

Reclaiming Jezebel

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"In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel. And the carcase of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field; so that they shall not say, this is Jezebel."¹ With these words, the fate of Jezebel has been sealed for nearly three millennia. There can be little ambiguity about the symbolism behind this judgment, as Jezebel is transformed from queen, to dog food, and finally to excrement. Conventional sources tell us many things about Jezebel: that she was a Phoenician princess, the wife of Ahab king of the Israelites, and the mortal enemy of God's prophet, Elijah. In all of these roles, she has tradition²ally been presented as evil. But in recent decades a change has been brewing for Jezebel as feminist scholars have sought to reclaim her, if not as a heroine, at least as a strong (but flawed) female biblical character. This paper will examine the story of Jezebel in several parts: first, the biblical account of her life and death (using the King James version of the books of Kings in the Old Testament); second, the traditional view of Jezebel through the ages in extra-biblical sources, sermons, and books; third, Jezebel in pop culture; and finally, the specific ways that feminist scholars are seeking to reclaim Jezebel from the bone pile and the dung heap.

Jezebel in the Bible

To understand Jezebel one must start at the beginning of her known story, which was told as part of a larger narrative of God's prophet Elijah's activities in the books of Kings in the Bible. The first mention of Jezebel comes as she is married to Ahab, heir to the Omri dynasty, and a man already in trouble with Yahweh for "walk[ing] in the sins of Jeroboam,"³ a reference to idol worship. After marrying Jezebel, Ahab builds a temple and a shrine to the gods that she worships, Baal and Asherah, as part of the religion that she was brought up with as a Phoenician princess. The daughter of a priest (as well as a king), Jezebel is zealous in her religion and sets about immediately persecuting the prophets of Yahweh. But Ahab is open minded, and he continues to seek council from time to time with God's

prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, who tells him that "As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."⁴

A drought and famine did in fact ensue, as the prophet had predicted, until finally, according to the command of God, Elijah went to Ahab and challenged him to assemble the prophets of Baal for a contest to see who could end the years-long drought. These 850 prophets tried unsuccessfully to bring rain, until "Elijah mocked them, and said, 'Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or he sleepeth and must be awaked'."⁵ When it was Elijah's turn, he spoke softly to God, who answered with a bolt of lightning, soon followed by the life giving rain. Elijah then ordered the awe-struck onlookers to round up the prophets of Baal, all 850, who were promptly killed. When Jezebel, back home in Jezreel, learned of what had transpired, she did not tremble in the face of defeat. Instead, she "sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, 'So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time'."⁶ Apparently taking this threat seriously, Elijah fled to the wilderness.

We next hear from Jezebel in the context of the story of the vineyard of Naboth. In this part of the tale, King Ahab, wishing to obtain a new plot of land, has been rebuffed by Naboth, a land owner with a vineyard adjacent to the king's palace at Jezreel. Ahab sulks and refuses to eat, but Jezebel says "Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth."⁷ In order to fulfill her promise, Jezebel writes letters falsely accusing Naboth of blasphemy against God and king, a crime which is punishable by death. When Naboth has been thus removed from his land, Ahab takes possession of it, where Elijah finds him and issues proclamations against him, saying "in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood,"⁸ and "the dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel,"⁹ for Ahab had sold "himself

to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.”¹⁰ Ahab humbled himself before Elijah and God, and was given a reprieve of the punishment for his sin. This is the last direct contact between Elijah and the royal couple.

