

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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1 Kings 21:1-10,(11-14),15-21a

NRSV

King Ahab ruled Israel, the northern kingdom, ca 870-850 BC from the city of "Samaria" (v. 1). Israel has been a vassal state of Syria ("Aram", 20:1). Ben-hadad, King of Aram, has laid siege to Samaria. He has insisted on plundering the city, but Ahab, after taking advice, has refused. A battle has ensued. Chapter 20 contrasts the two sides: (1) Ben-hadad, drunk, has given impulsive orders; (2) Ahab, offered God's support by a prophet, has consulted him on strategy and has taken his advice. It is probably hand-picked commandos that have routed the Syrians. Ahab has been a fine military commander, in God's favour. In a second battle (at "Aphak", 20:26), Israel draws the Syrian hill-fighters into the plain. Again Ahab consults while Ben-hadad blusters. Against overwhelming numbers, Israel wins. Ahab captures Ben-hadad and spares his life in exchange for the return of land and trading privileges. But Ahab loses God's favour for, in a holy war, the spoils belong to God: Ben-hadad was not Ahab's to set free.

Now Ahab commits unforgivable sins. He offers Naboth a choice of either other land or money for his vineyard (21:2). Both legally and by religious custom, the vineyard must remain in Naboth's family ("ancestral inheritance", 21:3). Ahab shows that he knows both the Law (21:4a) and the custom (21:4b). Ahab's wife, Jezebel, hatches a plot (21:7), on the pretext that the King of Israel is God's agent. She tells those in authority ("elders ... nobles", 21:8) to "proclaim a fast" (21:9, to sort out a serious problem). In the Law, two witnesses were required to bring a charge of blasphemy; the offender then died by stoning. These two "scoundrels" (21:10) so charge Naboth. Later they tell Jezebel that they have done what she asked (21:14). Presumably the property of a man stoned to death was forfeit to the crown. Now Elijah enters the picture (21:17). God sends him to prophesy to Ahab (21:19): his fate will be the same as Naboth's (21:21-22). In 22:34, 37 a stray arrow strikes Ahab, who dies from his wounds.

Psalm 5:1-8

NRSV

The psalmist seeks delivery from personal enemies; he cries for help (vv. 1-2). Perhaps after a night vigil ("in the morning", v. 3), he *pleads his case* to God and awaits judgement ("watch"). He is sure that God has no place for evil (v. 3), that God hates "all evildoers" (v. 5). God's "house" (v. 7), his "temple", is open to all the obedient because of his enduring love. May God lead the psalmist in godly ways.

From vv. 9-10, it appears that ungodly people have laid a formal charge against the psalmist. (Evil was believed to arise from "open graves".) May the ungodly "bear their guilt" (v. 10), for they have turned against God. May God give the

godly cause for rejoicing; may he protect those who know him. ("Your name", v. 11, is equivalent to *you*, for knowing a name implied knowing a person.) May God favour the faithful!

Galatians 2:15-21

NRSV

Earlier, Peter has visited, eaten with, and baptised Cornelius' household but now, under pressure from conservative Jewish Christians, he no longer eats with Gentiles. Paul has challenged him for "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). He has asked Peter: "how can you compel ... [Gentile Christians] to live like Jews?"

Paul now puts forward a (complex) logical proposition. He and Peter ("we", v. 15) are Jews with access to Mosaic Law (unlike "Gentile sinners", i.e. pagans), yet we know that a right relationship ("justified", v. 16) with God comes not through acting per the Law but through faith. One can't attain oneness with God through such acts ("no one ..."). Logically (v. 17), if in pursuing this oneness ("our effort"), we have done something sinful (i.e. eating with Gentiles), isn't Christ sinful too? Of course not, for two reasons: (1) Were I to revert to living by the Law ("build up", v. 18), I would show that I sinned by living by faith; and (2) an interpretation of the Law ("through the law", v. 19) led to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' death led me to abandon ("died to") the Law, so that I may truly "live to God", sharing in the cross. Surely this is not sinful! Living in Christ has reshaped my very being (v. 20), from self- to Christ-centred. Those who would have Christians obey the Law "nullify the grace of God" (v. 21) by diminishing the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice, to the extent that "Christ died for nothing": I don't do this.

Luke 7:36-8:3

NRSV

Jesus is reclining at the table of a Pharisee called "Simon" (v. 40). While someone arriving uninvited looks odd to us, Mark 1:33 and 2:2 show that a home was not particularly private. Guests reclined with their legs stretched out away from the table, so the woman could reach Jesus' feet easily. She may have intended to anoint Jesus' head (7:46, a sign of regard); perhaps she is overcome with humility and gratitude for his good news. Simon follows the rules of hospitality but she honours Jesus specially (7:45-46; "ointment" was much more costly than "oil".) In 7:39 Simon means: *a prophet would have known she was a sinner; knowing this, he would have avoided her touching him, making him ritually unclean.*

Jesus' story elicits the correct answer from Simon (7:43). The woman's great love and actions show that her many sins "have been" (7:47) forgiven. In contrast, Simon's actions show little love. Jesus' forgiveness (7:48) articulates what is already clear, but he goes further: "faith" (7:50) is central to forgiveness. Jesus' fellow guests say: *this guy is more than a prophet; he even forgives sins!* (7:49) In 8:1-3, that women accompanied Jesus would be strange (in fact, scandalous) in those days. Jesus has healed Mary Magdalene from total ("seven", 8:2) possession by evil forces. "The kingdom of God" (8:1) is both proclaimed in word and carried in their hearts. (Herod's "steward", 8:3, was the manager of his estate.)

