

OpenTheo

October 7th: 1 Kings 21 & 1 Peter 5

October 6, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Naboth's vineyard. Shepherding the flock of God.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

1 Kings 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.

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 Beasha 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 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 Nebat and his vineyard in 1 Kings chapter 21 is a further indictment of the reign of Ahab and the Amorite dynasty. The story begins with Nebat 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 Nebat, offering him another vineyard in exchange or money even, Nebat 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.

Yet in this passage Ahab requests the vineyard of Nebat. 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 is 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 Nebat'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 Nebat.

She writes letters in Ahab's name to the elders and the leaders of Nebat's city. Within the letters she instructs the elders and the leaders to call a fast and to place Nebat 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 Nebat to Jezebel. Ahab wanted to appear tougher and he wanted Nebat 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 we would usually associate with divine commands and human responses but here it is 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 Nebat 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 We should also observe the ways in which patterns of the fall are at play here as well. 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 and 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. 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 Baash'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 judgement.

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. 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 9 21-26, we read, And Jehu drew his bow with his full strength and shot Joram between the shoulders, so that the arrow pierced his heart, and he sank in his chariot. Jehu said to Bidkar his aide, 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? 1 Peter chapter 5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded, be watchful.

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings. And so does Mark, my son.

Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ. 1 Peter chapter 5 concludes the epistle with some parting instructions and greetings.

He turns to address the elders at the beginning. And his reason for doing so seems to follow from what he has just been talking about. They are facing a fiery trial, so they will need oversight.

Faithful elders will be especially important at this time. Elders here are probably referring to people with a more formal role, but it should not be detached from its more informal sense. When we talk about elders, we can often think about a formal office or function in

some degree of detachment from its more generational sense.

Yet the fact that elders are older is not unimportant. Certain things can only be known through experience. And as we live through the patterns of life, we experience those times of sowing and reaping the harvest of our past actions and commitments.

And we experience the various seasons of life. Those who are older have gone through these seasons of life and can put their wisdom at the disposal of those who are younger. Peter speaks of himself as a fellow elder.

He doesn't appeal to his apostolic authority, but presents himself alongside them as one who has the same sort of commitment of oversight. He is also a witness of the sufferings of Christ from a unique vantage point. As Peter looked back upon the sufferings of Christ, no doubt he also recalled his denial.

Those memories being inseparably bound up together. He is also a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed. He has a foretaste of Christ's glory in the transfiguration.

And he also has this experience that all Christians have of the Spirit that gives us a down payment and guarantee of what we will receive on the last day. Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God among them. The notion of the people of God as a flock and their leaders as shepherds is one that we find throughout the scriptures.

The patriarchs were keepers of sheep. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph introduces his brothers in Egypt as shepherds. Moses, who once shepherded sheep in the wilderness, shepherds Israel out of Egypt, leading them with a shepherd's rod.

The young David is called from the flock to shepherd God's people Israel. Later in places like Micah chapter 5, the Messiah is described as a shepherd. Christ, in John chapter 10, speaks of himself as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

When we think about shepherds we can often have this image of bucolic mountainsides, perhaps the countryside of the English Lake District, and this very peaceful and serene scene. Yet shepherding, as it is described in scripture, is a far tougher profession. Shepherds had to lead their flock through the wilderness.

They had to protect them from bandits and thieves. They had to protect them from wild beasts. David killed the bear and the lion.

Jesus talks about laying down his life for the sheep. The shepherd in Israel had to tend for sheep in hostile and unforgiving terrain, to locate good pasture in an often dry land. The faithful minister is an under-shepherd of the chief shepherd, responsible to him for his flock.

In John chapter 21 verses 15 to 17, Jesus had given this charge to Peter himself. When

they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Feed my lambs.

He said to him a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, do you love me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.

Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. Under-shepherds are dependent upon and responsible to the chief shepherd. The flock is the flock of God, not their personal flock.

And in places like Ezekiel chapter 34, we have an extensive indictment against the false shepherds, who treat the flock of God as if it were their own. And then a description of how God, as the true chief shepherd, will seek out and tend for his flock. In verses 1 to 6 and 11 to 16 of that chapter, The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God, Our shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves, Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, You slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, The injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, The lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, And they had become food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains and on every high hill.

My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, With none to search or seek for them. For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, And will seek them out, as a shepherd seeks out his flock, When he is among his sheep that have been scattered, So will I seek out my sheep, And I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered On a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, And gather them from the countries, And will bring them into their own land.

And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the ravines, And in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, And on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, And on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, And I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, And I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, And the fat and the strong I will

destroy, I will feed them in justice. The description of the true shepherd in 1 Peter chapter 5 should be looked at more closely.

When we think about elders and pastors, we tend to think about leaders. But the description of the work of the shepherd here does not focus upon the theme of leading. The sorts of things that are foregrounded are tending, overseeing, presenting an example.

Domineering, leading for mercenary purposes, or being an elder only under compulsion are all opposed. True oversight must be a willing and eager activity, a loving activity exercised from the heart, not for mere financial gain. It should not be a matter of taking advantage and privilege over others, but of giving yourself as an example.

