

ROYAL CARE FOR THE POOR IN ISRAEL'S FIRST HISTORY:

THE ROYAL LAW DEUTERONOMIAN 17:14-20), HANNAH'S SONG (1 SAMUEL 2:1-10), SAMUEL'S WARNING (1 SAMUEL 8:10-18), DAVID'S ATTITUDE (2 SAMUEL 24:10-24) AND AHAB AND NABOTH (1 KINGS 21) IN INTERTEXT ¹

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Abstract

It has been widely recognised in scholarship that the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy to 2 Kings 25) was written to explain why the states of Israel and Judah both failed, attributing the reasons for the failure to their kings' disobedience regarding the demand of cult centralisation (Dt. 12) and keeping idolatry at bay (Dt. 13). This article argues that material questions (e.g. land and economic existence) are integral to the history and that the monarchy's failure to care properly for the poor can be added as a further reason for the demise of Israel (north and south). As such the history not merely narrates the political history of (early) Israel, but also conveys a socio-ethical message.

Key Words: Deuteronomistic History; Poverty; Politics; Deuteronomic Code; Hannah's Song; Ahab and Naboth; David; Solomon; Idolatry; Economics; Oppression

Introduction

The Genesis to 2 Kings 25 narrative (cf. Miller & Hayes 2006:73), which in its first part (the Pentateuch) contains the Mosaic law, can be regarded as ancient Israel's first history. The Chronicler, of course, is the second. Below we will limit our discussion to the Deuteronomy to Kings narrative or what Noth (1981) distinguished as the Deuteronomistic History (cf. also Kaiser 1984:172-177; Gottwald 2014:299).

The eventual exile and ruin of Jerusalem are usually ascribed to most of the kings' failure to obey the Deuteronomic prescription to centralise the cult (Dt. 12)² and not to serve other gods (Dt. 13, cf. Otto 2016).³ There seems to be consensus on this point and it is not the purpose of this article to contend it. However, we argue below that there is also another case of royal disobedience which the macro-text of Israel's first history offers as a reason for the exile, namely the kings' obligation to care for the poor. However, this aspect is mostly ignored by European middle-class scholarship (similarly by the white section of the South African population). This may be due to the adage of the Talmud that we don't see the world as it is, but *as we are*. Or to put it a bit bluntly: we don't see the poverty motif in the Deuteronomistic History because our stomachs are full.

In comparison to other ancient Near Eastern annalistic histories (e.g. from Assyria and Babylonia, cf. Wiseman 1958:46-84) in which the kings are usually glorified and lauded for their mighty deeds, Israel's first history about her kings is unique in its self-criticism

regarding the Deuteronomic obligation to care for the poor. Ironically, perhaps for this very reason (amongst others), Israel's first history had the most influential *Wirkungsgeschichte* in humanity in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern histories.

To discuss this thesis I will look for a link between Deuteronomy 17:14-20, 1 Sam. 2:1-10; 2 Sam. 8:10-17; 2 Sam. 24:10-24, and 1 Kings 21 (or the royal law, Hannah's song, Samuel's warning, the good David, and Ahab and Naboth).

The Law about the King: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

The (future) law about the king forms part of the Deuteronomic Code (Dt. 12-26) which in one or other form has been discovered in the temple during the time of Josiah (who ruled probably 640-609 BCE), inspiring the latter's drastic reforms (2 Ki. 22:3-10).⁴ The verses that pertain to the rule of the king are as follows (with those especially significant for our present purposes emphasised):⁵

¹⁴ When you have come into the land that YHWH your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say,

"I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,"

¹⁵ you may indeed set over you a king whom YHWH your God will choose.

One of your own brothers you may set as king over you;

you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community.

¹⁶ Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since YHWH has said to you,

"You must never return that way again."

¹⁷ And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away;

also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

¹⁸ When he has taken the throne of his kingdom,

he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests.