Upon Elijah being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, his successor Elisha took over his prophetic duties. Under the guidance of Elisha, Jehu, a soldier, was secretly anointed the king of Israel and set about to claim the throne from the descendants of Ahab, who had died. When Ahab’s son, Joram (Jehu’s commander), asked him “Is it peace,” Jehu answered “what peace, so long as the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many?”¹¹ He then killed both of the sons of Ahab, and turned his sights to Jezebel in her palace at Jezreel. Knowing that Jehu was coming for her, Jezebel “painted her face, and tired her head, and looked out at a window,”¹² and when Jehu approached she taunted him by saying “Had Zimri peace who slew his master?”¹³ Jehu was unmoved and ordered several of Jezebel’s servants to throw her down, and they did so, causing her blood to splatter on the wall before she was trampled by Jehu’s horse. Jehu then neglected to bury Jezebel, and by the time soldiers went to take care of that business (since she was, after all, the daughter of a king), all that was left of Jezebel was “the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.”¹⁴ Jehu was satisfied that this was the fulfillment of Elijah’s earlier prophecy.

Traditional Interpretation

Jezebel’s story is told in a few verses, intertwined with the stories of the men who affected her life, but it seemingly gives enough information to condemn her for all time. Readers of the story have found in Jezebel some of the worst qualities that can be ascribed to a woman: manipulation, masculinity, boldness, seductiveness, and more. These traditional sources begin with the earliest biblical commentaries found in the Talmud and are continued by subsequent commentaries by Thomas Aquinas, Jerome, and others. The idea of Jezebel as evil seductress has also been used in countless sermons, often to describe any destructive or negative outside influence, but also as a warning to women about the limits of their power. And finally, in current written sources one can find negative portrayals of Jezebel ranging from mild condemnation to a fear that the “Jezebel spirit” is actively seeking the downfall of Christianity even

today.

The earliest extra-biblical sources set the stage for Jezebel’s image through the ages, beginning by laying the blame for Ahab’s sins at Jezebel’s feet. As Janet Howe Gaines notes in her book *Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel through the Ages*, “Talmudic legend amplifies biblical accounts of Jezebel’s active role in causing Ahab’s apostasy.”¹⁵ So it is not just her own sins for which she has been condemned, but for the sins of Ahab as well. According to Gaines, this is because of the line in Kings that says “But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.”¹⁶ R. Levi understood the importance of the second part of this line after Ahab appeared to him in a dream and complained that he had overlooked Jezebel’s influence.¹⁷ So, while Ahab is clearly seen as a villain in this tale, it is understood to be through the work of Jezebel that he has strayed from strict Yahwhism. In keeping with this theme, a Talmud scholar notes “Jezebel is portrayed as a wicked woman (*Sifrei on Numbers* 133), who represents the negative influence of Gentile women who turned Israel’s heart to idolatry; an evil woman who causes the king of Israel to stray from the ways of the Lord (*Sifrei on Deuteronomy* 159).”¹⁸

Jezebel’s representation as a harlot, while not seemingly founded in the text itself, has taken root in the traditional interpretations of her tale. In the biblical text the word “whoredoms” (or harlotries in other versions besides King James) is used only once, by Jehu to describe the ruling practices of Jezebel. As Gaines points out, this is not because she displayed the activity of a harlot, but because “a country desiring false gods is symbolically represented by a woman lusting after additional sexual partners. Therefore, the concept of unlawful sex and unlawful idol worship are linked in the Bible.”¹⁹ So if Jezebel does not display the actions of a harlot, then from where does this notion come?

It is within the Talmudic sources that one first finds the insinuation that Jezebel was a harlot. Gaines notes that “In the Talmud (*Sanhedrin*, 39b), Raba recounts that Jezebel draws pictures of prostitutes on Ahab’s chariot. Ahab, the rabbi concludes, is “frigid by nature [passionless], so Jezebel painted pictures of two harlots on his chariot that he might look upon them and become heated’.”²⁰ While modern day Christian preachers may not know this story from the Talmud, its influence is still felt in the popular understanding of Jezebel as a woman of loose morals. In addition to

this, Jezebel's behavior leading up to her death has also been used against her to insinuate that she was willing to use seduction to save herself. In Rashi's commentary it is said that Jezebel "adorned her head in order to have charm in Jehu's eyes so that he would marry her."²¹ Later interpreters would find fault with this reading, but the rabbis found Jezebel to be a harlot and a seductress in life, and this verdict has stuck.

