**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 KINGS-021. ROYAL MURDERERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And it came to pass after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2. And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto 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. 3. And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee. 4. And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him: for he had said, I will not give thee the inheritance of my fathers. And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread. 5. But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him. Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread? 6. And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy 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. 7. And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. 8. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth. 9. And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: 10. 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. 11. And the men of his city, even the elders and the nobles who were the inhabitants in his city, did as Jezebel had sent unto them, and as it was written in the letters which she had sent unto them. 12. They proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. 13. And there came in two men, children of Belial, and sat before him: and the men of Belial witnessed against him, even against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth did blaspheme God and the king. Then they carried him forth out of the city, and stoned him with stones, that he died. 14. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, Naboth is stoned, and is dead. 15. And it came to pass, when Jezebel heard that Naboth was stoned, and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab, Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead. 16. And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it."*

*1 Kings 21:1-16*

There are three types of character in this story, all bad, but in different ways. Ahab is wicked and weak; Jezebel, wicked and strong; the elders of Jezreel, wicked and subservient. Amongst them they commit a great crime, which was the last drop in the full cup of the king's sins, and brought down God's judgment on him and his house.

**I. We have to look at the weakly wicked Ahab.**

His wish for Naboth's vineyard was a mere selfish whim. He was willing to give more for it than it was worth. It suited his convenience for a kitchen-garden. In the true spirit of an Eastern despot, he expected everything to yield to his caprice, and did not think that a subject had any rights. What business has a poor man with sentiment? Naboth is to go, and a handful of silver will set all right. Samuel's warning of what a king would be and do was fulfilled. This highhanded interference with private rights was what Israel's revolt had led to. The sturdy Naboth was influenced not only by love for the bit of land which his fathers had cultivated for more years than Ahab had reigned days, but by obedience to the law of God; and he was not afraid to show himself a Jehovah worshipper, by his solemn appeal to the Lord, as well as by the fact of his refusal. The brusque, flat refusal shows that some independence was left in the nation.

The weak rage and childish sulking of Ahab are very characteristic of a feeble and selfish nature, accustomed to be humoured and not thwarted. These fits of temper seem to have been common with him; for he was in one at the end of the preceding chapter, as he is now. The bed on which he flung himself is probably the couch for reclining on at table, and, if so, the picture of his passion is still more vivid. Instead of partaking of the meal, he turns his face to the wall, and refuses food. No meat will down with him for want of a salad, because wanting Naboth's vineyard for a garden of herbs. As he lies there, like a spoiled child, all because he could not get his own way, he may serve for an example of the misery of unbridled selfishness and unregulated desires. An acre or two of land was a small matter to get into such a state about, and there are few things that are worth a wise or a strong man's being so troubled. Hezekiah might turn his face to the wall in the extremity of sickness and earnestness of prayer; but Ahab in doing it is only a poor, feeble creature who has weakly set his heart on what is not his, and weakly whimpers because he cannot have it.

To be thus at the mercy of our own ravenous desires, and so utterly miserable when they are thwarted, is unworthy of manhood, and is sure to bring many a bitter moment; for there are more disappointments than gratifications in store for such a one. We may learn from Ahab, too, the certainty that weakness will darken into wickedness. Such a mood as his always brings some Jezebel or other to suggest evil ways of succeeding. In this wicked world there are more temptations to sin than helps to virtue, and the weak man will soon fall into some of the abundant traps laid for him. Unless we have learned to say No with much emphasis, because we are strong in the Lord, we shall fall. This did not I because of the fear of the Lord. To be weak is to be miserable, and any sin may come from it.

**II. Jezebel is a type of a different sort of wickedness.**

She is wicked and strong. Notice how she takes the upper hand at once, in her abrupt question, not without a spice of scorn; and note how Ahab answers, bemoaning himself, putting in the forefront his fair proposal, and making Naboth's refusal ruder than it really had been, by suppressing its reason. Then out flashes the imperious will of this masterful princess, who had come from a land where royalty was all-powerful, and who had no restraints of conscience. She darts a half-contemptuous question at Ahab, to stir him to action; for nothing moves a weak man so much as the fear of being thought weak. Dost thou govern? implies, If thou dost, thou mayest trample on a subject. It should mean, If thou dost, thou must jealously guard the subject's rights. What a proud consciousness of her power speaks in that I will give thee the vineyard! It is like Lady Macbeth's Give me the dagger! No more is said. She can keep her own counsel, and Ahab suspects that some violence is to be used, which he had better not know. So, again, his weakness leads him astray. He does not wish to hear what he is willing should be done, if only he has not to do it. So feeble men hoodwink conscience by conniving at evils which they dare not perpetrate, and then enjoying their fruits, and saying, Thou canst not say I did it.

