

# **“From Elijah to Jesus” by Pat Conover**

**June 12, 2016**



## **Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

[This is a much improved revision for written distribution, June 14, 2016.]

Based on story of Naboth's Vineyard in I Kings 21

Those of you shared the theology class with me on learning to think and feel theologically may be interested in the progression of reframed concepts and images in this sermon. My guide to the sequential reframing is consideration and reconsideration of what matters and what matters most in the story of Naboth's Vineyard.

On its face, Naboth's Vineyard is a straightforward story of corruption and manipulated murder. King Ahab is presented as a weak petulant king and Jezebel is presented as the conniving murderous woman behind the throne. Naboth as victim and Elijah as the heroic prosecuting attorney and judge complete the human voices in the story.

If you want to keep it simple that's it. Do good according to the guidance of religious authorities.

If you want to understand and appreciate what “good” is, what is valuable in the guidance, and why one might honor religious authorities, perhaps this sermon will help.

Elijah is the dominant character in Kings. The story is one example of the narrative of Elijah as heroic prophet. The book of Kings is part of Deuteronomist Histories that include Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. Joshua and Judges lead up to the Davidic Kingdom. Samuel tells the story of that kingdom with strong criticisms of King David and high praise for Solomon as the Wise Judge who built the Temple and thus established temple based Hebrew religion. Detailed descriptions of the temple and temple practices tell us how important the temple and its rituals were for the priestly authors. Kings picks up the story of the Northern Alliance of ten Tribes after the inter-tribal war that broke up the Kingdom of David, broke away from Jerusalem Temple controlled religion for Judaism carried by Levites embedded in the tribes.

In the story of Naboth’s Vineyard, God’s voice is presented through Elijah’s mouth. Elijah is imaged as having a *special* relationship with God which gives him *special* healing powers and *special* authority to speak as God’s voice. Reminds me of the Moses narrative and the Jesus narrative.

Elijah speaks as prosecutor and judge doing God’s will. The punishment of Ahab will be that dogs will lick up his blood. God will act to kill Ahab and he will die in disgrace with no one to honor his body. The punishment is to be the same for Jezebel. Furthermore, all traces of the Omri dynasty were to be wiped out. Twenty-two years later Jehu, Ahab’s General of the army leads a rebellion against Jehoram Ahab’s son. then King. Jehu then declares himself king. Eunuchs then throw Jezebel out a window to her death and her body is left to the dogs.

Elijah explains his blame of Ahab. He tells Ahab he made God angry and caused Israel to sin.

The story of Naboth's Vineyard is about Ahab's sin, Jezebel's sin, the scoundrels sin, and the collusive sin of the city elders. But what did Ahab do that caused *Israel* to sin?

Part of the path to an answer begins with understanding the difference between the historical King Ahab and the image of Ahab in this story.

Ahab ruled in Samaria in the tribal territory of Issachar for twenty-two years from about 872 to 850 bce. He led an alliance with the other nine Northern Hebrew tribes. The Northern Kingdom was not a highly centralized and controlled reality like later feudal versions of kingdoms. There were two main uniting forces of the alliance. The first was an alliance army to protect alliance territory. This army was more like a ready reserve than a standing army.

The second uniting force was Hebrew religion carried by Levites embedded in the tribes. Samaria had a worship center but it was not the only worship center in the Northern Alliance. The Ninth Century bce Levites contributed to, copied, and edited the first scrolls of the J and E sources that became the core documents Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, and wrote Leviticus. They were writing down foundational oral narrative, arranging them and interpreting them for what was important for them after the breakup of into the Northern and Southern alliances. They began shaping Judaism as a religion of the Book. The Book for them was a four scroll proto-Torah.

Ahab was the strongest of the kings in the history of the breakaway Northern tribal alliance. He built a fortified city in Samaria on a hill in the Jezreel valley as his capital and his military base.

The Jezreel Valley was a fertile agricultural valley and the Northern Alliance also had access to fish from the Sea of Galilee, an important protein source in a food referenced economy. The Jezreel Valley controlled a stretch of a major

trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Tigris-Euphrates area that became Babylon. Taxing the trade caravans, and trading via the trade caravans, contributed to a strong economy. The Jezreel Valley was also a valley of strategic military importance where many battles had been fought and many more would be fought.