In sermons Jezebel has been reviled throughout the history of the Christian Church as well. It is impossible to know how often and to what extent Jezebel has been used as a cautionary device to warn churchgoers of the dangers lurking around them: dangerous women, temptation to sin, idolatry, etc. However, there are some sermons that have been recorded which give an idea of the way in which Jezebel's image has been maintained throughout time. In one famous sermon called *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, the Protestant reformer John Knox, said:

And who doubteth but Iesabel, and Athalia, before their miserable end, were conuicted in their cankered consciences, to acknowledge that the murther, which they had committed, and the empire whiche the one had six yeares usurped, were repugnant to iustice: Euen so shall they I doubt not, whiche this daye do possesse and mainteine that monstiferous authoritie of women²², shortlie be compelled to acknowledge, that their studies and deuises, haue bene bent against God: and that all such as women haue usurped, repugneth to iustice, because, as I haue saide, it repugneth to the will of God expressed in his sacred worde. And if any man doubt herof, let him marke wel the wordes of the apostle, saying²³: I permit not a woman to teache, nether yet to vsurpe authoritie aboue man.²⁴

In this case, Knox uses Jezebel as a warning against the rule of women, which he sees as "repugnant to the will of God." It is the very act of a woman taking an authoritative role over men that is so concerning to Knox about Jezebel, and reflects a general animosity toward Catholic queens of the time. It is very interesting that Jezebel, who was clearly a commanding presence, should be used as an instrument of oppression for women, in the sense that her memory could be employed to keep people

in fear of the rule of women.

It is not just at the pulpit that Jezebel has been denounced before a Christian audience. Edith Deen wrote in her biography of Jezebel (as part of a larger collection of biographies of biblical women) that the queen "was neither a good wife and mother nor a just ruler."²⁵ In saying this, Deen manages to render Jezebel a failure in feminine and masculine terms, reflecting the multiple dimensions that Jezebel inhabited as both a woman and a ruler. In fact, Deen finds something in Jezebel that is inherently destructive to men and women, saying "her elaborate, sensuous entourage introduced into Israel the lewd Baal worship which tended to destroy manhood and drag womanhood into shame."²⁶ Along these same lines, Deen finds shadows of Jezebel in later examples of "evil" women: Lady Macbeth, Mary, Queen of Scots, Marie Antoinette, and Catherine de'Medici, who, like Jezebel, was "an outstanding example of what a woman ought not to be."²⁷ The author apparently finds no mitigating circumstances that help to explain Jezebel's behavior, as she roundly condemns her, saying "no woman's name in history has become so commonly accepted as a synonym for wickedness."²⁸ Edith Deen's appraisal of Jezebel is in keeping with the established dogma that has become so comfortable to readers in regards to this biblical queen.

Jezebel's negative image extends to academic writers as well. Writing in 1992, William E. Phipps, self-proclaimed feminist and Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia, gives another less-than-forgiving view of Jezebel in his book *Assertive Biblical Women*. In this book, the author appreciates assertiveness as "a central concept of the women's movement in the past generation."²⁹ But in Jezebel he apparently finds something beyond assertiveness, as he places her story under the collective heading "Bold and Unscrupulous Rulers."³⁰ Calling her "Hurricane Jezebel," Phipps goes on to accuse the queen of "pressur[ing] prince Ahab to erect a sanctuary for Baal,"³¹ and finally of being a contemptuous wife toward Ahab when he was angry and petulant regarding the vineyard of Naboth.³² In his analysis of Jezebel, Phipps does include some information which may help to understand her label of whore/harlot: that the religion to which Jezebel adhered included devotion "to orgies of slaughter and sex."³³ The author does not offer corroboration of his assertion, but if it is true it could go a long way toward understanding Jezebel's legacy as a harlot.

