

What's the Connection?

I Kings 21

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What kind of justice is that, anyhow? Far from Ahab's having murdered Naboth, or "put out a contract on him," Ahab didn't even know he was dead until, following his burial, Jezebel happened to tell him about it. Was there anything wrong with purchasing the land of a deceased person?

Yes, he faintly recalls a few week ago telling his wife, Jezebel, how disappointed he was at Naboth's stubborn refusal to sell the property. But isn't that sort of frustration that a husband would normally express to his wife? He certainly didn't ask her to arrange Naboth's death (as it now appeared that she may have). He wouldn't do something like that. He wasn't that kind of person. No! The only thing of which he was guilty was telling Jezebel that Naboth had turned down his offers for the land. Other than that, his hands were clean...weren't they? Surely God knows better than to assign guilt by association.

That's not unlike another, better known, Biblical anecdote – the one told in Genesis 3. There it is Adam sitting, late one afternoon in the family room after a long day out naming the beasts and the birds. His wife, Eve, bring him a glass of Zinfandel and an hors d'oeuvre plate full of something that looked remarkably, tantalizingly, like fresh, forbidden fruit. Ahhh....what a woman, that Eve!" He hadn't, so far, been able to bring himself, actually to take fruit from the forbidden tree. But here, as if she'd been reading his mind, the forbidden fruit is, appearing before him, unasked for, so that he need feel no responsibility or accountability. As with Ahab, regarding Naboth's death, Adam is subsequently told that he is guilty. Here again, was that fair? The most he should be charged with was "second degree receiving of stolen goods," or maybe "accessory after the fact." At least it would seem so.

Those, and yet other similar Biblical material take us into some tough, sticky territory; something that might be described as "synthetic innocence." "Synthetic innocence" is a mental strategy by which a person carefully arranges not to know what he could know, automatically screens out what he may sense is going on but is determined not to know for certain that it is or was. It is the wily-but-smooth-refusal to recognize the connection between certain causes and their effects. It also includes keeping one's conscience quiet by focusing on one's minor virtues in order to remain oblivious to major wrongs.

A few years ago, Snoopy, of the "Peanuts" cartoon, wonderfully revealed the sheer absurdity of this brand of "innocence." He has a broken leg and is sitting on his doghouse reflecting upon his plight. He says, "My body blames my foot for not being able to go places. My foot says that it was my head's fault, and my head blames my eyes. My eyes say that my

feet are clumsy, and my right foot says that it shouldn't be blamed for what my left foot did." Then in the last frame, Snoopy looks out at us and explains, "I don't say anything, because I don't get involved."

When you and I do this, it is seldom quite that transparent, but the phenomenon is still very familiar, isn't it? "Can I help it," Ahab pleads, "that my wife, Jezebel, mistakenly thought that I would condone her methods? I'll be the first to admit that bad judgment was used. But really, what does that have to do with me?" Or, make it the Genesis story, with Adam defending his contrived innocence. "God, there are a lot of kinds of fruit growing out there in that garden. How was I supposed to know that the woman (that you, O God, invented) would try to involve me in her indiscretion? God, I just don't see the connection."

The inescapable message seems to be, though, that no matter how many layers of insulation that we have to put in place in order to insure our innocence, God insists upon looking at who it is that ends up with the vineyard or ends up munching away at the forbidden fruit. Where might this have to do with me – with ways in which I may feel protected and insulated from moral accountability? Let's look at only a very few ways in which this could apply. I certainly can't imagine, for example, my having any part in arranging for, or consenting to, someone starving to death. You probably can't imagine doing that either. You and I are much too compassionate to sanction such misery. I wouldn't be able to bear to look at that happening. Nevertheless, I am, at least, dimly aware that at this very minute, starvation is what is happening for millions of actual, flesh-and-blood human beings here on our earth. How then, do I, a comparatively humane person, manage to maintain a serene, seemingly innocent, obliviousness to all of that? You know as well as I do. It is the thousands of miles, and the layer upon layer of social and economic theories, conveniently in place there between me and all of that.

And yet, if I understand correctly this Bible of ours, there IS a direct, moral connection between yours and my level of consumption in this part of the world, and the terrible deprivations under which people live in so much of the rest of the world. If I am at all honest, I do know that there has to be a correlation between world hunger and the fact that, in this part of the world, our dogs and cats are far better nourished, than are close to half of the world's human population, and/or that some of us throw away more edible food in a month than is available to nourish several million of the world's human beings, in an entire year.