The Northern Alliance was strong enough under Ahab's rule to enjoy a mostly peaceful twenty-two years. Part of that strength was two alliances with neighboring nations. He inherited one alliance with King Jehoshaphat of Judah from his father Omri. Perhaps this alliance is better described as a shifting understanding with a variety of intrigues between Northern and Southern families. In any case they were not actively fighting each other during Ahab's reign.

Ahab married Jezebel as a typical move for sealing an alliance with the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were an advanced Canaanite culture controlling the Mediterranean coast with strongholds in the port cities of Tyre and Sidon. The Phoenicians had horses, chariots, iron, and sailing ships for Mediterranean trade. They invented the phonetic alphabet I am speaking with. This three part alliance, later joined by a rising Babylon, was sufficient to resist the Assyrian regional Empire for one hundred and thirty years.

Let me be clear that I make no excuses for some of the bad religious practices of Ahab reasonably influenced by Jezebel. They built a temple of Baal and allowed the burying of a followers first born child and then his youngest son as sacrifices to strengthen foundation in the rebuilding of Jericho. (I Kings 16:34)

I noticed that Elijah accepts the legitimacy of Ahab and the Northern Alliance. The blame is for misusing his power and authority to cause Israel, (the Northern Alliance) to sin. This places Elijah as accepting a Judaism that is dispersed and locally focused with Levitic religious leadership in the

tribes. This is keeping with the foundational narratives of Abraham and Moses in Torah before the tribes moved into Canaan and began integrating with Canaanite religion. Blaming Jezebel is another example of attacking Baal religion in the interests of Hebrew referenced to the narratives of Abraham and Moses.

Elijah speaks his embodiment of angry Yahweh, the jealous God of the Second of the Ten Commandments attributed to Moses.

Elijah confronts Ahab. Ahab confesses and repents. Elijah modifies the punishment of Ahab but not of Jezebel. This is to show that God is both just and merciful. Ahab's recognition of Elijah's religious authority ameliorates the anger of Elijah speaking as God.

The Deuteronomist author paints Jezebel as the active enemy.

Ahab is presented as merely weak and petulant. Ahab merely tried to get the vineyard by offering a fair price or exchange for another vineyard. Ahab was merely guilty of acting like a powerful businessman. (Reminds me of a certain businessman who fought to get New Jersey to use its right of eminent domain to seize the property of a widow who would not sell it to him and then give it to him so he could build a more expansive casino.) Jezebel colludes with scoundrels and city elders to murder Naboth and appropriate the Vineyard. We can think of this as Jezebel claiming a de facto royal right of eminent domain. In the story Jezebel acts with royal power to nullify the tribal base for private ownership of land.

The Levites kept the tribal records and defended the rights of landowners, including setting and interpreting the rules of inheritance. The Levitic claim to authority was based on a speculated covenant with Yahweh beginning with Abraham, adjusted a bit with Moses, and problematically developed with David. The Abraham stories culminate with establishing a covenant claim to the Promised LAND." This claim to ancestral authority is referenced to YHWH and not to a Canaanite god.

Tribal allegiance and tribal alliances were crucial for the

Hebrews as nomads, crucial for defeating Amorites, Edomites, and Moabites to take their agricultural land. The covenant stories justify the claim to Canaanite land as representing the triumph of YHWH over Canaanite gods. This supposedly justifies their right to captured land as ancestral land because made a covenant with the tribes as a special and chosen people. After conquering Canaan a tribal conclave divides up the land among the tribes with the least favored tribes getting wilderness land on the other side of Jordan. This constituting agreement turns promises and claims into law. The Levites were the keepers of that law.

When Jezebel disregarded the ancestral land right of Naboth she was attacking the foundational covenant claims constructed and defended by the Levites as a special deal with God. They were the chosen people and the Canaanites were not.

