." 3 But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." 4 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.<sup>1</sup>

This story takes place in the city of Jezreel, which was 90 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles northeast of Samaria. It was located within Manasseh's territory at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. Ahab had a summer palace in this city.<sup>2</sup>

The Mosaic Law had various rules governing Israel's inheritance, the land of Canaan. It was divided by tribe and family, and the land was to remain within the tribe (Nu 36:7). Even if a family fell into poverty and sold their land, it would revert back in the Year of Jubilee (Le 25:23-28). It appears that, technically speaking, Ahab's proposition didn't violate the letter of the law, but since Naboth did not (apparently) need the money, it probably violated the spirit of the law;<sup>3</sup> Naboth was well within his rights to refuse.

When he couldn't get what he wanted, Ahab was vexed and sullen, just as he was after the prophet predicted his death (1 Ki 20:43). Vexed comes from the idea of being stubborn and rebellious<sup>4</sup> but focuses upon the appearance, and thus means to be discouraged, gloomy, or unhappy.<sup>5</sup> The root idea of sullen is to storm or rage against,<sup>6</sup> and here it focuses upon the internal, and thus means to be angry and bitter and in bad humor.<sup>7</sup> This term is used of the fool in Pr 19:3, "When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD."

5 But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" 6 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 please you, I will give you another vineyard for it.' And he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" 7 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."

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<sup>1</sup> ESV.

<sup>2</sup> Youngblood, Jezreel. Jezebel would be assassinated here later (2 Ki 9-10).

<sup>3</sup> Davis, 296-297.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, 635.

<sup>5</sup> Swanson, DBLH 6234.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, 247.

<sup>7</sup> Swanson, DBLH 569.

The grammar of Jezebel's retort is difficult, which is why there are a variety of translations:

- Do you now reign over Israel? (NASB95)
- You are the king of Israel! (NET)
- Now, exercise your royal power over Israel. (HCSB)

But the point is the same every time: "Jezebel tells her husband to act like a king, to be a man! She then promises to show him how a real monarch gets what he or she wants. Readers surely sense that she cannot keep her promise through legitimate means."<sup>8</sup>

Israelite kings were bound to obey the Law, including those that governed the land (Deut. 17:14–20). Ahab knew the rules and knew that Naboth would never be persuaded to sell, so he was reducing to being vexed and sullen; Jezebel, however, was different. Canaanite kings were despots, used to doing whatever they wanted (1 Sam. 8:11–18), and Jezebel brought that mindset from her country.

8 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. 9 And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. 10 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." 11 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, 12 they proclaimed a fast and set Naboth at the head of the people. 13 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. 14 Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

15 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." 16 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.

When Jezebel set about to acquire the land, she had Ahab's approval, at least implicitly if not explicitly, as she used his seal to put her plan in motion. Seals were a way of signing a document and giving it validity. "The ordinary way of using it was to cover the seal with an ink substance and press it on the paper."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> House, 232.

<sup>9</sup> Freeman, 252.

She also had an understanding of how the Jewish legal system worked, since she perverted it to accomplish her goal.<sup>10</sup> Richards speculates that the two “witnesses” (Dt 17:6-7) accused Naboth of renegeing on an oath made in God’s name to sell his land to the king. Breaking such an oath was blasphemy (cursed God), a crime worthy of death (Lv 24:16), and speaking ill of the king (cursed the king), not a good thing. With no one else left to take possession of the land—2 Ki 9:26 informs us that Naboth’s sons were killed as well—Ahab was free to take the “disputed” land.<sup>11</sup> “Coveting and sulking combine with power and cruelty to produce oppression and destruction.”<sup>12</sup>

At this point in the story Ahab and Jezebel are guilty of lying, theft, and murder. An innocent man is dead, and Ahab has the land for his vegetable garden. Does God notice such injustice? Will he let it stand? Will Ahab and Jezebel go unpunished?

17 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 18 “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. 19 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.” ’ ”

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 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. 22 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. 23 And of Jezebel the Lord also said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls 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 heavens shall eat.”

