

Who was Naboth in the Bible?

Naboth's story in the Bible (1 Kings 21) involves the downfall of the wicked king Ahab of Israel and his infamous wife, Jezebel. Because of their mistreatment of Naboth, Ahab and Jezebel were each promised an untimely and violent demise.

Naboth was a Jezreelite. He had a vineyard in close proximity to Ahab's palace in Jezreel. Ahab wanted to turn Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden, since it was so near the palace (1 Kings 21:2). So the king offered to pay Naboth for his vineyard or give him a better vineyard someplace else. Naboth, however, was unwilling to give up the land he had inherited from his fathers; it was not for sale at any price (verse 3). Ahab was upset and went home "sullen and angry" because he could not have Naboth's vineyard. The sulking king refused to eat (1 Kings 21:4).

It may seem strange that Naboth would refuse the king's offer, but Naboth was doing the right thing. God had commanded that a family's inheritance not be sold: "The land must not be sold permanently" (Leviticus 25:23); and "No inheritance in Israel is to pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal inheritance of their ancestors" (Numbers 36:7). Naboth was simply following the Law; it was King Ahab who wanted to ignore the Law, and then he pouted when the righteous Naboth would not agree.

In the palace, Queen Jezebel noticed that her husband was unhappy, so she asked him what was wrong. Ahab told her about his encounter with Naboth. Jezebel told him that, since he was the king, he could have anything he wanted. Then she promised to take action herself: "Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (1 Kings 21:7). Jezebel proceeded to make arrangements to have Naboth disposed of.

First, she forged letters from the king (verse 8), directing the noblemen and elders of the city to “proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people” (verse 9). Near Naboth were to be placed two “scoundrels” who would falsely accuse Naboth of cursing both God and the king. On these trumped up charges, Naboth was to be taken outside the city and stoned to death (verse 10).

The evil plan against Naboth worked. Jezebel had been careful to plant two false witnesses, since a death sentence could not be carried out on the basis of only one witness (Deuteronomy 17:6). So she followed the Law when it suited her; that is, when she could twist it to facilitate her ability to lie, steal, and murder. An especially heinous part of Jezebel’s plan was her proclamation of a day of fasting—using a religious ceremony to cover her murderous intent and ensure Naboth’s presence was depraved in the extreme. When the queen received word that Naboth was dead, she told Ahab that he could now take possession of Naboth’s vineyard, which Ahab was all too happy to do (1 Kings 21:15).

Because of Ahab and Jezebel’s shocking murder of Naboth, God condemned them both. Elijah the prophet came to the king with a message from God. In fact, Elijah met Ahab while the king was touring his ill-gotten vineyard. The prophet said, “Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? . . . This is what the Lord says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!” (1 Kings 21:19). Next, Elijah prophesied that the Lord would bring disaster on the house of Ahab, so that every male in Ahab’s household would die and, rather than receive an honorable burial, they would be eaten by wild animals (verse 21 and 24). Then the prophet foretold the queen’s fate: “Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel” (1 Kings 21:23).

After hearing this terrible pronouncement, Ahab repented of his actions toward Naboth;

he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and humbled himself before God (1 Kings 21:27). Because of Ahab's response, the Lord chose not to bring the promised disaster on Ahab during his lifetime but during his son's days instead (verse 28). Ahab was indeed an evil man. In fact, he "sold himself to do evil" (1 Kings 21:25), and he "did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him" (1 Kings 16:30). One of the things the Lord hates is "hands that shed innocent blood" (Proverbs 6:17), and Ahab and Jezebel were certainly stained with the innocent blood of Naboth. Yet, even in God's judgment of Ahab, He showed mercy in response to a humbled heart.

The Lord was true to His word. Ahab was killed in battle; his blood was washed out of the chariot in the same place where Naboth had been stoned to death, and the dogs were there, just as Elijah had said (1 Kings 22:34-38). Jezebel was killed, and her body was eaten by dogs (2 Kings 9:30-37). And Ahab's family were all killed (2 Kings 10:1-17). Thus Naboth was avenged.