¹⁹ ***It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life,***

so that he may learn to fear YHWH his God,

diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes,

²⁰ ***neither exalting himself above other members of his people***

nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left,

so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

As our previous analysis indicates (Scheffler 2007:127) verses 15a-20a state nine *conditions* for kingship in Israel. From a synchronic perspective the kingship would be in the future after the settlement, but from the *ex eventu* view of the author(s) of the Deuteronomic History (hence DH) the history of Israel is already embedded in the text. The text as it were dialogues with all the history of all the kings mentioned in the Deuteronomic History.

The first two conditions (verse 15) regard the *eligibility* for kingship: YHWH should choose him and he should be a male compatriot. Conditions 3 and 4 (verse 16) pertain to the *social* limitations of the king's power: it is directed against excessive military power

and exploitation and oppression of the citizens. Conditions 5 and 6 (verse 17) regard *personal* limitations to the king's power and warn against distractive sexuality (too many wives) and excessive wealth (וְכַסֵּף וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה-לּוֹ מְאֹד). Conditions 7-9 (verses 18-20a) deal with the king's obliged submission to the divine (Deuteronomic) law: he must have a copy (וְכָתַב לּוֹ אֶת-מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה) and continuously read the law (וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּו), he must observe the law and fear God (לִמְעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאַה אֶת-יְהוָה) and must minutely act according to its prescriptions (לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה) in order not to oppress his fellow citizens (רוּם-לְקַבֹּל מֵאֶחָיו).

Especially three conditions are relevant for our theme: the king should not be too rich, he should read and act according to the (Deuteronomic) law, and not exploit and oppress his citizens (who are his brothers).

Von Rad (1968:86) remarks correctly that in comparison to Psalms 2; 20; 45; 72 and 110 the power which the king should have according to Dt. 17:14-20 is extremely restricted. Especially Solomon (who is painted in all his glory initially, cf. 2 Ki. 3) in the end did not pass the Deuteronomic test: he gathered too much wealth, allowed idolatry because of his excessive polygamy⁶ and oppressed the people with forced labour.

Regarding royal care for the poor, the king is not only obliged to abstain from exploiting the poor, but should positively care for them. If the king would read the law as Dt. 17:19 prescribes, and act meticulously accordingly (17:19-20) he would be confronted with Dt. 15:1-11 which explicitly deals with caring for the poor. This law deals with the remission of debts (to the benefit of the poor) and the positive caring for the poor who should (as in Dt. 17:14-20) be regarded as siblings (*achim*).⁷ In reading the text the present reader is advised to imagine the ancient Israelite king reading the text (important phrases highlighted):

Every seventh year you shall grant a **remission of debts**.

² And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because YHWH's remission has been proclaimed.

³ Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.

⁴ **There will, however, be no one in need among you,**

because YHWH is sure to bless you in the land

that YHWH your God is giving you as a possession to occupy,

⁵ if only you will obey YHWH your God by **diligently observing this entire commandment** that I command you today.

⁶ When YHWH your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

⁷ **If there is among you anyone in need,** a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that YHWH your God is giving you, **do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.**

⁸ You should rather **open your hand,**

willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

⁹ Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking,

“The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,”

and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing;

your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

¹⁰ **Give freely** and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account

YHWH your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, **“Open your hand to the poor** and needy neighbor in your land.”

Dt. 15:1-11 occupies a central position in the Deuteronomistic Code and the king who repeatedly read the code as prescribed by Dt. 17:19 could not but be confronted with its strict demands. The law-reading king had to realise that not only the centralisation of the cult, the exclusive loyalty to Yahweh or prohibition to serve other Gods, but also the care for the poor and striving for a society without poverty was the obligation (at least one amongst others) of the king. When the Deuteronomist judged the kings subsequently in his work, he does not repeatedly refer to the kings' behaviour in this regard, but rather to their behaviour regarding the centralisation of the cult and exclusive loyalty to YHWH. To judge from this that the poverty motif was unimportant is to ignore an important motif in the Deuteronomistic History, as we hope to argue below.⁸

Hannah's Song (1 Sam. 2:1-11) as an 'Overture' to the History of the Kings

The Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-11) occupies a prominent position at the beginning of the history of Samuel (her son) and the subsequent kings. Of course its relation to Samuel and (through the latter to the kings) as well as the motif of the overcoming of her infertility is of cardinal importance for the interpretation of the text. Notwithstanding, as a poem it is a programmatic text which reveals the Deuteronomist's views regarding poverty and God's relation to the poor (although he might have incorporated it from a source, cf. Hertzberg 1973:20). To appreciate this we quote the text and emphasise phrases relevant to our theme.

