

Naboth's Vineyard

Our recent daily readings (following "The Bible Companion" reading plan) have brought us through the ministry of Elijah in relation to Israel. In 1 Kings chapter 19 and verse 18, we saw Elijah being told that though he felt alone in terms of true worship, there were yet seven thousand individuals who refused to bow the knee to the Baal idols. And in our reading for today (1 Kings 21), our attention is brought to one of those seven thousand, by the name of Naboth, an individual who refused to give up his inheritance against the designs of an avaricious king.

1 Kings 21:1-2 describes how that Naboth owned a vineyard next to one of king Ahab's palaces. But Ahab desired to take ownership of that vineyard for himself – so we read:

"Ahab spake to Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near to my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it, or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money" (1 Kings 21:1-2).

On the face of it - humanly speaking - the offer appears to be a generous one. Naboth would do very well out of the deal: he would either have money, or a vineyard that was better than his. However, spiritually speaking, Ahab, even though he was the king, was wrong in coveting the property of his neighbour (see Exo. 20:17). We are told that the reason he wanted the vineyard was to plant "a garden of herbs". Some translations render it "a vegetable garden". But why would Ahab want this particular plot so badly, if all he wanted to use it for was to grow his cabbages and cucumbers? There is another possible reason. Herbs were – and still are – used for medicinal purposes, and also for recreational use. Modern society is plagued by the drug culture, with the misuse of natural herbs to induce mental states that are not natural. Could it be that Ahab wanted a "herb garden" to grow his drugs next to his house, so that he didn't have far to go to get his "fix"? That might explain why he wanted this particular plot of land so close to where he lived.

Ahab's desire for Naboth's vineyard fulfilled Samuel's expectations concerning the dealings of a human king over the people of God:

"he will take your fields, *and your vineyards*, and your oliveyards, even the best of them ..." (1 Sam. 8:14)

When the people rejected Yahweh as king and desired a human ruler, Samuel warned them of what such a king could turn out like. Governed by self-interest, a human ruler can be more concerned about his own standing than the welfare of his people, as seen by the failings of a whole succession of kings who ruled over Israel. Certainly, Ahab – being led away by his wife Jezebel – was a man who wanted to have his own way, and became distressed when he could not have it so.

The answer of Naboth was clear and unequivocal:

"Naboth said to Ahab, Yahweh forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee" (2 Kings 21:3).

It was a principle of the Mosaic Law, that land ownership could not be transferred between the tribes. So, in speaking of a particular situation we read:

“So shall not the inheritance of the children of Israel remove from tribe to tribe: for every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers” (Num. 36:7).

And in the future kingdom of God, when the land shall be apportioned once more, we read:

“Moreover the prince shall not take of the people’s inheritance by oppression, to thrust them out of their possession; but he shall give his sons inheritance out of his own possession: that my people be not scattered every man from his possession” (Ezek. 46:18).

What a marked contrast this is, to Ahab, and the means by which he was to eventually obtain the inheritance of Naboth!

Notice, Ahab offered Naboth a “better” vineyard than the one he had inherited – which again suggests there was a specific reason why he wanted this particular plot. But “better” in whose eyes? The world at large seeks to offer us something “better” than what we have in Christ – but what can be better than what God considers it wise for us to have? The world at large offers us freedom from the constraints of the truth, providing us with the opportunity to please ourselves, and seek our own benefits, at the expense of others. But in reality, such are the servants of sin, and shall reap corruption as a consequence. Scripture enables us to lift up our sight to better things, speaking of the faithful of old:

“truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire *a better country*, that is, and heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (Heb. 15-16).

Notice, Naboth was promised a “better” vineyard, but he, like the worthies of old, instead looked to a “better” city to come, based on heavenly principles when the Will of God shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

The record continues in 1 Kings 21:

“And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him ... and he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread” (1 Kings 21:4).

It has often been remarked that Ahab was reacting to the situation like a spoiled child who can’t have his own way. Going off to sulk like a little boy, he wouldn’t even eat anything: he “turned away his face”. But notice how he relayed the situation to Jezebel his wife, in response to her question as to what was wrong:

“And he said unto her, because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him Give me the vineyard for money; or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for it: *and he answered, I will not give thee my vineyard*” (1 Kings 21:6)

In Ahab’s complaint, we have a gross misrepresentation of Naboth’s words. He did not say: “I will not give thee my vineyard” at all. What he actually said was: “*Yahweh forbid it me* that I should give *the inheritance of my fathers* unto thee”. There are two differences here: firstly, God would not allow Naboth to do this thing. And secondly, the land was regarded as an inheritance of his fathers, not solely his own to do as he pleased with it. This is the way of the flesh: to misrepresent the people of God. Ahab saw the situation as a personal one between him and Naboth, whereas in actual fact, it was between Ahab and Naboth’s God. Men of the flesh cannot see the difference, but to the children of the spirit, it is of vital importance.