For some modern Christians it has become natural to speak of a “jezebel spirit.” It is not clear how widespread this notion has become, but there is a vast amount of information to be found on the internet regarding the jezebel spirit. Many books have also been written on the subject, one of which is John Paul Jackson’s *Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit*. In this book, the author explains the jezebel spirit to be “a diabolical spiritual force that seeks to deceive, defile, and destroy God’s authorities.”³⁴ It seems that the jezebel spirit is believed to be some sort of demonic influence, because Jackson says that “at the moment [that a person comes under the influence of a Jezebel spirit], the individual’s rational reasoning process begins to deteriorate. His or her thoughts and actions become distorted.”³⁵ If it were just one book and a few websites it would be easy to ignore this incarnation of the Jezebel myth, but there are many other titles to choose from in exploring this epithet: *The Jezebel Spirit*, *Confronting Jezebel: Discerning and Defeating the Spirit of Control*, *Overcoming the Spirit of Jezebel*, *Jezebel in our Midst*, and many others. So it seems that, at least for some people, Jezebel is not simply a wicked queen of antiquity, and not just a pile of bones, but a permanent source of evil in human society.

Pop Culture

In spite of, or perhaps in part because of, her evil image, Jezebel has become a recurrent theme in American pop culture, with examples that alternately uphold and destroy the traditional view of the painted queen. Within our language, the word Jezebel has been transformed from a woman’s name to a descriptive term, an epithet to be hurled as a weapon against any woman whose behavior is deemed inappropriate. In fact, the word has been used in this way so extensively that it has found a place in the Oxford English Dictionary, where the entry for Jezebel reads: “Name of the infamous wife of Ahab king of Israel; hence used allusively for a wicked, impudent, or abandoned woman.” This reference volume traces the etymology of the word in its allusive form to the 1558 sermon by John Knox, previously referenced, entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, and to various other sermons, and includes the adjective forms Jezebelian, Jezebelical, and Jezebelish. It is also acceptable to use the word in lowercase, as included in Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary: “often not capitalized: an impudent, shameless, or morally unrestrained woman.” One

thinks nothing of the remark, used in an off-hand way, in a popular movie like *Steel Magnolias*, when the character played by Dolly Parton jokingly calls her younger friend, played by Daryl Hannah, Jezebel for staying out late, drinking, and smoking.³⁶ In this way, the legend of Jezebel as a woman of loose morals is perpetuated in our daily lives.

In the American south, the insult takes on a more sinister racial undertone. It is no secret that in the days of slavery a man could exploit his female slaves for his own sexual gratification. But what is not always remembered is that these captive women were often blamed for the acts of their captors, and given labels to make this exploitation seem justified. As Tina Pippin writes, “Jezebel was the designation of the sexually dangerous African American slave woman. The jezebel is sexual; provocative; promiscuous; rebellious; a whore. The white masters created these images to control and dominate the female slave. White women blamed the jezebels in order to deny the rape and oppression of slave women.”³⁷ Knowing this, it is perplexing that author Jacquelin Thomas, a writer of African American Christian fiction, would pen a book called *Jezebel*, in which the protagonist, Jessie Belle is a seductive and manipulative young black woman who schemes and does evil to get her way. The book is styled as a modern day retelling of the biblical story of Jezebel, with Jessie Belle meeting a similar fate when she is thrown from a balcony. But unlike the biblical Jezebel, Jessie is given a chance to redeem herself before she dies. In looking back on her life and her situation, Jessie Belle asks her nurse “Did you know that there’s a Jezebel spirit? There is. Anyone who worships money, earthly treasures or power is vulnerable to this spirit.”³⁸ As previously noted, this idea of a “jezebel spirit” reaches across modern Christian teaching, and continues the tradition of relating the name Jezebel with temptation and sin.