² My heart exults in YHWH;

my strength is exalted in my God.

My mouth derides my enemies,

because I rejoice in my victory.

² “There is no Holy One like YHWH, no one besides you;

there is no Rock like our God.

³ Talk no more so very proudly,

let not arrogance come from your mouth;

for YHWH is a God of knowledge,

and by him actions are weighed.

⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵ *Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.*

*The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.*

⁶ *YHWH kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.*

⁷ *YHWH makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.*

⁸ *He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth belong to YHWH,
and on them he has set the world.*

⁹ “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

¹⁰ *The adversaries of YHWH shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.
YHWH will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed.”*

The poem consists of three sections. Verse 1-3 praises God for his actions, verses 4-9 describe these ‘typical actions’ which consists in the inversion of power relationships and 9-10 emphasise his power.

Although the song in its present context of the Samuel story is a hymn which praises God for taking away Hannah’s infertility, the theme of poverty functions more prominently. The poor are mentioned at least six times in verses 4-9 and different terms and expressions are used to refer to them (hire out for bread, hungry poor, low, poor, needy).

The song creates link between childlessness and poverty: God can cancel the latter, therefore also childlessness. It is important to note the free choice of God. He can do what he wants. Because he has this free power (and can push people into Sheol and take them out), he is *able* to care for the poor and the needy. And it is repeatedly stated that it is his preference to change the situation of the poor. His free choice and power are therefore linked to his compassion. It appears as if the song was initially about changing the fate of the poor, and that 5b (about making women fertile) was added in view of applying the Song

to Hannah's situation. This need not be, because it is explicitly stated that YHWH exalts and brings low, and that covers both poverty and barrenness.

In verse 10 the song reminds the reader of the role of the (messianic) king. God gives him power, but a good relationship with the poor is the pre-supposition since God "make[s] the poor sit with princes". No wonder that Luke's Gospel bases much of Mary's Magnificat on this song, since in his Gospel it has a similar function, pre-empting the Lukan Jesus's intensive care for the poor (see Scheffler 1993:50-51).

The fact that the king and his role regarding poverty is explicitly mentioned in verse 10b, provides the clue that Hannah's Song with its emphasis on changing the fate of the poor can or should be read in intertext with Deuteronomy 15 and 17.

Samuel's Warning regarding the King's Care for the Poor (1 Sam. 8:11-17)

In 1 Samuel 8:8-18 Samuel⁹ (who opposed the monarchy) warns the Israelites (who insisted on having a king) that a king would exploit and oppress them:

¹¹ These will be the ways (*mishpat*) of the king that will rule over you:

he will take your sons and appoint them to his *chariots*

and to be his *horsemen*, and to run before his chariots;

¹² and he will appoint for himself *commanders* of thousands and fifties,

and some to *plough* his ground and to *reap* his harvest,

and to *make* his implements of *war* and the equipment of his chariots.

¹³ He will take your *daughters* to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

¹⁴ He will take the best of your *fields and vineyards*

and *olive orchards* and give them to his servants.

¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards

and give them to his officers and to his servants.

¹⁶ He will take your *menservants and maidservants*,

and the best of your cattle and your asses and put them to his work.

¹⁷ He will take the *tenth of your flocks*, and you shall be his *slaves*.

