

READING
THE WOMEN
OF THE BIBLE



Tikva Frymer-Kensky



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Queen Jezebel, or Deuteronomy's Worst Nightmare

WEALTH AND POWER magnify the effects of the quintessential foreign wife, Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, the northernmost of the Phoenician cities included as "Canaan" in Genesis 10 and Judges 3. As the wife of King Ahab of Northern Israel, she brought her foreign gods and ideas into the heart of Israel.

The book of Kings remembers Ahab primarily for his establishment of the cult of Ba'al in Samaria:

◇ *Judgment on Ahab (1 Kings 16:30-33)*

Ahab son of Omri did evil in the eyes of YHWH more than all who were before him.

It happened that it was not enough for him to go in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, so he took as wife Jezebel daughter of Ethba'al the king of the Sidonians, and he went and worshiped Ba'al and bowed down to him.

He erected an altar to Ba'al in the temple of Ba'al which he built in Samaria.

Ahab made the asherah and Ahab continued to behave thus and to anger YHWH the God of Israel more than all the kings that came before him.

The book of Kings tells us nothing about Ahab's leadership of a coalition of South Syrian states to victory over the Assyrians. It remembers instead his worship of Ba'al and attributes the states to his marriage to a Sidonian princess. Jezebel herself tried to spread the worship of her gods Ba'al and Asherah, killing the prophets of YHWH and subsidizing Canaanite priests so that the prophet Elijah confronted "four hundred prophets of Ba'al and four hundred and fifty prophets of Asherah who ate at Jezebel's table" (2 Kings 18:19). Even after Elijah defeated them decisively in a dramatic contest on Mount Carmel and roused the people to

kill the prophets of Ba'al, Jezebel did not give up. Instead, she sent word to Elijah, "Thus may the gods do to me and continue to do if it is not that by tomorrow I will make your life like one of their lives" (1 Kings 19:2). The contest was not yet over. Her otherwise estimable piety was a prime danger, for it magnified the intrusion of a foreign cult into Israel.

The next appearance of Jezebel is in the story of Naboth's vineyard. Here too she appears as a well-meaning woman who does everything wrong, this time by trampling on Israelite law.

◇ *A Question of Patrimony (1 Kings 21:1-3)*

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel next to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria.

Ahab spoke to Naboth thus, "Give me your vineyard and let it be my vegetable garden, for it is near my house. I will give you a better vineyard in its stead. If you wish, I will give you money at full price."

Naboth said to Ahab, "God forbid, YHWH himself forbid that I should give my fathers' patrimony to you."

Here we have a classic economic issue; the enlargement of estates where there is no empty land. Many people sold land during Israel's history. The Elijah and Elisha stories interspersed with the tales of this dynasty show that, at the time of Ahab and his sons, people were incurring debts that they were not able to repay and thus were forced to sell land to pay off what they owed. Significant rural poverty was accompanied by the growth of large landholdings, a process (called "latifundization") that continued in the next (eighth) century, when Amos and Isaiah bitterly attacked those who obtained land in this way. The sale of one's patrimony was all too common in the time of Ahab, but Naboth was not a debt-ridden poor man. He turned back the encroaching king with a flat "no," a refusal that he softened by referring to Israel's basic belief that people should preserve their ancestors' land and the memory that is attached to it.

◇ *Jezebel to the Rescue (1 Kings 21:4-7)*

Ahab came home depressed and angry about the fact that Naboth the Jezreelite said, "I will not give you my fathers' patrimony."

He lay down on his bed and turned his face and didn't eat.

Jezebel his wife came to him and said, "Why is your spirit depressed and you will not eat?"

And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money, or if you wish I will give you another vineyard instead of it,' and he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.' "

Jezebel said to him, "You, now, perform kingship over Israel! Arise, eat, and be satisfied! I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

Ahab has no tradition of "eminent domain" that allows a government to take any land it wants, but Jezebel sees that a subject stands in the way of the king's desires, and she will **perform kingship**, acting as she believes kings should act.

◇ *A Show Trial for Treason (1 Kings 21:8-15)*

She wrote scrolls in Ahab's name, sealed them with his seal, and sent the scrolls to the elders and the nobles in his city who sat with Naboth.

She wrote in the letters thus, "Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people. Seat two worthless people opposite him and let them testify thus, 'you "blessed" God and the king,' and take him out and stone him till he dies."

The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent to them, just as was written in the scrolls that she sent to them.

They called a fast and sat Naboth at the head of the people.

Two worthless men came and sat opposite him.

The worthless men accused Naboth thus before the people, "Naboth 'blessed' God and the king" and they took him out of the city and stoned him and he died.

They sent to Jezebel thus, "Naboth was stoned and he died."

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and had died, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, inherit the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite who refused to sell it to you, for Naboth is not alive, he is dead."

Ahab's predicament, which Jezebel has made her own, is like David's when he was faced with an inconvenient Uriah; like David, she will not

simply kill a subject without a cover story. David used the cover of warfare. Placing Naboth in a situation in which he will be convicted for "blessing" the king, a euphemism for cursing the king, is an act of treason. Her plan rests on the widely held convention that the king can confiscate the lands of those executed for treason.