One of the best known examples of Jezebel in pop culture is the 1938 movie “Jezebel,” in which Bette Davis plays a willful and demanding young southern belle named Julie Marsden who schemes and manipulates men to get her way. This is an interesting portrayal of a character loosely based on Jezebel, since Julie is never depicted as being sexually immoral, and in many ways is shown as a good person who is simply spoiled and impetuous. Julie is gracious toward her friends, kind to her slaves (all of whom appear unrealistically happy and content in their lives), and in the end repentant and sacrificing to save the life of her true love, Pres Dillard (played

by Henry Fonda). But before her redemption, Julie uses her feminine wiles to bring about the downfall of two of her friends: men who are brought to a duel over false implications regarding the lady's honor, and one of whom is killed in the event. When Julie is left to finally face the results of her actions, she emotionally asks her aunt what she is thinking, and receives the reply, "I'm thinking of a woman called Jezebel who did evil in the sight of God."³⁹ This line echoes the line repeated in the Bible regarding the Kings of Israel (Omri, Ahab, and the sons of Ahab), who "did evil in the sight of the Lord." The closing scene of the movie shows Julie, riding atop a cart loaded with yellow fever patients, one of whom was her love Pres, headed to "plague island" where people were quarantined. On her face is a look that one could imagine on Jezebel's face as she awaited her certain fate: a look of determination, courage, and self assuredness. It is not likely that the makers of this film were interested in paying homage to Jezebel in anyway, but it is a striking end to the film nonetheless.

In music, Jezebel has been made a staple of the jilted lover song genre. Frankie Laine's 1950's dramatic song, "Jezebel," included the line "if ever the devil was born, without a pair of horns, it was you, Jezebel, it was you."⁴⁰ Throughout the song, the singer laments the evil object of his self-destructive love, and Jezebel's image as caustic woman is maintained. In a twist on an old theme, the 10,000 Maniacs song "Jezebel" employs the word as a self-deprecating remark used by a guilty lover who no longer feels the love: "I know your feelings are tender; And that inside you the embers still glow; But I'm a shadow, I'm only a bed of blackened coal; Call myself Jezebel for wanting to leave."⁴¹ Yet another "Jezebel" song depicting the traditional usage of the word is by Depeche Mode. In this song, a man speaks in defense of his lady, who others call Jezebel: "They call you Jezebel; Whenever we walk in; You're going straight to hell; For wanton acts of sin" (Depeche Mode). In all of these songs, the time-honored rendering of Jezebel as seductive, evil, and sinful is upheld in one way or another, either by explicit or implicit acceptance.

However, not all pop culture portrayals of Jezebel are negative. In Isaac Asimov's 1953 book, *Caves of Steel*, there is a woman named Jezebel who goes by Jessie. She is quite enamored of her name, thinking that it makes her very exciting and risqué. In an argument one day, her husband (named Elijah, of all things) tells her that the Jezebel of the Bible

was not nearly as bad a woman as her reputation would suggest. In the following narrative, Asimov presents a view of Jezebel that modern day feminists might appreciate, saying "the Jezebel of the Bible was a faithful wife, and a good one" and that the reason she is viewed in such a negative light is because "her enemies wrote" the chapters about her.⁴² Lije goes on to tell Jessie that Jezebel's actions in persecuting the prophets were no worse than the actions of Elijah who killed the Baalists, and that this was "the usual method of proselytization in those days."⁴³ Asimov cannot as easily explain away Jezebel's actions against Naboth, which he concedes were wrong, but he mitigates the behavior by saying, "the only excuse for her was that Ahab was sick and unhappy over the situation and she felt that her love for her husband came ahead of Naboth's welfare."⁴⁴ Overall, this was a very progressive view to be found in a book written in 1953. Perhaps Asimov was channeling the future, looking ahead to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the time frame in which the story in *Caves of Steel* was set, when a different view of the Jezebel story would be more commonplace.

