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**Title:** Bible Beach Reads Elijah: Preparing the Way

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**Scripture:** [1 Kings, 16:33](#), [1 Kings 21:1-6](#), [Exodus 20:13-17](#), [Malachi 4:5](#)

**Text:** [1 Kings 21:15-23, 27-29](#)

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Every hero needs a villain. It is a basic principle of storytelling. Superman had Lex Luther, Batman did battle with the Joker. Harry Potter fought Lord Voldemort and Skywalker's adversary was Darth Vader. In the case of this year's Bible Beach Read, it is Elijah against Ahab. Ahab might beg to differ. He would suggest that his wife

Jezebel gets him in trouble. She is the real villain. He might have a point but that's not the way it went down in the beginning nor at the end.

We are coming to the end of contests between Elijah and Ahab with a final confrontation. The opening battle was about the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3) Ahab forgot or ignored this when he married the daughter of the King of Sidon, the infamous Jezebel. She never gave up her Phoenician religion, nor her devotion to Baal. Ahab sinned not only by taking a worshiper of Baal for his wife but at her urging, he too worshiped Baal. This earned Ahab the title of the baddest king of Israel for he "...did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel than had all the kings of Israel who were before him." (1 Kings 16:33) It also earns him a visit from Elijah and the beginning of their good versus evil contest.

At the visit, Elijah declares a drought and then he leaves the building faster than Ahab could point a finger at his queen and says, "She made me do it." We are all responsible for our behavior even if politicians both then and now are quick to place the blame on someone or something else.

Drought is not insignificant in an agrarian society. One year without rain is bad, two worse but three-plus years is disastrous, although rabbinic legend has it that Ahab and Queen Jezebel were well fed. During the time, she sought out the competition and put to death Yahweh's prophets. But she couldn't find Elijah because he was in retreat, preparing for the next contest. God had to do something in Elijah before he could do something through Elijah.

After three and a half years, the people have suffered enough. God sends Elijah to confront Ahab, not Jezebel. In an undisclosed location, they meet and in true presidential form, Ahab has a derisive nickname for our hero, "...the troubler (snake) of Israel." (1 Kings 18:17) Elijah says, "Not me." You brought the trouble on you with Baal. We'll end it now. He pitches a winner take all competition on Mt. Carmel. The first to call down fire on their god's altar wins. When Baal's prophet's fizzle, Elijah brings the sizzle, a pyrotechnic firestorm not unlike the wildfire consuming California vineyards. Elijah sentences the opposing team to death and the people of Israel carry it out with enthusiasm.

Later in the day, upon hearing of the defeat of all her prophets, the wicked queen Jezebel speaks for the first time. "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." (1 Kings 19:2) Clever girl. She rightly reads the character flaw of our hero. "Elijah was a person, just like us" (James 5:17a) and after a once in a lifetime achievement against incredible odds, is vulnerable to burn-out. He runs like a dog with his tail between his legs and he keeps running all the way to Mt. Horeb.

Thousands of miles away, listening in the silence, Elijah hears God whisper, "Go. Go back to work." Anoint new kings and find your replacement. On the way back, he finds a burly understudy as strong as the ox he was driving. Elisha accepts the apprenticeship and they head back, a long walk from the Sinai Peninsula, a hike that took Moses and crowd 40 years.

It is not surprising that the Deuteronomist narrator of our Bible beach read writes, "sometime later." Sometime is relative. Sometime was a least a few years, long enough for Jezebel to stop hunting for Elijah. It was time enough for King Ahab to be back in Yahweh's good graces, helping him win a war against Ben-hadad, the king of Aram. But it was also time enough to fall back out of favor, for disobeying Yahweh's command to take Bennie out. Sometime after all of these things took place, King Ahab breaks another command, the tenth. You shall not covet your neighbor's house or wife or servants, his ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17) In this case, it was a vineyard.

Vineyards are big in Jezreel. Great soil, good climate, and not one firestorm except for the one 30 miles away on Mt. Carmel a few years back. This particular vineyard was an absolute beauty, located right next door to King Ahab's military quarters. Ahab tries to strong-arm the owner into selling or trading property. But the owner, Naboth, wouldn't hear of it. Naboth inherited it from his family. It was the gift of God to his forbears and by

extension, to him. It is covenantal, his ancestral inheritance, and as such represents Naboth's participation in God's gracious gift of the promised land. So Naboth will not sell the land, not even to the king. And Ahab understands Naboth's reason. After all, Ahab too is an Israelite, so he understands Naboth's refusal even if he does not like it.<sup>1</sup> And like so many heads of state, Ahab doesn't take rejection well. He sticks out a lip and sulks away like a petulant child. Back at the palace, "He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat." (1 Kings 21: 6)

Jezebel finds him in bed depressed and asks what is going on. Ahab whines, "Naboth won't sell me his vineyard." "What? Are you the king of Israel or a wimp? Get up and eat. I'll get your stupid vineyard for you."