The historical reality is that Hebrew and Canaanite religions become mixed up together after the tribal alliances fought their way across the Jordan River and became farmers instead of nomads.

Canaanite religion was a fertility focused religion with ceremonies of planting and harvest in a culture and society economically based on land and agriculture. The Canaanite Top God was named El and his consort was Asherah. They showed their fertility by producing seventy or more Elohim as lesser Gods in the Canaanite pantheon. Baal was a leading figure of the Elohim.

The gods were related to locations and land in keeping with common animist religions that explained all sorts of things with references to benevolent, mischievous, or hostile spirits. I think of polytheism as a first level attempt at integrating human experience of experiences of Spirit with constructed concepts and images that are real as constructs of human imagination, real as magical human knowledge, real as foci for human motives such as wanting hostile spirits to

leave them alone, and wanting benevolent spirits to give their blessings. This understanding links polytheism to land and location.

Torah is full of polytheistic Canaanite references in addition to preserving religious guidance as the laws of Moses. The Hebrew referential grounding includes narratives of slavery, exodus, covenants, family in-fighting and other bad behavior, and wandering in the wilderness as nomads with flocks of sheep and goats.

The Canaanite referential grounding includes agricultural festivals of planting and harvest. More significantly, Canaanite names of God show up as Hebrew names of God. The most important of those names is El, the top god of the Canaanite pantheon.

When you read “most high” God as English translation of Hebrew Scripture you are probably reading the name El Shaddai. Most high has at least a double meaning. El Shaddai places the father progenitor of the Canaanite pantheon as a god of mountains. Since mountain top fortresses were crucial for defense of agricultural territory when ravaging hordes swept in, El Shaddai was also a god of war. Think of fortified Mount Zion and the fortified hill top of Ahab in the Jezreel Valley. The name El shows up all over the place in names of people such as Dani-el and places such as Beth-el. Jezeb-el is a name related to a Canaanite ceremony when Baal is understood as going to the underworld

In contrast, we also have the Hebrew name of God as YHWH, a name not to be spoken aloud, a tradition that recognizes that people cannot adequately symbolize God. This points to Hebrew God as only God and not just most high God. Syncretism brings theological conflicts and we have a whopper conflict story in the tale of Naboth’s Vineyard.

Borrowing Canaanite names and traditions is not the same as

recognizing the authority of Canaanite religious authority. Luther's German Princes, for example, fought a breakaway war from the Holy Roman Empire.

It is not easy to sustain an alliance when both parties think they have a god-given right to rule, when both parties think their God is better and stronger than other gods. Taking competition between gods seriously only makes sense when both sides are referencing a many-gods paradigm. Turning toward monotheism supports understanding religious conflicts as conflicts about how people understand their relationships to one God, rather than my god is better and stronger than your god.

Only God or Top God, we have inherited the Jewish version of specialness. It shows up in the Christian Testament as the claims of Paul and the gospel authors that they, and not other Jews, are the true inheritors of the covenantal promises and special favor of Yahweh.

The claim to specialness in Jewish or Christian form has had devastating destructive consequences. The claim justified the "ethnic cleansing" against Canaanite tribes we read about in Samuel. In Kings it justifies the massacre of Baal priests led by Elijah. In contemporary Israel, Jewish orthodox triumphalism claims a god-given right to the land of Palestine and justifies Zionist repression of Palestinians including stealing their land and claiming the right to all the water of Jordan River. Christian specialness disasters include the Crusades of the Middle Ages, the clearing away of "Indian savages" by European settlers in North America, Nineteenth Century justifications for colonialism round the world by European powers, and the current Neocon themes of American exceptionalism referenced to the United States imaged in religious terms as a Christian nation. Recognizing and appreciating one God known as Creator and Spirit supports ecumenical and inter-faith conversation and cooperation.



Jesus is not our Savior because he is a special God, not because he is an elohim-like offspring of YHWH, not because he has special status to speak for God like Elijah. I adore Jesus as Savior because he inspires me and guides me to recognizing my experiences of God knowable as Spirit, guides me into faith that the gifts of Spirit are guidance to what matters most in the life I have been given by Creator God. Jesus points to what is available for free to everyone, to what is already possible, to what already happens in people even though they name their experiences differently, even though they choose diverse concepts and images to interpret and express their spiritual experiences.