Non-traditional representations of Jezebel, or non-traditional uses for her name, can be found in other pop culture formats as well. For example, a recent song by Iron and Wine, from the 2005 album "Woman King," lends a more sympathetic voice to the chorus. The sentiment is fairly well summed up in the line, "Who's seen Jezebel? She was born to be the woman we could blame" (Iron and Wine). This song is part of a collection of songs that all deal with aspects of women and spirituality, and Jezebel is given an uncharacteristically compassionate treatment, along with Lilith, and women in general. With the rise of the internet in the last ten years or so, it has become understood that almost any view is represented on the vast network of the internet. For this reason, one really shouldn't be surprised to find a woman's online magazine called Jezebel.com, with the tagline: "Celebrity, Sex, Fashion, for Women. Without Airbrushing."⁴⁵ The trend toward more accepting portrayals of Jezebel in pop culture may be due in part to the next important topic of this paper: the reinterpretation of Jezebel and other Bible stories by feminist scholars.

The Reinterpretation

Ever since women have been studying history and religion, they have been finding new meanings behind the stories that they read. Jezebel's tale is

no exception. Feminist scholars of the Bible have often found in Jezebel something different from tradition. At times, they have found her to be smart, courageous, a caring wife, and fervently religious. At each point in the story where Jezebel has been condemned, a feminist voice now speaks up to explain, if not to excuse, her actions. A look at just a few of these areas of interest will suffice for the purposes of this paper.

To begin with, reinterpreters have made much of the fact that *Kings* was written under the Deuteronomistic tradition, and that this automatically puts Jezebel at a disadvantage in the telling of her story. The Deuteronomistic History is the “theological framework that shapes the books of *Deuteronomy* through *Kings*” and “declares that obedience to Yahweh brings reward and disobedience brings punishment.”⁴⁶ Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel would have been a problem, even if they had not built temples to Baal and persecuted prophets of Yahweh, because “it was believed that foreign women would lure their Israelite husbands away from God to their gods.”⁴⁷ It seems that part of Jezebel’s predicament is that she got caught up in the problems between the Israelites and their God. She was not the cause of this problem, as her story takes up only a small part of the two books of *Kings*, but “the theme of these two books is Israel’s failure to live up to God’s expectations.”⁴⁸ Her story is simply a small part of this larger idea that the Israelites were to face punishment for being unfaithful to their jealous God.

In fact, not only were the Israelites already in trouble with Yahweh, they were already familiar with the gods that Jezebel worshipped so fervently. Researchers have found that “Baalism was already in the land when the Israelites moved there.”⁴⁹ As people who made a living doing agriculture, the Israelites would probably have appreciated having a god such as Baal, who was supposedly a fertility god who could control the weather. But that doesn’t mean that the Israelites wanted to worship Baal to the exclusion of other gods. In fact, “a large number of Israelites were probably ambivalent and content to serve two deities.”⁵⁰ This can be seen in Elijah’s question to the Israelites gathered at Mt. Carmel on the day of the prophet’s contest: “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). If Baal worship already existed in Israel before Jezebel’s arrival, this could go a long way toward mitigating her influence on the apostasy of Ahab

and the Israelites, but it may not help her much with strict traditionalists who have already made up their minds about her.

Another important way that feminists have sought to reclaim Jezebel is by reinterpreting the Naboth incident with the understanding of Jezebel’s different cultural upbringing. It would be hard to completely excuse her actions, since she did lie and cause the death of an innocent man. However, by understanding Jezebel’s own culture we may begin to see why she thought this course of action would be justified. Barbara Essex takes a particularly sympathetic view when she writes that “Jezebel is misunderstood: she was from another culture and worldview trying to adjust in a new and strange land.”⁵¹ She goes on to say that “Jezebel was a princess in a culture where royalty knew great power and privilege. Insubordination was a capital offense punishable by death as far as she is concerned.”⁵² So, while not exactly forgiving Jezebel for having Naboth killed, Essex and other writers at least acknowledge that her natal culture would have influenced her actions. Some interpreters have even suggested that “the Deuteronomic historian may have blamed Jezebel for Ahab’s deeds”⁵³ in an effort to place the blame for evil on the shoulders of the foreign woman, in keeping with the policy of vilifying all outside influence.