Ahab’s wife was Jezebel. Jezebel had already distinguished herself by being an opposer of God’s Truth. 1 Kings 18:4 and 13 describes how she “cut off” and killed the true Prophets, 1 Kings 19 records her opposition, and threat to kill Elijah, and it was under her auspices that idol worship became the state religion of Israel. Being preeminently a woman of the flesh, “that woman Jezebel” is used in the book of Revelation as a figure of the great apostasy (Rev. 2:20-23) to be destroyed by the coming of the Lord. “That woman” devised a means by which Ahab could have his plot of land, and do with it as he pleased. She wrote letters in Ahab’s name saying:

“Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: and set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die” (1 Kings 21:9-10).

This thing was not to be done in a corner. Naboth was to be lifted up before the eyes of all the people, and two false witnesses would indict him before them all. The claim was that he had spoken against God and the King. Nothing could be further from the truth: far from blaspheming God, he actually remained faithful to Yahweh’s commandments. Yet in the eyes of the unbeliever, truth is a secondary element: Jezebel, herself a blasphemer of Israel’s God had no regard for truth, but was intent on condemning the guiltless in order to take possession of the vineyard.

The charge against Naboth is similar to the accusation made against Stephen, one of the early disciples. Like Jezebel, “they suborned men, which said, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11). Moreover, in addition, they “set up false witnesses which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law” (Acts 6:13). In both cases, the principal charge was that faithful men were actually blasphemers. A passage from the prophets comes to mind:

“Hear the word of Yahweh, ye that tremble at his Word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name’s sake, said, Let Yahweh be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed” (Isa. 66:5).

For Jezebel, the great idolater, it was the utmost hypocrisy to condemn Naboth as being a blasphemer of Israel's God. Similarly, those who rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, had no good cause to claim Stephen had spoken against God. But both were condemned by the words of false witnesses, and were put to death by stoning by the people.

It is interesting to note that Jezebel, despite her wicked idolatry, knew something about the Law of Moses. According to the Law it was written:

“One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: **at the mouth of two witnesses**, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established” (Deut. 19:15).

So it was that Jezebel raised up two witnesses to testify against Naboth. But it was not Naboth alone who was killed: ordinarily upon his death, his children would inherit his property and that which appertained to him. Indeed, that is how Naboth had possession of the vineyard: it was the inheritance of his Fathers. Jezebel had to put his sons to death, in order to remove any claims to that inheritance. This is related later on in Scripture, in the words of the Lord:

“Surely I have seen yesterday the blood of Naboth, **and the blood of his sons**, saith Yahweh; and I will requite thee in this plat, saith Yahweh” (2 Kings 9:26).

In various ways, the slaying of Naboth in order to take his inheritance, typifies the slaying of our Lord and Master. We read that those who were incited against Naboth were his own kinsmen: “the elders and the nobles that were in the city, **dwelling with Naboth**” (1 Kings 21:8). They rose up against him, and had him killed. Even so it is written regarding Messiah:

“One shall say to him, What are these wounds in thy hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded **in the house of my friends**” (Zech. 13:6).

Just as the charge against Naboth was blasphemy against God and the King, so Jesus was accused likewise:

“... whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar ...” (Jno. 19:12).

“then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses?” (Mat. 27:65).

And verse 60 tells us that there were “two false witnesses” that spoke against him, just like in the case of Naboth.

Matthew chapter 21 recounts the parable of the vineyard, as taught by our Lord. The parable narrates how the owner of a vineyard let it out to husbandmen, who were to bring forth the fruits thereof in due course. When the owner sent his servants to collect the fruit, they abused them, beating them and stoning them. Then he sent his

son: “last of all they sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him” (Mat. 21:37-39).

Notice, that just like Naboth, the Son was slain in order that others could possess his inheritance. But notice also what the owner’s response was to this: “He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons” and the interpretation of this is given: “the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Mat. 21:41, 43). Here is the irony: those who oppressed others to take their inheritance will themselves have it taken from them, and given to another. Though Jezebel and Ahab secured the death of Naboth, he will be amongst that nation to whom the kingdom will be given, rendering the fruit in due time. Indeed, this is implied by the meaning of his name: Naboth means “fruitful” - by contrast to Ahab and Jezebel who bore no fruit to the landowner, even Yahweh himself. They were but tenants in the land, called upon to serve the landowner, who placed them there, yet they abused his prophets and slew his messengers who came to collect the fruits. They will therefore be miserably destroyed at the time when those who have given their lives for the preservation of the Truth shall be rewarded according to their deeds.

In considering Naboth therefore, we have a man who foreshadowed our Lord Jesus Christ. Being falsely accused by two false witnesses, both were condemned by the nation, and their own people. But both refused to part with their inheritance, and so were to be raised to glory at their appointed time. Our part therefore, is to labour in the vineyard whilst time remains, that we might bring forth the fruits thereof, to be admitted into the “better” inheritance when our Master comes.

Christopher Maddocks