

THE KING AND THE READER

HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS ON 1 KINGS 20–21

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Summary

1 Kings 20–21 offers a critical portrayal of Ahab as a king who practices neither mercy, nor justice in his dealings with his subjects but who strives to present a public image of himself as a king of mercy and justice. His character would have been seen by the exilic/post-exilic readership of the book of Kings as prefiguring their own experience of judgement and providing them with a model of repentance in the face of inevitable doom.

1. Introduction

King Ahab is one of the well-known villains of the Deuteronomistic history. His shortcomings as promoter of idolatry, persecutor of prophets, husband of Jezebel, and oppressor of the weak are explored in a number of narratives stretching from 1 Kings 16 to 22. In view of his negative portrayal, it is not a surprise that modern readers have usually not warmed up to him and have sought to identify themselves with one of the other, more positive, characters in the story. Reading the text of Kings from such a perspective almost inevitably leads to taking Ahab as a representative of the hostile and evil world opposed to everything good and pure. This is well illustrated by several recent attempts to relate the account of 1 Kings 21 to the experience of the contemporary reader. Hens-Piazza, for example, comments as follows:

In our own world, the same misuse of power discourages the buildup of the human community. Large corporations often manipulate legal codes and practices in order to squeeze small businesses out of existence. Powerful governments slash budgets, depriving citizens of basic needs while satisfying the desire for further luxuries among those at the top.

First-world countries already controlling a great deal of the earth's natural resources often negotiate inequitable deals or exert military pressure in order to control even more resources belonging to the needy two-thirds world.¹

Similarly, Richard Nelson says:

The community which accepts this story (i.e. 1 Kings 21) as Scripture must read its newspapers and then ask itself the hard questions. Who are the Ahabs and Jezebels? Who are the Naboths? What is the shape of the conspiracy this time? ... The community of faith must always ask if it is functioning as Elijah, bearing the word of God to governments and corporations. Or is it playing Ahab's role, sharing in Jezebel's responsibility by permissive silence and quietism?²

According to this reading governments and corporations stand for the wicked royal family and the story is an encouragement to the believing community, invited to identify itself with Elijah, to present the ruling powers with a prophetic challenge to repent and mend their evil ways. A somewhat different way of reading the story in the present is suggested by Leithart:

The story is an allegory ... Naboth represents the faithful within Israel holding onto the promise to Abraham and the inheritance given by Yahweh ... Throughout the centuries the blood of the righteous has been spilled on the earth ... As many as 160,000 Christians have been killed every year since 1990 ... The blood of the martyrs cries out for vengeance against the persecutors of Christ, his bride, and his gospel. That cry will be heard; that blood will be avenged.³

Here the believing community is identified with Naboth and the story is read not as a call to social action but as encouragement in the midst of persecution. The underlying idea, however, that Ahab and Jezebel represent the hostile, sinful world remains the same.

In what follows I would like to explore an alternative way of engaging with the narratives about the wicked Israelite king. In order to do this I will first explore in some detail the image of Ahab presented in chapters 20–21 and then try to imagine the ways in which this image might have been understood and utilised by the first generations of readers of the book of Kings.

¹ G. Hens-Piazza, *1–2 Kings* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) 211.

² R. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation; Westminster John Knox Press, 1987) 145.

³ P. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible; London: SCM, 2006) 156–57.

2. The (Un)just and (Un)merciful King Unmasked

Chapter 20 narrates two invasions by the king of Damascus Ben-hadad into Israelite territory. Ahab defeats twice the invading Arameans against apparently impossible odds. He has YHWH consistently on his side, receives and follows prophetic instructions (20:13-15, 22, 28) and reaps the fruits of divinely ordained victory. Twice with the promise of victory Ahab hears the statement ‘and you shall know that I am the Lord’ (20:13, 28). This statement ties in chapter 20 with the preceding Elijah narratives (17:24; 18:37) and establishes an important theological connection with them. King Ahab is promised to come to know the Lord as a result of YHWH’s intervention in his conflict with Damascus in the same way as the widow of Zarephath came to know the Lord after the resurrection of her son and the people of Israel professed faith when fire fell from heaven on the altar at Mount Carmel.⁴