Otto (2016) in his excellent commentary of Deuteronomy indicated the intertextuality between the king's law of Dt. 17:14-20 and Samuel's warning in Sam. 8:11-17.¹⁰ The following table endeavours to provide a synoptic overview of the parallels.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20	1 Samuel 8:10-18
<i>Wish for a king:</i> In Dt. 17:14 it is predicted that the people would ask for a king like all the nations.	In 1 Sam. 8:5 the people ask Samuel for a king like all the nations. Their request is repeated in 1 Sam. 8:20.
<i>Military build-up:</i> According to Dt. 17:16 The king should not acquire many horses for himself using the people in the process of military build-up.	In 1 Sam. 8:11 the warning against military build-up (using the people) is described in detail: chariots, horsemen, commanders, implements of war.
<i>Gathering of wealth:</i> Dt. 17:17 forbids the king to “acquire silver and gold in great quantity.”	The economic build-up is described in 1 Sam. 8:14: fields, vineyards, olive orchards, tithing for property.
<i>Against the oppression of compatriots:</i> According to 17:20a the king should not exalt himself above his brothers (<i>lebilti rum lebabo meechar</i>).	The exploitation of the king's subjects is the focus in 1 Sam. 8:11-17: they do military service, plough and reap, women are also forced to work, agricultural property is confiscated, they became slaves.

Military service, forced labour, oppressive taxes, enslavement – all refer ultimately to extreme poverty amongst the people. In short: the king, although leading the people in battle (1 Sam. 8:20), will cause poverty amongst his subjects. The report on the kings' history (and their failure) that follows is therefore not only a report of their idolatry (mentioned in Dt. 17 but not in 1 Sam. 8:11-17), but also their economic exploitation of the people, their failure to adhere to the demands of Dt. 15:1-11. Especially Solomon's practices as described in 1 Ki. 10-11 has such a resemblance to 1 Sam. 8:11-17 that it seems as if the Deuteronomistic authors' criticisms of Solomon were incorporated into 1 Sam. 8 (e.g. Jones 2001:204) just as they were incorporated into Dt. 17:14-20 (see above).

David's 'Positive' Attitude Regarding Poverty and Greed: 2 Sam. 24:10-24

According to the Deuteronomistic authors most kings failed to meet the criteria for kingship, but David, Hezekiah and Josiah are mentioned as notable exceptions. 2 Sam. 24:10-24 reports positively on David's care for the poor, and as such it is a counter-text to the Ahab text that follows in 1 Ki. 21. David, despite his missteps (cf. besides the census also the Uriah incident), had the (economic) interests of the people at heart and according to 2 Sam. 24:10-24 “did not exalt himself above the people” (Dt. 17:20), taking cognisance of the Deuteronomic law (Dt. 17:17-20). The relatively unknown text is quoted here and the relevant 'economic' phrases highlighted.

¹⁰But afterward, David was stricken to the heart because he had counted the people.

David said to YHWH, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done.

But now, YHWH, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant;

for I have done very foolishly.”¹¹ When David rose in the morning,

the word of YHWH came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying,

¹²“Go and say to David: Thus says YHWH:

Three things I offer you; choose one of them, and I will do it to you.”

¹³ So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him,

“Shall three years of famine come to you on your land?”

Or will you *flee three months* before your foes while they pursue you?

Or shall there be *three days’ pestilence* in your land?

Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me.”

¹⁴ Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress;

let us fall into the hand of YHWH, for his mercy is great;

but let me not fall into human hands.”

¹⁵ So YHWH sent a *pestilence* on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba.

¹⁶ But when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it,

YHWH relented concerning the evil, and said to the angel

who was bringing destruction among the people,

“It is enough; now stay your hand.”

The angel of YHWH was then by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

¹⁷ **When David saw the angel who was destroying the people, he said to YHWH,**

“I alone have sinned, and I alone have done wickedly;

but these sheep, what have they done?”

Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father’s house.”

¹⁸ That day Gad came to David and said to him,

“Go up and erect an altar to YHWH on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”

¹⁹ Following Gad’s instructions, David went up, as YHWH had commanded.

²⁰ When Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming toward him; and Araunah went out and prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground.

²¹ Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?”

David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you in order to build an altar to YHWH, so that the plague may be averted from the people.”²² Then Araunah said to David,

“Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him;

here are the oxen for the burnt offering,

and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.

²³ All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king,

“May YHWH your God respond favorably to you.”

²⁴ **But the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt offerings to YHWH my God that cost me nothing.”**

So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

The situation of the narrative of 2 Sam. 24:10-24 is the punishment of David for the census he conducted. Being “a man after God’s heart” therefore does not imply David’s impeccability, but his remorseful and positive attitude while being punished. The punishment had implications for the economic and existential well-being of his people (and their animals!, cf. 17), and David is portrayed as taking these concerns to heart.