The overseer has authority, but his authority is used in the way of service. What he looks for is not earthly treasure or human power, but the reward of glory that comes from the chief shepherd. When Christ, the good shepherd, appears, the good elder must be able to give a faithful account of his charge.

Those who are younger must be subject to their elders. They must respect their service, they must learn from their example, and they must allow themselves to be tended to by others, to be overseen and guided by humble leaders for their own good. There are virtues of good leaders, but there are virtues of good followers too.

The more general deference towards the older generation that Peter encourages here is a bit counter-cultural in our own time. Our society idealises youth. Many of our churches have ceased to be intergenerational, and even when they are, they can continue to idealise youth.

The older people can be aspiring to be young. A posture of humility should characterise Christians more generally. In our relations to one another, whether we are in positions of authority or under other people's authority, we must be characterised by humility and honouring each other.

Part of the radical message of the New Testament is that humility and honouring other people is not exclusive to those in lower positions in society. God himself is humble in his condescension to us. Peter drives the point home by quoting Proverbs 3, verse 34.

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. No one should boast in God's presence. He then moves into a series of short instructions.

We must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. We should recognise and submit ourselves to God's providences. They are about to enter into this fiery trial, and they must recognise that God is the one who is in control of all things, even the trial that they are undergoing.

Like Job had to submit to the hand of the Lord, so they have to submit. God will raise them up at the right time. Quoting Psalm 55, verse 22, he calls for them to cast their anxiety upon God.

He cares for us. Just as our Lord charged Peter to watch and pray lest he enter into temptation, Peter presents his hearers with a similar challenge. Once again he tells them to be sober-minded and to be watchful.

They must be alert, recognising that they are acting in hostile territory. The devil himself is seeking to destroy and to consume. He is like a savage beast, a roaring lion.

And what is needed to resist him is a strong, a firm and a steadfast faith. In the struggle that they face, it will help them to recognise that these struggles come from God ultimately, and God will preserve them through them. Furthermore, the sufferings that they are experiencing are not exclusive to them.

Other Christians elsewhere in the world are going through the same thing. And when the time comes, God will raise them up and bless them. He has called them to eternal glory in Christ, and they will reach that destination.

He will restore, confirm, strengthen and establish them. He ends with the benediction. Following the benediction, there are a number of short greetings.

Silvanus is mentioned first of all. He is a faithful brother by whom Peter has written to them. This might be a reference to Silvanus being the one who bore the letter that was carried to different places.

Or maybe Silvanus is the one who was the amanuensis. I believe it is more likely to be the latter. As Peter's amanuensis, it is possible that Silvanus exercised a lot of latitude in what he wrote.

He might have been writing just according to the general theology of Peter, in his own words, with Peter approving and signing off on it at the end. There is plenty of room for debate. But the possibility of such involvement by Silvanus might explain the quality of the Greek that we see throughout the epistle.

A quality of Greek that probably exceeds what we might expect from someone with the education of a Galilean fisherman. Peter communicates greetings from she who is at Babylon. She who is at Babylon is almost certainly not Peter's wife.

Rather, it is a reference to the church. We find a similar female personification of the church in 2 John. Where is the Babylon in question? It is almost certainly not the literal Babylon, which had been wiped out by that point.

The traditional alternative to this is that Babylon is a reference to Rome, where the early

tradition argues Peter lived for some time. Another possibility, depending upon your reading of Revelation 17 and 18, is that Babylon is a reference to Jerusalem. We know that both Peter and Mark lived in Jerusalem, so it would not be surprising for them to send a letter from that city.

Within the New Testament, we find several inversions of the Old Testament themes that associate Jerusalem with captivity. Jerusalem is in captivity with all of her children, Paul argues in Galatians 4.25. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus reworks material that was originally associated with oracles against Babylon in the book of Isaiah, and relates them to the destruction of Jerusalem. And then, of course, in Revelation 17 and 18, Jerusalem, I believe, is the Babylon the Great, the harlot that is destroyed.

Peter also communicates greetings from Mark. In Acts 12, after he was released from prison by the angel, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. The Mark here is almost certainly the Mark who wrote the second gospel.

Recognising the association between Mark and Peter, we can also see something more of the unity between various parts of the New Testament. Matthew's gospel has affinities with James. The gospel of Mark is associated with the material of Peter, and Peter is associated also with Jude's material.

Luke was a missionary companion for some time with the apostle Paul, and John's material includes both his gospel, his epistles, and the book of Revelation. This suggests that there are essentially four families of material within the New Testament. And when we consider the overlap and the interaction between these families of material, we will have a fuller sense of the variegated unity of the New Testament as a corpus.

The letter ends with a charge to greet each other with a kiss of love. As in Paul, this token of affection was a sign of the unity of the church as the family of God. A question to consider.

How does the vision of the oversight of elders and pastors that Peter presents in this passage serve as a challenge to prevailing notions of leadership in our day and age?