This positive picture of the king is subverted in the final episode of chapter 20.⁵ After the last battle Ahab makes a treaty with the defeated Aramean king Ben-hadad and allows him to go in peace (20:31-34). A prophet pretending to be a wounded soldier waits by the road and when the king passes by he cries out to him (20:39). The verb ‘cried out to’ (צָעַק אֶל־) has the general meaning of crying for help, especially in the context of oppression, suffering, or need. In other places in Kings it is used to refer to appeals to the king for intervention and assistance (2 Kgs 6:26; 8:3) and presumably a similar situation is depicted here.⁶ The ‘soldier’ presents the king with a story which uses the genre of ‘petitionary narrative’, defined by Schipper as ‘extra-judicial appeals by parties that seek relief from legal but oppressive conditions.’⁷ The narrative goes as follows. During the battle the petitioner was entrusted with the safekeeping of a prisoner with the understanding that if he lost him he would have to either pay one talent of silver or his life would be

⁴ Some scholars think that already at the end of chapter 18 Ahab is portrayed as one who repents and turns to YHWH and is invited to participate in a covenant renewal ceremony (18:41; cf. Exod. 24:4-11); R.L. Cohn, ‘The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17–19’, *JBL* 101 (1982) 333-50, esp. 341, 348; cf. Leithart, *Kings*, 136-37; M. Cogan, *1 Kings* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 445.

⁵ For what follows I am indebted to the study of J. Schipper, ‘From Petition to Parable: The Prophet’s Use of Genre in 1 Kings 20:38-42’, *CBQ* 71 (2009) 264-74.

⁶ *TDOT* 4:117. Contrast Konkel who allows the possibility that here it is simply a ‘call for attention (because of apparent need)’; *NIDOTTE* 3:827 (#7590 p.1).

⁷ Schipper, ‘From Petition to Parable’, 267.

in the place of the life of the prisoner (v. 39). The ‘soldier’, however, was ‘busy here and there’⁸ and suddenly the man was no more (v. 40). One assumes the prisoner capitalised on the distraction of his guard and managed to escape. This is as far as the story goes but the use of the verb ‘to cry out to’ and the genre of ‘petitionary narrative’ suggest an implicit plea for mercy. The ‘soldier’ is in effect asking the king to release him from the oppressive obligations of the agreement. Ahab’s statement in verse 40 ‘this is your sentence, you have decided it yourself’ must be taken to mean that Ahab refuses to intervene and states that the terms of the original agreement, ‘his life for your life’, must be upheld.

At this point the prophet reveals his true identity and declares that because Ahab has let Ben-hadad, the ‘man of my *herem*’ (אִישׁ־חֶרֶמִּי), go his life will be in place of the life of the Aramean king (v. 42). Many scholars have understood this as a condemnation of Ahab’s breach of the sacral rules of *herem* similar to the actions of Saul in 1 Samuel 15 who did not destroy the Amalekite king as he had been commanded. The prophet’s parable in verses 39-40, much like Nathan’s famous parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-4, aims simply to unwittingly trick the king into pronouncing judgement upon himself. According to Jones the story seeks to ‘demonstrate the point that if such a punishment followed the breach of a legal contract, how much more the penalty for breaking sacral law.’⁹ The main fault of Ahab, according to this reading, is the decision to let Ben-hadad go. This, however, is problematic in view of the fact that, in contrast to Saul, at no point in the earlier narrative is Ahab informed that he is engaged in holy war and is under the obligations of *herem*. Prophets appear repeatedly before him with instructions how to conduct battle and with promises as to its outcome but none of them informs him of YHWH’s

⁸ For the meaning of עָשָׂה ‘to be busy’ see *DCH* 6:581 col. 2; *HALOT* 2:891 col. 2. In addition *HALOT* 2:893 col. 1 postulates עָשָׂה IV with the meaning ‘to turn’, while LXX translates here ‘looked around’ (περιεβλέψατο).