Disposing of the guidance of specialness, whether grounded in speculated ancestral covenants or Canaanite fertility referenced polytheism, is a good start in reframing theology as understanding our relationships with God. The two aspects of God we human can come to know are the aspects named as Creator and Spirit. I claim Jesus as my Savior because he has inspired me and guided me to live into noticing, exploring, engaging, embracing, embodying, and responding to what matters and what matters most. I have little or no interest in arguing about whether the Jesus Way, much less the Christian Way, is the only path to salvation. I stand with the prophets rather than the defenders when it comes time to confront the evil actions of Christendom done in the name of specialness or other bad theology; when it comes time to confront all the evil actions done by Christians who have syncretic relationships with idolatrous cultural themes including racism, patriarchy, greed, homophobia and transphobia.

We can discern that the Deuteronomist author is a Levite in the Jeremiah "school" that addresses the concerns of exile by claiming that both the Northern Alliance and later the Southern Alliance are destroyed by foreign rulers who are bringing the deserved punishment of YHWH for making foreign alliances and worshiping foreign gods. In the story of

Naboth's Vineyard ancestral rights to land matters and religious *purity* matters more.

The emphasis on religious purity is carried forward in the Book of Jeremiah who has to deal with what it means to be faithful in exile, as well as what it meant to be without political authority or religious control by the remnants left behind. Focusing on Torah had the benefit for exile and remnant audiences of focusing on the narratives of Abraham and Moses rather than on the regional empire of David and Solomon. Their Deuteronomic History books tell us about the sins of Saul, David, and the alliance kings, including Ahab. This supports reframing Judaism as a religion of the Torah, controlled by Levites, rather than a religion of the land centered in the Jerusalem temple. That includes no need for a Baal fertility religion.

They succeeded in constructing a decentralized religion. They kept the covenantal promises in their back pockets in case they regained military and political control. They also began to spiritualize the covenant promises in the form of an apocalyptic Judgment Day when God would enter history, punish their enemies, and directly guide the chosen people. And, for those who wore out in waiting for the end of days there was the promise of living again in Heaven after death where the righteous are rewarded with the Presence of God and everyone else goes to Hell. Becoming a people of the Torah supported small scale religion that could be practiced in homes and small gatherings without getting in trouble by displaying political pretensions.

Jesus inherited this approach to Judaism which by his time was established in synagogues where traditional prayers were said and where Torah was read, interpreted, and debated. As a rabbi, Jesus was prepared to be a leader in such settings.

Jesus was influenced by John the Baptist who offered *purification* by reframing the traditional mikvah baths as baptism. One could become pure without propitiating God by

offering sacrifices in the temple. That amounts to a direct theological attack on temple Judaism, and a direct economic and political attack on colluding Jerusalem priests and kings.

With this in mind it is hardly surprising that Jesus in Galilee, North of Samaria, was critical of Temple Judaism in Judah which reeked of corruption and collusion with foreign kings. Among other things, Jesus offered a theology that had revolutionary, if quiet, implications. I mean religious, economic, and political revolutions based in recognizing what matters and what matters most. To balance off my sense of decentralized Judaism, it helps me to remember that there were a lot of synagogues in Jerusalem and two competing rabbinic “schools” which prepared synagogue leaders.

Jesus as Rabbi interpreted Torah for his close followers and crowds. His interpretation of Torah guidance followed the tradition of Hillel in emphasizing the “spirit of the law” in contrast to the guidance of the Shammai “school” that emphasized purity as keeping kosher as an expansions of the “laws of Moses.”

I suggest that those of us who are citizens and can vote have governance responsibilities. That puts us in the place in of both Ahab and Elijah. We are faced with making difficult compromises and we are challenged to become critics of our choices. The difficulties of choosing priorities and of estimating the outcomes of choices leads us to be humble Ahabs. In this presidential campaign season we can learn from Elijah to pay attention to character, and consider whose interests various candidates will serve. We can learn from Jesus to look at the needs of the world through the eyes of widows, orphans, and other people who have the greatest needs.