◇ *The Prophecy of Doom (1 Kings 21:16-19)*

As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to inherit it.

The word of YHWH came to Elijah the Tishbite thus, "Arise and go down to meet Ahab king of Israel in Samaria. Look! He is in Naboth's vineyard to which he has gone down to inherit. You shall speak to him and say, 'Have you murdered and also inherited?' And say to him thus, 'This is what YHWH says, "In the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth, the dogs will also lick your blood."'"

Jezebel wished to gratify her husband's desire, but the prophet tells Ahab that he has been doomed to a terrible death. Foreign wives bring their own ideas about social institutions, and Jezebel has run roughshod over Israel's cherished traditions. Her vision of kingship is imperial and imperious, not so different from David's before he learned better. With this vision, she overrides the Israelite concept that land should remain within the owner's family, a concept of no interest to her. She also subverts the integrity of the judicial system. Perhaps her view is like that of Egypt or later Persia: the word of the king is law, and if the king commands, his subjects must obey. But the results of her ideas are abhorrent to Israel, where divine demands about law and land override royal wishes.

The house of Ahab began to unravel. Ahab himself died of wounds incurred fighting at Ramoth-Gilead. His son Jehoram had good intentions. He dismantled Ba'al worship, and seemed to listen more to Elisha than his predecessors had listened to prophets. But he ruled only twelve years before Jehu, anointed by a disciple of Elisha, brought the final doom of the house of Omri in a bloody coup. Having begun his insurrection, Jehu approached Jezreel, where King Jehoram was recuperating from war wounds. Jehoram and the visiting King Ahaziah of Judah went to meet him.

◇ *Doom Delivered (2 Kings 9:22–26)*

As soon as Jehoram saw Jehu, he said, "Is all well with Jehu?" He said, "What is 'well' as long as there be your mother Jezebel's many whoredoms and sorceries?" Jehoram reversed his hands and fled. He said to Ahaziah, "It is deceit, Ahaziah!" Jehu filled his hand with his bow and struck Jehoram between his arms.

The arrow came out through his heart and he fell in his chariot. Jehu said to his adjutant Bidqar, "Pick him up and throw him into the portion of field that was Naboth the Jezreelite's. For remember, I and you together were riding together after his father Ahab, and YHWH sent this message to him, 'By oath, I have seen the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons yesterday,' says YHWH, 'and I will pay you back in this portion,' says YHWH. And now, pick him up and throw him into the portion, as YHWH said."

Jehu accuses Jezebel of "whoredoms and incantations." Jezebel's "whoredoms" are not sexual (as far as we know). They are her acts of worship to her own gods, which from Israel's point of view are *genûnim*, "whoredoms," acts of faithlessness to YHWH. In the same way, her "witchcrafts" are her prayers to her gods. Jehu's indictment of her loyalty to her home gods is a tip-off that an insurrection is afoot. He kills Jehoram, invoking the death of Naboth as justification for brutality, and then turns to Jezebel.

◇ *The Death of Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30–36)*

Jehu entered Jezreel.

Jezebel heard and placed kohl on her eyes, and made her head nice.

She looked out the window.

Jehu was coming in the gate.

She said, "Is all well with Zimri, the killer of his master?"

He looked up at the window and said, "Who is with me, who?"

Two or three eunuchs looked at him.

He said, "Throw her down!"

They threw her down and some of her blood splattered on the wall and on the horses, who trampled her.

He came and ate and drank and said, "Take care of that accursed woman and bury her, for she is the daughter of a king."

They went to bury her and didn't find anything but her skull, her feet, and her hands.

They came back and told him and he said, "It is the word of YHWH which he spoke through his servant Elijah the Tishbite, thus, 'In the portion of Jezreel the dogs will eat the flesh of Jezebel.'"

The story of her death reveals a woman of courage. Facing the murderer of her husband's family, the queen makes herself up to look her best and calls Jehu a murderer, comparing him to a long-ago royal assassin who ruled only a week before being assassinated himself. She speaks with dignity, defiance, and grace. Nevertheless, we readers almost cheer when her servants throw her out of the window to be eaten by dogs. Her motives may have been pure, but Jezebel has done everything wrong. She is not evil herself, but she is the very embodiment of Evil, and the arch-villain of Israel. Jehu, on the other hand, the fierce usurper who goes on to massacre all the house of Ahab, plays the part of the champion of the forces of light, spouting prophecies of God to justify his barbarisms. Despite his bloodthirstiness, he stands on the side of Israel's native lore. Jezebel, operating on a national scale with her royal power, did precisely what Deuteronomy feared: she imported her foreign customs into Israel. As the Deuteronomist historian sums up Ahab's reign (1 Kings 16:31): "Following Jeroboam's sin was not serious enough for him (Ahab), so he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethba'al and went and worshiped Ba'al and bowed down to him."