⁹ G.H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (NCBC; Grand Rapids and London: Eerdmans and Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984) 349. See also Wiseman, *Kings*, 179-80; V. Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 208; I.W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 153-54; B.O. Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature* (FOTL IX; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 221-22.

will that Ben-hadad should perish and of the king's responsibilities in this regard.¹⁰

A much more satisfactory interpretation of the chapter is proposed by Schipper who argues that the whole point of the narrative has to do not so much with Ahab's decision to let Ben-hadad go but with his response to the petition of the soldier. Ahab's treatment of the Aramean king was lenient and generous (vv. 31–34). Instead of repaying Ben-hadad's earlier arrogance with humiliation, or even death, Ahab concludes a treaty with him and lets him go. He lives up to the reputation of the kings of Israel as being 'merciful kings' (v. 31). Against the background of this event a prophet, disguised as a soldier, aims to test Ahab by presenting him with another opportunity to exercise disinterested mercy. Both the Aramean king and the Israelite soldier were in the wrong. Damascus had repeatedly attacked Israel and insulted its king, the soldier had not carried out faithfully the task entrusted to him. Both of them appear before him with petitions for mercy which bear some remarkable similarities.¹¹ One would expect that if Ahab had the generosity to spare the life of a mortal enemy he would be lenient towards one of his own servants. In view of all this the king's judgement sounds harsh. He upholds the terms of the original agreement 'your life shall be in place of his life' and does not grant mercy to the soldier. This prompts the reader to revisit the previous episode and question Ahab's earlier display of mercy. Now it becomes clear that there were probably ulterior motives at play. Ahab's generosity was motivated by the desire to have formerly captured territories returned to him and to win trading concessions from Damascus (v. 34). His mercy was nothing more than a cover for a desire for profit. When the incentives are removed mercy goes out of

¹⁰ E. Würthwein, *Die Bücher der Könige I Kön. 17 – 2. Kön. 25* (ATD, 11,2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984) 243, suggests that the war, depicted in the earlier account as a secular event, has been subsequently reinterpreted by the addition of vv. 38–42 as holy war. If this was indeed the intention, one wonders why at the same time a command to the king to devote everything to destruction was not introduced somewhere in the text.

¹¹ The Syrians gird themselves with sackcloth and put ropes on their heads to evoke the king's sympathy (vv. 31–32), the prophet-soldier appears before the king wounded (v. 37) with a 'bandage' over his eyes (v. 38); both Ben-hadad and the soldier are referred to as 'your [i.e. Ahab's] servant' (עֶבְדְּךָ; v. 32 and v. 40); they both plead for their life (נַפְשִׁי; vv. 31, 32, 39, 40) and both the prophet and the Syrian ambassadors act 'quickly' (מְהֵרָה; vv. 33, 41) in response to Ahab's words; see Schipper, 'From Petition to Parable', 271–72.

the window together with them. The final episode then subverts the preceding narrative, unmasking Ahab's true intentions, and shows the reader his real face. He is a king of mercy in the public domain but there is no actual mercy in him, only selfishness and lust for power.

The story of Naboth's vineyard, which follows immediately, confirms this interpretation. The editor who arranged the text in its present form attempted to link these narratives and indicate that they were meant to be read together.¹² This is achieved mainly with the help of the repetition of the phrase 'sullen and angry' (סַר וְזָעַף) in 20:43 and 21:4¹³ but also by the thematic connections between the two stories of Ahab's encounter with the anonymous prophet in 20:34-43 and with Naboth in ch. 21. In both one of Ahab's subjects is condemned, the first time through the failure of mercy, the second time because of lack of justice. And of course both end up with divine condemnation of the king mediated through prophets.