Being offered a choice between three punishments (famine, persecution and pestilence), David did not choose poverty for his people but pestilence (by implication) which he thought could be tempered by YHWH’s mercy. When it proved to be a disaster (70000 people died), David relented and (for the benefit of his people) asked YHWH to be punished alone. The people are innocent, and David expresses this by movingly referring to the innocence of the sheep (*pars pro toto* for the animals and not metaphorically meant). David is portrayed as succeeding in changing YHWH’s mind. The plague abated.

The rest of the narrative is interwoven with the buying of Arauna’s threshing floor (that the future temple would be built there emphasises its importance) and further illustrates David’s positive attitude especially with regard to money matters. Whereas it is warned in 1 Sam. 8:10-17 that the king would confiscate the property of his subjects, David here acts to the contrary: Arauna offers him the threshing floor for free, but David insists on paying for it (2 Sam. 24:24). David is not greedy and in the larger narrative appears to be the opposite of his son Solomon (1 Ki. 10-11) and king Ahab (1 Ki. 21).

Ahab’s Exploitation of Naboth: 1 Kings 21

The well-known (prophetic, see Deist 1991:48) narrative of Ahab and Naboth’s vineyard (1 Ki. 21) is the example *par excellence* of a king that acted contrary to Dt. 15:1-11 and Dt. 17:14-20, and in accordance to Samuel’s prediction in 1 Sam. 8:10-17. Despite its being well-known it is (for the benefit of the following discussion) being quoted in full with phrases containing the poverty motif highlighted.

¹ Later the following events took place:

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria.

² And Ahab said to Naboth, “Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a **better vineyard** for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its **value in money**.”

³ But Naboth said to Ahab, “YHWH forbid that I should give you my **ancestral inheritance**.”

⁴ Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him;

for he had said, “I will not give you my ancestral inheritance.”

He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

⁵ His wife Jezebel came to him and said,

“Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?”

⁶ He said to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him,

‘Give me your **vineyard for money**; or else, if you prefer,

I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will **not give you** my vineyard.'"

⁷ His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel?"

Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; **I will give** you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

⁸ So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city.

⁹ She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly;

¹⁰ seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

¹¹ The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them,

¹² they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly.

¹³ The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying,

"Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city, and **stoned him to death.**

¹⁴ Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, **take possession** of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead."

¹⁶ As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, **to take possession** of it.

¹⁷ Then the word of YHWH came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying:

¹⁸ Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to **take possession.**

¹⁹ You shall say to him, "Thus says YHWH: Have you **killed**, and also **taken possession**?"

You shall say to him, "Thus says YHWH:

In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood."

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"

He answered, "I have found you. Because you have **sold yourself** to do what is evil in the sight of YHWH, ²¹ I will bring disaster on you;

I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel;

²² and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.

²³ Also concerning Jezebel YHWH said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.’

²⁴ Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.”

²⁵ (Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of YHWH, urged on by his wife Jezebel.

²⁶ He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom YHWH drove out before the Israelites.)

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Then the word of YHWH came to Elijah the Tishbite:

²⁹ “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; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.”

According to the archaeological record (see Deist 1987:68-88; Miller & Hayes 2006:303-313) Ahab was an economically successful king. However, according to the biblical text he was greedy and corrupt. Several aspects, relevant for our theme, deserve our attention.