And she does. Jezebel's strategy is to get Naboth found guilty of trumped-up charges. Using the Kings' royal seal, she writes two letters enlisting the support of a couple of scoundrels who would lie about Naboth, accusing him of disloyalty to the king and cursing Yahweh. It worked. Naboth got stoned to death at the city gates and Ahab got the vineyard. But it also got God's attention and a final visit from Elijah.

They meet up in the vineyard and true to form, Ahab is quick to call him a name. "Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" (1 Kings 21: 20) "How long did it take you to grow that beard? I should call you hairy. And nice belt. (2 Kings 1:8). For a Tishbite, you are styling. You get that in Egypt?"

"I have found you because of this property."

"Pretty nice, don't you think? I've had my eye on it for a long time. I wanted it. I can sit up in my room and look at it out the window and I just kept thinking, 'I've got to have it.'"

"That's what I'm talking about. You broke another commandment, the 10<sup>th</sup>. 'You shall not covet your neighbor's property.'"

"But I got it when the owner died; that's not coveting. I'll admit that I got it for a steal."

"Ahab, stealing is another commandment. Thou shall not steal. Remember? The seventh."

"But these old vines produce and those thirsting Assyrians traveling to the coast on the Via Maris, are ready to buy. You can make a killing."<sup>2</sup>

"That's what I'm talking about. Killing. Thou shalt not kill, the sixth commandment."

"What? I didn't murder anyone."

"What about the note that you sent asking those crooks to lie about Naboth, telling them to say he cursed you and cursed Yahweh? Lying is, by the way, another commandment. You are checking them off the list pretty fast."

"Wait, wait, wait. I didn't write any note."

"But it had your seal on it. Who could have written it but you?"

And at that moment, it all came to Ahab. He knew it was true. I'm sure more than anything in the world, he wanted to say, "She did it. I'm not responsible for all this." But of course, Elijah didn't need to hear it. He knew it but he also knew that Ahab was fully complicit. Turning an eye, going along, acting innocent doesn't acquit sinful behavior. Ahab was in bed with his queen in more ways than one.

Elijah let him have it with both barrels, the final confrontation between our hero and his villain. "When God gets through with you there will be nothing left to scrape off the sidewalk and what there is the dogs will take care of, just the way they did to poor Naboth. And as for your nasty queen Jezebel, not only because of what she did to Naboth but also because of all her imported witchdoctors and totem poles, she going out the same way.<sup>3</sup> The dog days don't end with Naboth. They will feast on both of you."

An amazing thing happens. Right then and there, in the middle of the vineyard, he repents. "When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly" (1 Kings 21:27). It impressed God, so much so that the Lord said to Elijah "Good work. There has been no one like Ahab who sold out to evil in my sight. But look at him now." "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..." (1 Kings 21:29)

Because Elijah was a person just like us, I'm sure he felt some pride. But I wonder if he also felt a little letdown as if the wicked had prospered and Ahab had gotten away with it all. At the very least, Elijah was discovering what we all need to know. No one is too far from God to experience the gift of grace. Everyone needs to know that, every person just like us. No one is too far from God to experience the gift of grace.

Elijah is the one who points to this truth and will do it again because God has a plan for everyone to experience the grace which Ahab received. Elijah is part of that plan. God promises to "...send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5), when the Messiah comes, when Jesus comes. Elijah was preparing the way for Ahab and he prepares the way for us.

God was merciful. Ahab was allowed to die honorably in battle. Jezebel, on the other hand, continued unrepentant to the end. When the time finally came, they threw her out of the window, and when the dogs got finished, all that was left for the undertaker was ".th..e skull and the feet and the palms of her hands." (II Kings 9:35)<sup>4</sup>

Now our hero doesn't have a villain. Is he a prophet without a cause? No, he still has one assignment left and then an amazing ride into heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching and Reading the Old Testament Lessons*. CSS Publishing. 2003. p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> "Naboth's Vineyard Unearthed at Tel Jezreel? Ahab's kingdom for a vineyard. *Biblical Archeology Review*. November 06, 2017. Retrieved by subscription at <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/naboth-vineyard-tel-jezreel/>

<sup>3</sup> Buechner, Frederick. Ahab, Naboth, and Jezebel. Originally published in *A Room Called Remember* and later in *Beyond Words*. Retrieved at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2019/7/1/weekly-sermon-illustration-ahab-naboth-and-jezebel>.

<sup>4</sup>Buechner.