The narrative begins with Ahab's offer to buy Naboth's vineyard which is next to the royal palace and to convert it into a vegetable garden. Naboth rejects the offer with the statement: 'The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers' (21:3). There is debate among commentators as to how appropriate Ahab's offer was in the first place. Most interpreters read it against the background of priestly legislation (Lev. 25:23-28) according to which the land belonged to Yahweh and could not be sold in perpetuity. Ahab's very offer to buy Naboth's vineyard then can be seen as an assault on Yahwistic faith and Israelite legal custom.¹⁴ Some commentators have perceived even deeper religious undertones in the story in the fact that Ahab wanted to convert Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden. The vineyard is seen as a symbol for Israel and Ahab's wish to obtain it signifies his

¹² Obviously this refers to the editor responsible for the MT version of the text of Kings which is the focus of the present investigation. As is well known, the LXX arranges the material differently, with ch. 21 preceding ch. 20. There is debate as to which order is more original, that of the MT (D.W. Gooding, 'Ahab According to the Septuagint', ZAW 76 [1964] 269-80) or of the LXX (H-J. Stipp, *Elischa-Propheten-Gottesmänner* [St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1987] 419-39; S. Otto, *Jehu, Elia und Elisa* [BWANT 152; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001] 159 n. 53, 204-205).

¹³ These are the only two places the two terms appear in Kings and the only two places the two are used together in the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁴ Cogan, *Kings*, 477; J.T. Walsh, *I Kings* (Berit Olam; Liturgical Press, 1996) 318; Jones, *Kings*, 353; Provan, *Kings*, 157. According to M.A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 249, the key issue here is transfer of property from one tribe to another but this seems to read too much into the text.

battle to control the nation.¹⁵ The phrase ‘vegetable garden’, on the other hand, appears elsewhere in Deuteronomy 11:10 where the land of Egypt is compared to a ‘vegetable garden’. On this basis some interpret Ahab’s desire as wish to make the people of Israel like Egypt.¹⁶ Others understand the story in much more practical terms. Westbrook argues that the narrative presents Ahab’s proposal as perfectly reasonable and Naboth has right to sell or not to sell his property but in this particular case he chooses not to.¹⁷ Whatever the answer to this question the focus of the story is not on the rationale behind Naboth’s refusal but on the subsequent actions of the royal family. Throughout the narrative very little space is given to Naboth himself. He does not speak again and his reactions to the developments of the plot are not recorded. Walsh notes that Naboth is mentioned six times and concludes that he ‘haunts the narrative like an unpeacable ghost’.¹⁸ It is, however, not Naboth’s actions but his memory that haunts the narrative, not what he does but what is done to him. This, on one hand, underlines his position as an innocent and powerless victim. On the other hand, his passiveness serves to focus our attention on his executioners. This is not a story about the unfortunate fate of the oppressed but a study in the depravity and crookedness of their oppressors.

In response to Naboth’s refusal to sell his vineyard Jezebel stages a trial during which Naboth is falsely accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death.¹⁹ One of the striking features of its description is the public display of respect for legal custom and religious propriety. A public fast is proclaimed as a way of seeking YHWH’s mercy. One is to assume that some calamity had befallen the community and it had been interpreted as a manifestation of divine wrath. A need was felt to find

¹⁵ K. Nielsen, ‘Construction of Meaningful Contexts: On War, Lions, Dogs, Birds, and a Vineyard’, *SJOT* 21 (2007) 218–27, esp. 221.

¹⁶ Provan, *Kings*, 157–58; Nelson, *Kings*, 141; Leithart, *Kings*, 154–55; Hens-Piazza, *Kings*, 206–207.

¹⁷ R. Westbrook, ‘Law in Kings’ in *The Book of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, ed. B. Halpern and A. Lemaire (VTSup 129; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 445–66, esp. 452–53. Also Wiseman, *Kings*, 181; H. Seebass, ‘Der Fall Naboth in 1 Reg. XXI’, *VT* 24 (1974) 474–88, esp. 477. Perhaps with the loss of land Naboth would have lost status as well and would have been reduced to the position of a royal dependent; see J. Gray, *I & II Kings* (OTL; London: SCM, 1964) 389–90; S.J. DeVries, *I Kings* (WBC 12; Waco: Word, 1985) 256.