- *Firstly*, it should be kept in mind that the story is not merely between a rich Ahab and a poor Naboth. Naboth owned a vineyard and Ahab offered to buy it from him. The story is rather about a rich and greedy (forbidden in Dt. 17:14-20) Ahab who wanted to infringe on the rights of a free Naboth (contra the limitation in Dt. 17:20), who if he conceded was in danger of becoming impoverished. Jezebel orchestrates the elimination of Naboth (reminding of the warning that women could lead a king’s heart astray, Dt. 17:17), and Ahab does not prevent Jezebel in murdering in order to steal.
- *Secondly*, Elijah confronts Ahab prophetically, thereby being a precursor for later prophets especially who campaigned for social justice, e.g. Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah (see Van Heerden 2012). In DH’s portrayal of Elijah’s life the latter mirrors opposite values than Ahab: through his caring for the poor widow (1 Ki. 17:7-16) he obeys the Deuteronomic law.
- *Thirdly*, the parenthetic incorporation of 1 Ki. 21:25-26 also reflects that Ahab stood in the line of most of the kings in the Deuteronomistic History who were judged in terms of their idolatry. But the Deuteronomistic authors also included the narrative as a whole that testifies to the fact that in Ahab’s case his greediness and oppression of the poor aggravated the judgment on him: “there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of YHWH” (1 Ki. 21:25).
- *Fourthly*, it is often overlooked by readers who only judge Ahab negatively (maybe due to verses 25-26) that he repented and that he received some forgiveness. The

text therefore also has the message that penitent oppressors' punishment could be mitigated. However, Ahab's actions had disastrous consequences for his dynasty, thereby conveying the serious message that the exploitation of the poor inevitably has negative social consequences which cannot be annulled by mere personal pardon.

After a 'close reading' Loader (1991:39-41) concludes that 1 Ki. 21:

- protests against excessive land ownership of the rich at the expense of ordinary citizens;
- reflects a conflict between a potentate and an ordinary citizen and sympathises with the latter's non-violent resistance, even at the cost of his own death;
- prophetically criticises a greedy and corrupt monarch that benefits personally by doing wrong to the powerless;
- indicates that socioeconomic wrongs are also religious wrongs and thus punished by God.

The perspective of the Deuteronomistic narrator in is thus clear: God sides with the poor and the marginalised. Even if a monarchy would be allowed to replace a theocracy (1 Sam. 10), this does not imply that power may violate justice. The treatment of the poor serves as a criterion to judge the kings when Israel's first history is written.

Conclusion

What Israel's first history communicates by prominent subtexts (Hannah's Song, Samuel's warning, David's positive attitude and Ahab and Naboth) in the larger story is confirmed in so many words by the Deuteronomistic Jeremiah (Jr 7:5-11; relevant phrases again emphasised):

⁵ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings,

if you truly *act justly* one with another,

⁶ if you do *not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow,*
*or shed innocent blood in this place,*¹²

and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt¹³

⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place,

in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸ Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,

make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,

¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house,

which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" –

only to go on doing all these *abominations*?

¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name,

become a *den of robbers* in your sight?

You know, I too am watching, says YHWH.

In considering this prophecy, one should note that the care for the alien, orphan and the widow, the poorest of the poor, is at the top of the Deuteronomistic Jeremiah's list. Compared to what we have discussed thus far, Israel's first (Deuteronomistic) history reflects *prophetic* socio-political criticisms. The label 'Former Prophets' can therefore be regarded as appropriate, since Joshua – 2 Kings can be typified as "prophetic history writing", not only because it contains the Elijah-Elisha cycle, but because it shares the values (regarding socio-ethical matters) with the later major and minor prophets.

According to the Deuteronomistic History political power is subject to the Deuteronomic law in which the fate of the poor is taken seriously (Dt. 15:1-11; 17:14-20). The king has the task of caring for the poor (cf. also Ps. 72:4, 12, 13).¹⁴ If the king does not do it, it amounts (just as idolatry) to religious transgression which can lead to catastrophic consequences, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile (2 Ki. 25).

In the Ancient Near East (e.g. Assyria and Babylonia) the king also had the obligation to care for his people. However, in the narration of their histories, the kings are usually praised, especially for their military successes. Israel's first history is self-critical, unique in not glorifying its kings. The kings are judged and criticised according to Deuteronomistic criteria which demand loyalty to God (Dt. 6:4; 13) which in itself implies love for the neighbour (Lev 19:18), especially those that suffer (Dt. 15:1-11). Not only specific smaller units of the text, but their intertextual function in the macro-text of Israel's first history conveys this self-critical message.

This self-criticism has an implication for contemporary history writing in the (post)modern world, especially those histories that are taught to children at school. Are they prophetic and self-critical, not merely serving the interest of the powers that be, but also communicating (also by narrating past failures) values that will contribute to a peaceful and caring future society?