Even if this election ends up ruining the United States, we can continue to notice the guidance of Spirit in our own lives, for creating Christian community with our companions, and for coping with the hard moments and hard situations we

live through. Nothing can take away the path Jesus has opened to here and now salvation. It was a path to salvation for Jesus and his close followers in the hardest of hard times.END  
OF SERMON

#### ADDITION OF SOME OF THE STUFF LEFT OUT OF MY ORAL SERMON

So, who were the Deuteronomists that completed the first edition of the Torah, who wrote the Deuteronomist histories, who contributed to the perspectives of Jeremiah and other Ninth Century prophets?

The answer begins with Assyria's defeat of the Northern Alliance in 722 bce. The Levites embedded in the ten Northern tribes fled to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem they formed relationships with Jerusalem elites, in part because the elites were also critical of their kings. In 640 bce they jointly pull off a coup against King Amon and replaced him with an eight year old boy raised in a priestly family. The boy-King Josiah is then much praised as a good king by the Levites now reinvented and in control as Jerusalem priests. This was a priestly victory over kings of the the Southern Alliance, a theocratic takeover unburdened by competition between central and tribal authority. The Southern Alliance was pretty much the tribe of Judah with Benjamin as a junior partner. The Hebrew religion became the Judah-ish religion.

We get the stories of the Northern Alliance and Elijah because the the Deuteronomist Levite/Priests cared about the history and fate of Israel and wanted to warn Judah against the impurity of worship that would make Yahweh angry with Judah and bring the same punishment of Assyrian domination.

Fear of Assyria wasn't speculative. Assyria was trying to defeat Judah and repeatedly ravaged Judah. However, Assyria was never able to conquer the better defended fortress city of Zion, the City of David, Jerusalem. Judah was able to resist

the Assyrians in part by at least sort of allying with the rising Babylonian Empire. The priests were eager to warn of the dangers of foreign alliances. They had a point. Babylon turned on Judah and defeated Jerusalem leading to a sequence of exiles beginning in 597 bce. As for the defeat of the Northern Alliance by the Assyrians, the defeat of Judah was explained as the punishment of bad kings and their supporters who made foreign alliances and wouldn't listen to Jeremiah or other prophets.

When you read in English, "Most High God" you are referencing El Shaddai, A Canaanite God also claimed as Hebrew God. With this in mind lets reconsider the first two of the Ten Commandments attributed to Moses.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have *no other gods before Me*.

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to *them* nor serve *them*. For *I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My Commandments.

The transition from El Shaddai as Most High God to Yahweh reframed as the only God might seem subtle to some but it is theologically pivotal.

When you read the Ten Commandments with a monotheistic frame of reference you have a fundamental challenge to the framework of specialness. If you take monotheism seriously you have to ask about the relationship between everyone and God, not just Jews and God, not just Christians and God. The Jesus Way, and then the Christian Way, is based on the good news of salvation

that is available to everyone. This points to evangelism based on listening to people as they work with their spiritual challenges in relating to God before you show upon the scene. This is not evangelism as a special deal if only you will change your beliefs to agree with me.

In verse 23 of our story we get the judgment of Elijah that he has broken the second of the Ten Commandments by “most abominably in going after *idols*.” This is different than the critique that Ahab worshiped Baal, another God. This is the monotheistic charge that Baal is no god at all, just an idol. Monotheism doesn’t end the disaster of specialness grounded in speculated covenants. But verse 23 raises the questions of what we have turned into idols in our day.

In that regard you might start by having a look at Jezebel.com, or reconsider the theology of the TV show “Idol.” One of the dangers is turning clergy or some other Christian leader into an idol, according them some *special* status which makes them not like the rest of us. We can hold them accountable to standards that don’t apply to the rest of us. We can come to be ministered to rather than to minister. We can conform to guidance without having to understand and appreciate it. With this in mind I suggest that we need Jesus as our Savior, not as our idol.