¹⁸ Walsh, *Kings*, 327.

¹⁹ For a different interpretation see F.I. Andersen, ‘The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident’, *JBL* 85 (1966) 46–57, who argues that Naboth was executed on the charge that he had promised to sell the vineyard and had later reneged.

the root cause and get rid of the evil.²⁰ The charge ‘you have cursed God and king’ echoes Exodus 22:28 (Heb. 22:27) and suggests that blasphemy was found to be the offense. Two witnesses are to give testimony in accordance with Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Numbers 35:30. The stoning is outside the city to avoid ritual pollution (Lev. 24:14; Num. 15:36). Concern for God’s honour and for the legality of the proceedings seems to be one of the defining characteristics of the event. The bitter irony, of course, is that in reality neither God nor justice matter to those who are in charge of the trial. This only serves to underline the cynicism with which the whole operation is conceived and carried out. As in the preceding narrative there is a striking discrepancy between the public image of the king and what goes on behind the scenes. In 21:7 Jezebel tells Ahab ‘Now you will exercise kingship over Israel.’²¹ Her words sum up nicely the Omride understanding of the nature of royalty. To be a king implies the ability to exercise unlimited power over the lives and property of one’s subjects.²² A king can and should manipulate the judicial system for personal gain and execute his subordinates whenever they stand in his way.

The story finishes with a scene where Elijah confronts Ahab and pronounces judgement upon him and his house (21:17-29). This is the point when the end of the Omride dynasty is decided and announced by YHWH and so the Naboth incident is in some ways the defining moment of Ahab’s reign. Elijah’s speech affects the interpretation of the preceding story in two important ways. First, it focuses attention back on Ahab and away from Jezebel. Because of Jezebel’s active role in the affair the reader may be tempted to understand Ahab as a weak and passive character, manipulated by his forceful pagan spouse.²³ Yet, Elijah’s words focus on the king. Jezebel is mentioned twice, but it is Ahab, according to 21:19, who has murdered and taken possession and

²⁰ Cogan, *Kings*, 479; Gray, *Kings*, 391; Wiseman, *Kings*, 182.

²¹ There is disagreement among commentators as to whether these are to be construed as interrogative: ‘Do you now exercise kingship over Israel?’ (so Jones, *Kings*, 354) or indicative: ‘You now: you are going to perform majesty over Israel’ (so DeVries, *Kings*, 257; Walsh, *Kings*, 320-21) but the basic point is clear enough.

²² M. Oeming, ‘Naboth, der Jesreeliter: Untersuchungen zu den theologischen Motiven der Überlieferungsgeschichte von I Reg 21’, ZAW 98 (1986) 363-81, esp. 379, suggests that the theme of the narrative revolves around the issues of power and various types of responses to power.

²³ Nelson, *Kings*, 141; Provan, *Kings*, 158.

he is the primary object of the divine displeasure. This strengthens the impression that chapters 20 and 21 are meant to be read together and to interpret each other as they treat the question of justice and mercy in relation to the figure of the king. Chapter 20 shows the reader that Ahab is a ‘king of mercy’ only when he can benefit from his mercy. Chapter 21 completes the picture and unmasks him even further. He is not just a king who does not help the weak when there is no profit to be expected but one who actively persecutes those placed under his care when his interests dictate this.