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Endnotes

- ¹ With appreciation I dedicate this contribution to Hendrik Bosman, with whom I could have many stimulating discussions and who took a special interest in the question of poverty in South Africa. The volume which he initiated and of which he was co-editor (Bosman *et al.* 1991) has a special relation to this article (various discussions of 1 Ki. 21) and to my mind remains a landmark in Biblical Studies in the specific context of South Africa.
- ² Dt. 12:13-14 summarise the demand for the centralisation of the cult: "Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you happen to see. But only at the place that YHWH will choose in one of your tribes – there you shall offer your burnt offerings and there you shall do everything I command you." Most kings failed to obey this, with David, Hezekiah and Josiah as notable exceptions.
- ³ Dt. 13 polemicalises vehemently against idolatry by prescribing that those that entice to serving other gods should be put to death: "If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents,² and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other

gods” (whom you have not known) “and let us serve them,”³ you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams...⁴ YHWH your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear...”⁶ If anyone secretly entices you – even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend – saying, “Let us go worship other gods,” whom neither you nor your ancestors have known,⁷ any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other,⁸ you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them.⁹ But you shall surely kill them...” The seriousness of the command is emphasised by the fact that even family members should be executed. Again most kings failed to obey this command (notably also Solomon) with David, Hezekiah and Josiah again the exceptions.

⁴ If the information in 2 Ki. 22:3 is correct the discovery was made in 622 BCE.

⁵ The texts to be discussed are supplied here to facilitate the discussion. In a previous contribution (see Scheffler 2007:124-137) I have reflected in more detail on Dt. 17:14-20 in terms of the synchrony and diachrony of the text.

⁶ It should be noted (especially by First World readers) that the text does not advocate monogamy but polemicalises against distracting excessive polygamy. David, for example, is never criticised for his “moderate polygamy”.

⁷ In a previous contribution (see Scheffler 2005) I have reflected extensively on Dt. 15:1-11 and its present-day relevance (see also Scheffler 2013:1-14).

⁸ From a materialistic, Marxist or liberationist perspective (cf. e.g. Mtshiselwa 2015) it can be argued that the Deuteronomist authors were from the elite and therefore underplayed the motif of poverty in favour of a religious or power-interest perspective in which the centralisation of the cult and exclusive religious thinking serve to control the thoughts of an otherwise exploited people. Even so it is remarkable that the positive attitude towards the poor surfaces (prominently) in the Deuteronomistic History as it does in the Pentateuch (Scheffler 2013a) and the Tanach as a whole (cf. Scheffler 2013b and the literature mentioned there).

⁹ 1 Sam. 8:1-7 (about Samuel’s “economic pervert” sons) constitutes a context in the narrated world of the present text for the warning which most probably had a separated (later) existence.

¹⁰ According to Otto (2016) 1 Sam. 8:8-10 provides the “exegetische Schlüssel” for interpreting 1 Ki. 17:14-20. Both texts are post-exilic and look back on history which is then presented on a synchronic level as the criteria for the future king (Dt. 17:14-12), the warning before its institution (1 Sam. 8:8-18), the institution (1 Sam. 10) and the report on the history of the (mostly failed) history of the kings 1 Sam. 11-2 Ki. 25.

¹¹ Pypier (2014:366), most probably in search of an “original” or “novel” interpretation, relativises the Deuteronomistic antimonarchical view by interpreting the would-be king’s actions positively: “... the king will organize the army, give their sons a proper military training, and even find occupations in his palace for his daughters. After years of uncertainty ... this is surely just what the people are asking for.” Not merely the perspective of Samuel in 1 Sam. 11-18 as such is misread here, but also to our mind the Deuteronomistic history as a whole regarding the theme of poverty and oppression. Can this perhaps be ascribed to the North-European context of Pypier?

¹² As Ahab did through Jezebel.

¹³ As most of the kings did, and Ahab also (1 Ki. 21:25-26).

¹⁴ Almost emotionally expressed in Ps. 72:12-13: “For he shall save the poor when they cry and the needy who are helpless. He will have pity on the weak and save the lives of the poor.”