Jezebel had Ahab's signet, the badge of authority, which she probably got from him for her unspoken purpose. Her letter to the elders of Jezreel speaks out, with cynical disregard of decency, the whole ugly conspiracy. It is direct, horribly plain, and imperative. There is a perfect nest of sins hissing and coiled together in it. Hypocrisy calling religion in to attest a lie, subornation of evidence, contempt for the poor tools who are to perjure themselves, consciousness that such work will only be done by worthless men, cool lying, ferocity, and murder,--these are a pretty company to crowd into half a dozen lines. Most detestable of all is the plain speaking which shows her hardened audacity and conscious defiance of all right. To name sin by its true name, and then to do it without a quiver, is a depth of evil reached by few men, and perhaps fewer women.

The plot gives a colour of legality, which is probably often unobserved by readers. Naboth was to be accused of treason: renouncing God and the king; and that was, according to the law of Moses, a charge which, if proved, merited capital punishment. But it is Satan accusing sin for Jezebel, the Baal worshipper, who had done her best to root out the name of Jehovah, to accuse Naboth of departing from God. Much highhanded oppression must have gone before such outspoken contempt of justice; and, if Ahab represents the fatal connection of weakness and wickedness, Jezebel is an instance of the fatal audacity with which a strong character may come, by long indulgence in self-willed gratification of its own desires, to trample down all obstacles and go crashing through all laws, human and divine. The climax of sin is to see a deed to be sinful, and to do it all the same. Such a pre-eminence in evil is not reached at a bound, but it can be reached; and every indulgence in passion, and every gratifying of desire against which conscience protests, is a step toward it. Therefore, if we shrink from such a goal, let us turn away from the paths that lead to it. No mortal man is supremely foul all at once. Therefore resist the beginnings of evil. Elijah was strong by natural temperament, and so was Jezebel. But the strength of the prophet was hallowed by obedience, and, like some great river, poured blessings where it flowed. Jezebel's strength was lawless, and foamed itself away in fury, like some devastating torrent that spreads ruin whithersoever it bursts out. Be strong is good advice, but it needs the supplement, Let all your deeds be done in charity, and the foundation, Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.

**III. The last set of actors in this pitiful tragedy are the subserviently wicked elders.**

The narrative sets their slavish compliance in a strong light. It puts emphasis on the tie between them and Naboth, in that they dwelt in his city, and so should have had neighbourly feeling. It lays stress on their cowardly motive and their complete execution of orders, both by reiterating that they acted as Jezebel had sent and as it was written, and by taking the letter clause by clause, in the narrative of the shameful parody of justice which they acted. It suggests both their eagerness to do her pleasure, and her impatient waiting, in her palace, by the message sent in hot haste as soon as the brave peasant proprietor was dead. It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope, as the proverb has it. No doubt these cowards were afraid for their own necks, and were too near the royal tigress to venture disobedience. But their swift, unremonstrating, and complete obedience indicates the depth of degradation and corruption to which they and the nation had sunk, and the terror exercised by their upstart king and his Sidonian wife.

Cowardice is always contemptible, and wickedness is always odious; but when the two come together, and a man has no other reason for his sin than I was afraid, each makes the other blacker. Israel had cast off the fear of the Lord, which would have preserved it from the ignoble terror of men, and the consequence was that it trembled before an angry, unscrupulous woman. It had revolted from Rehoboam and his foolish bluster about whips and scorpions, and the consequence was a worse slavery. If we fear God, we need have no other fear. The sun puts out a fire. If we rebel against Him, we do not become free, but fall under a heavy yoke. It is never prudent to do wrong. The worst consequences of resistance to powerful evil are easier to bear than those of compliance, though it may seem the safer. Better be lying dead beneath a heap of stones, like the sturdy Naboth, who could say No to a king, than be one of his stoners, who killed their innocent neighbour to pleasure Jezebel!

Her indecent triumph at the success of the plot, and her utter callousness, are expressed in her words to Ahab, in which the main point is the taking possession of the vineyard. The death of its owner is told with exultation, as being nothing but the sweeping aside of an obstacle. Ahab asks no questions as to how this opportune clearing away of hindrance came about. He knew, no doubt, well enough that there had been foul play; but that does not matter to him, and such a trifle as murder does not slacken his glad haste to get his new toy. There was other red on the vines than their clustering grapes, as he soon found out, when Elijah's grim figure, like an embodied conscience, met him there. Whoever reaches out to grasp a fancied good by breaking God's law, may get his good, but he will get more than he expected along with it,--even an accusing voice that prophesies evil. Elijah strides among the leafy vines in the field bought by crime. Ahab meant to make it a garden of pot-herbs. Surely the bitter wormwood of divine revenge grew abundantly therein.