Second, the redactional comment in 21:26 reads: ‘[Ahab] acted most abominably in going after idols, according to everything the Amorites had done whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites.’ This reintroduces the theme of idolatry which has not been prominent since the end of chapter 19. The editorial remark invites the reader to view these narratives as part of the larger context in which they are placed and to make a connection between Ahab’s idolatry and his apparent lack of mercy and justice. To worship Baal leads to trampling of justice and denial of mercy. Idolatry, oppression and death form an unholy triumvirate which crowns the reign of the Omrides. Thus the description of Ahab’s reign moves from chapters 17–19, where the worship of foreign gods is shown to be a defining characteristic of his rule, to chapters 20–22, which portray the moral and political consequences of such worship. In social life idolatry manifests itself as injustice and oppression and ultimately results in destruction and death.

3. Ahab and the (Post)exilic Reader

Since in chapters 20–21 Ahab is under the spotlight it is natural to enquire if the reader may in some way identify with that character. If the narrative is read from the standpoint of the Judean exilic readership of the book of Kings this supposition becomes very likely. To such an audience Ahab presents both an explanation for their predicament and a challenge to respond appropriately to God. Ahab’s story is part of the community’s past and one specific illustration, in fact one of the highlights, of the multitude of sins which led to exile. It is no coincidence that Ahab is explicitly related to the arch-villain king Manasseh of Judah who is ultimately held responsible for the

irreversible divine decision to destroy Judah and Jerusalem.²⁴ Manasseh is twice compared explicitly to Ahab, first in his sin of idolatry (2 Kgs 21:3) and then in the prophetic description of judgement (2 Kgs 21:13). There are some further implicit connections between the two kings. Ahab is indicted for selling himself to act abominably ‘as the Amorites had done whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites’ (1 Kgs 21:26). Manasseh is reproached twice for following the ‘abominable practices of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel’ (2 Kgs 21:2, 9) and then to have done ‘things more wicked than all that the Amorites did’ (2 Kgs 21:11). Also Manasseh is said to have filled Jerusalem with innocent blood (2 Kgs 21:16). Whilst this can be taken as a historical allusion to the religious struggles during his reign²⁵ it is just possible that the remark is there also to remind the reader of the innocent blood of Naboth shed by Ahab.²⁶ The primary function of these connections is to vilify Manasseh as much as possible. He was as bad as Israel’s most wicked king, arguably even worse than him. On a secondary level, however, these same links serve to draw king Ahab more closely into the Judean orbit. Although he was a king of a different kingdom, Ahab is part of the spiritual heritage of the Judean exilic community. His idolatry and punishment are an anticipation of Judah’s idolatry and her consequent judgement. His figure portrays the tragedy of someone who has experienced the mighty deeds of Yahweh and has had the opportunity to ‘know’ him but has failed to do so.

A second aspect of the exilic message of 1 Kings 20–22 centres around the theme of repentance. This theme has been rightly identified as one of the important aspects of the message of the Deuteronomistic History.²⁷ Wholehearted repentance is the only way envisioned by DH to forgiveness and renewed relationship with the Lord. The story of Naboth’s vineyard finds its conclusion and climax in the account of

²⁴ W.M. Schniedewind, ‘History and Interpretation: The Religion of Ahab and Manasseh in the Book of Kings’, *CBQ* 55 (1993) 649–61.

²⁵ D. Kinet, *Geschichte Israels* (Neue Echter Bible; Würzburg: Echter, 2001) 161.

²⁶ Sweeney, *Kings*, 432.

²⁷ H.W. Wolff, ‘Das Kerygma des deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerks’, *ZAW* 73 (1961) 171–86 = ET ‘The Kerygma of the Deuteronomistic Historical Work,’ in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History*, ed. G.N. Knoppers and J.G. McConville (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 62–78; J.G. McConville, ‘1 Kings 8:46–53 and the Deuteronomic Hope’, *VT* 42 (1992) 67–79.