At this point in the story it appears that Ahab and Jezebel had gotten away with, well, murder. Ahab was enjoying his new garden, and Jezebel was feeling smug on how well her little plan had worked. But they reckoned without one thing: God’s omniscience. The writer of Kings informed the reader about the character of the God of Israel: He sees everything, and he noticed Ahab’s crimes. “How quietly the Bible makes the massive assumptions...no one is exempt from the scrutiny and judgment of God’s word.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Provan notes that “every legal system can become the tool of politicians, if the values of those responsible for it have been sufficiently corrupted” (158).

<sup>11</sup> Richards, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, 295.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, 303.

Even though God sees everything, the reader cannot help but notice that God does not stop every injustice. Naboth was still dead, and dogs licked up his blood. God did not prevent that. This is a fallen world (Ge 3), and everyone feels the effects of sin. Moses was saved from Pharaoh, but the other Jewish boys were killed. God rescued Peter from jail, but not John the Baptist. And on it goes.

God sent Elijah to pronounce his judgment upon Ahab. Ahab asked, "Have you found me?" almost as if he were expecting Elijah to show up. Again the writer informs us of the character of God: Even though he doesn't stop every sin, God still judges every sin. "The way the word of Yahweh tracks down Ahab shows that Yahweh comes as Naboth's defender. We may wonder about the timing, but the text remains an immense comfort. The Naboth episode...is no guarantee of immunity, only of justice."<sup>14</sup> So the dynasty of Omri would end with Ahab, and in a rather ignoble fashion. "Dogs were scavengers, who traveled in packs, and were held in contempt in the Middle East. The prediction that dogs would lick Ahab's and Jezebel's blood was equivalent to calling the king and queen garbage!"<sup>15</sup>

25 (There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. 26 He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)

Was God's punishment too harsh? The author of Kings obviously did not think it so. He inserted a quick summary of Ahab's reign, using words similar to his previous summary in 1 Ki 16:30-33.<sup>16</sup>

At this point the crisis of the story has been resolved. Although Naboth was dead, Ahab and Jezebel had not gotten away with their crimes, but would be judged harshly by God.

27 And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. 28 And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 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 upon his house."

The story concludes with an unexpected twist: Ahab repented. One commentator argued that Ahab's repentance was not real, and certainly torn clothes, sackcloth, and fasting don't guarantee true repentance. But God cannot be fooled; his response reveals the genuineness of Ahab's repentance. Unfortunately, as the next chapter demonstrates, his repentance didn't last very long.

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, 305.

<sup>15</sup> Richards, 238.

<sup>16</sup> That his repentance in the following verses is the high point of his reign should indicate how wicked he truly was.

Why did God give such mercy to Ahab? God gave mercy because God is merciful; it's who he is! He desires to give and keep giving mercy. "Isn't Yahweh's mercy...itself an appeal to Ahab to go on into a deeper repentance? For if Yahweh so responds to Ahab's initial expressions of remorse, how much more mercy might he find should he persevere in repentance?"<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Jezebel, however, did not repent, and God's judgment fell upon her (2 Ki 9:30-37).

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, 308-309.

## Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story about a king and a queen, Ahab and Jezebel, who murdered Naboth to get a garden.
2. National History – This story is about the worst act of Israel's worst king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel, the murder of Naboth for his land.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God's justice applied to Ahab and Jezebel after they murdered Naboth and stole his land.

## Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind's **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We tend to sin and sin cleverly, thinking that we can get away with it. We hide what we do so that others won't see our sin, forgetting that God sees everything.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need? God won't let us get away with sin. He will reveal our sin, punish us for it, and offer us an opportunity to repent.

## Outline

This outline is based upon the plot:

- Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21:1-4).
- Ahab murdered Naboth (1 Ki 21:5-16).
- God condemned Ahab (1 Ki 21:17-26).
- Ahab repented (1 Ki 21:27-29).

## Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 21 in order to teach exilic Jews that not even kings and queens are immune from the justice of God.

## Teaching Outline

God applies his justice equally to everyone, and I want you to understand that you are not immune from God's justice. From our text today in 1 Kings 21, we are going to see four aspects of God's justice:

- God's justice reveals God's heart (he cares for the insignificant) (1 Ki 21:1-4).
- God's justice utilizes God's omniscience (1 Ki 21:5-16).
- God's justice brings God's punishment (1 Ki 21:17-26).

- God's justice does not preclude God's mercy (1 Ki 21:27-29).

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