For another example, how about those indignant feelings that sweep over us when we see that another oil tanker or drilling rig has ruptured, ruining beaches and causing massive kills of fish and wildlife. You and I aren't the kind of people who would ever be patient with, much

less condone the slipshod practices and careless operations that bring about those desecrations of the environment. But here too, buried under righteous cries for new laws and greater accountability in the energy industry is, I fear, a much-too-neat obliviousness to what is really at work here. For it is, isn't it, our own, out-of-control, insatiable appetite for comforts and conveniences which gobble up over-growing amounts of fossil-fuel energy, that is the real culprit? To paraphrase a familiar line of poetry, "Ask not, for whom is the earth abused. It is abused on OUR behalf."

At a national level, one can see another, glaring example of "connections carefully not made." It has to do with our being appalled and alarmed at the terrible kinds of armed conflict that keep breaking out in certain parts of our world, ones which increasingly include planned genocide of civilian populations, as a normal part of waging war. What's the connection? One really has to work hard to keep from seeing this one. It has to do with our own country as a major source of the weaponry that makes the carnage possible. Manufacturing armaments, just as is so of handguns, is an extremely profitable industry. To live blithely, oblivious and unbothered with that, all one has to do is stubbornly refuse to see a direct moral connection between weaponry as a source of profits and weaponry as a source of death.

A similar connection that one will wish to avoid, in order to keep his Ahab-like innocence and peace of mind intact, has to do with poverty, with the millions trapped in it. In this case Ahab sits in the insulation of his palace office, ridiculing and damning people who remain on public assistance, rather than availing themselves of one of the many minimum-wage jobs that are available to them these days. In this case, the connection that Ahab carefully avoids is a simple mathematical one. He carefully DOES NOT calculate what kind of apartment one can rent, AND how much food one can buy, AND how much health care is available, AND what child care will cost, AND what transportation to work will cost, for someone living on minimum wage with no benefits: all out of approximately 12 to 16 thousand dollars a year. Ahab is certainly bright enough to see that the odds of survival are better subsisting in a homeless shelter on the public dole and on Medicaid, than to create the miracle that is required to survive, at large, on a minimum wage job. But you see, Ahab doesn't WANT to understand that. It is far more comfortable to keep his moral conscience in dreamland.

These are only a few examples of the larger moral issues, in the face of which, knowing little or nothing, is most comfortable. Ahab will be quick to tell you that he "minds his own business," that he leaves the complicated stuff to the experts and to those who have "a practical, pragmatic approach to getting things done." He's learned that "things have a way of working out."

This insulating gimmick doesn't have only to do with major moral issues either. It happens all of the time with the exercising of personal influence-personal power. Again, Ahab certainly knew his wife, Jezebel, well enough to know that if he acted sufficiently melancholy, helpless and incompetent, that it was her nature to take charge in her savage, Machiavellian way. While he might not have guessed how, still, at some level he knew that, by whatever means necessary, he would end up with Naboth's vineyard. She also knew him well enough to know that results were all he cared about. He had to stomach for the methods or other details, so she would oblige him by sheltering him from them.

We have that kind of knowledge of the people closest to us. We know what scares them what angers them, what makes them most insecure, where their consciences are weakest and most vulnerable and how they are most easily influenced. That is knowledge that we can manipulate anytime we choose to get him to go on our behalf to do or say something we want said or done, but don't want it on OUR consciences and/or hope to avoid risking the consequences. Again, "All I said to her was thus-and-so. It wasn't my fault that she thought that I meant for her to go out and do such-and-such."

Whether this happens at the personal level or in regard to some of the huge, more daunting moral issues, this illusion of disconnection, insulation, and "convenient, know-nothing innocence" is just THAT in the eyes of God, an illusion, and an immoral illusion at that.

The hard truth of the matter is, that a clear conscience that arranges to remain "clear" because it stays carefully unplugged from whatever might bother it, is at least as dangerous as no conscience at all.

There is nothing remotely good or virtuous about goodness that has no problem achieving one's ends through "arrangements" by which one benefits, indirectly, from out-of-sight evils.

A morality that is serene and comfortable as long as there is nothing provable or technically illegal about the exploitations, insinuations, and pressures used to reach its goals, is no morality at all. It is an insidious form of immorality.

So, nice try, Ahab. Nice try, Adam. But no way! It didn't work – at least not with God it didn't. For actually, when one reflects upon it, one of the major capacities that sets us human beings apart from the rest of the animal world, is our ability to MAKE connections, to figure out the chains of causality, to be aware of the lines of responsibility, and thus to understand both the dangers and the wonders of whatever is the influence and power God has given us.

To refuse to recognize that, or to pretend that we don't, is to deny the very image of God within us – not a good thing to do.