Ahab's repentance and YHWH's response to it (21:27-29). True, the key verb 'to turn' (שׁוּב) is not used here but there is no question that in essence the response of Ahab to Elijah's proclamation is that of genuine repentance. He tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and fasts. The divine word which comes to Elijah confirms that these actions are accepted by Yahweh as an outer expression of genuine change of heart. Because of it Yahweh postpones judgement and allows Ahab to escape the disaster which now hangs over his entire dynasty. In this Ahab looks remarkably like another Judean king—Josiah. Their reaction upon hearing the divine word is similarly described: 'and when Ahab heard (וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע) these words he tore his clothes (וַיִּקְרַע בְּגָדָיו)' (1 Kgs 21:27); 'and when the king heard (וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע) the words of the book of the law he tore his clothes (וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו)' (2 Kgs 22:11). Both are described as having 'humbled' (כָּנַע) themselves before Yahweh (1 Kgs 21:29; 2 Kgs 22:19), the only two times the verb 'humbled' (כָּנַע) is used in Kings. Most importantly, their repentance has very similar consequences. Ahab's humility is not sufficient to nullify the punishment pronounced upon his dynasty in the preceding verses but is enough to effect a change in relation to himself personally. YHWH promises that he will not 'bring' (Hiphil of בּוֹא) the promised 'evil/disaster' (הָרָעָה) in Ahab's days but in the days of his son (v. 29). Similarly, Josiah cannot avert Judah's judgement but, like Ahab, he is promised not to have to experience it personally. The 'evil/disaster' (הָרָעָה) will be brought (Hiphil of בּוֹא) by YHWH after Josiah is safely in his grave.

One can easily understand how and why such a depiction of repentance can resonate with the exilic readership of the book of Kings. Unlike Nineveh's turning in the book of Jonah, this is not a repentance that can avert disaster and change the course of history. In Ahab's case the course of history is irrevocably set. His past transgressions have made it impossible for him to become a second David and leave a perpetual dynasty on the throne of Israel. However, his repentance changes things in a more limited way. It makes a decisive difference to his own personal circumstances and fate. Ahab is not going to be on the throne when Jehu's bloody coup takes place; he is not going to experience the humiliation and cruelty of these upcoming events. In the same way the exiles could not change the course of history. In their case the disaster had already happened, Jerusalem was in ruins. Yet, the story implies that following Ahab's example might make a difference

to their own circumstances and relationship with YHWH. To humble oneself before God is not meaningless, even when inescapable doom is looming on the horizon.

King Ahab, therefore, is simultaneously connected to the best and the worst in Judah's history. In his sins he is an anticipation of evil Manasseh, in his repentance he echoes righteous Josiah. From an exilic point of view he is a meaningful, relevant figure. His sins and ultimate demise challenge the readers to reflect on the recent history of their own kingdom with its own mistakes and falls; his response to Elijah's oracle points the way forward and models an appropriate response to YHWH in a situation of experienced and unavoidable judgement.

4. Conclusion

The narratives in 1 Kings 20–21 are linked by their focus on the figure of king Ahab and by the closely intertwined themes of mercy, justice, idolatry, and the knowledge of Yahweh. Both narratives explore the discrepancy between the public image of the king as a just and merciful ruler and the reality of his selfishness and greed. In addition, in chapter 20 Ahab is promised to come to 'know Yahweh'; in chapter 21 he is accused of idolatry. The implication of this juxtaposition is that in spite of the experiences of divine deliverance he has, in fact, failed to attain knowledge of the divine. Ahab's idolatry goes hand in hand with the ruthless way in which he exercises his royal power.

As pointed out in the beginning of this article, a number of modern commentators regard the figure of the king as an ancient equivalent of the oppressive powers that are still operative in today's world. Yet it is likely that some of the first generations of readers of the book of Kings would have perceived Ahab in a very different way. The wicked Israelite king would have been seen as symbolising aspects of the experience of the exilic and post-exilic community. His judgement anticipates the Babylonian captivity; his humbling provides the exiles with a model response in the face of inevitable doom. Such a reconstruction has important hermeneutical implications. It suggests that Ahab is capable of denoting a lot more than simply the dangerous power of evil standing over against the reader and can very profitably serve as a basis of critical self-reflection and even hope.