Another focus of feminist scholars is the relationship between Elijah and Jezebel. Phyllis Tribble, in her essay “The Odd Couple: Elijah and Jezebel,” creates a diptych in which she illustrates the two powerful figures at odds in each of the important scenes from Jezebel’s story. After examining both side by side in this way, she finds that “they [both] have power, and they use it to get what they want. [They] both...manipulate, scheme, and murder.”⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Barbara Essex finds that “both Elijah and Jezebel were active, fanatical, violent, stubborn – and all in the name of their deities.”⁵⁵ This shows a double standard, common in the Bible, whereby any action may be excused as long as the end result is in the favor of Yahwhism and the Israelites. If, in an age of supposed enlightenment, readers can begin to discern this double standard, Jezebel may yet have a chance for redemption.

There is one final insult that has been leveled at Jezebel (and subsequently at countless women by the mere insinuation of their being like her): that she was harlot, a whore, a temptress. Since there is never any mention in the Bible of Jezebel committing any

act of adultery or sexual impropriety, this simply cannot be corroborated. In fact, many people find evidence of a strong and healthy marriage between Jezebel and Ahab. Barabara Essex says “their marriage seems to have been one of mutual caring, respect, and commitment”⁵⁶ and that “she was a caring and concerned wife.”⁵⁷ These assertions are usually connected to her display of concern and her desire to make her husband happy in the Naboth incident. In this light, Jezebel’s actions, though misguided, are done out of love for her husband and a desire to see him happy.

Furthermore, the one word in the text, “whoredoms,” which could be construed to connect Jezebel with sexual misdeeds, can also be explained. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes regarding this label, “Jezebel’s ‘whoredoms’ are not sexual. They are her acts of worship to her own gods, which from Israel’s point of view are ‘whoredoms,’ acts of faithlessness to Yahweh.”⁵⁸ It is strange that, of all of her indiscretions, real and imagined, this is the one that has stuck most strongly in the collective conscious of casual observers. Anyone who has not read the story, but has heard the term, has almost certainly heard it in this context, denoting a woman of loose character. However, the final verdict for many new interpreters of the story is that “despite popular interpretation, she is not a harlot, seductress, or temptress.”⁵⁹ One must wonder if simply clearing up this misconception might change the way Jezebel is viewed by the majority; since this seems to be the one crime for which people have found the most reason to condemn her.

Conclusion

A conspiracy of sorts has been uncovered, lurking in the shadows of this little understood parable of Jezebel; a conspiracy involving the men who wrote her story, and the numerous generations of men who have since used it as a way to subvert the power of women. In the continued use of “the cursed woman’s” name as a pejorative, Tina Pippin finds “the continuation of the ‘curse’ for all women who claim autonomy – sexual, religious, or political.”⁶⁰ Across the ages, this name has been used to refer “to countless women from political queens including Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart, and Isabela I to movie queens such as Bette Davis, Vivian Leigh, and Elizabeth Taylor.”⁶¹ A recurring theme in studies of women’s history finds that many spaces are gendered male or female, and that the spaces which women are permitted to occupy are the

interior spaces. Jezebel, like so many of the women who have come after her and been labeled with her name, overstepped her boundaries as a woman. By trying to influence the world beyond her prescribed space, she created trouble for herself.

However, even as she lived in condemnation for her transgressions beyond the accepted female space, Jezebel remained a captive. In “Jezebel Re-Vamped,” Tina Pippin writes that “Jezebel is a prisoner in her own palace. She never leaves or confronts men on the outside.”⁶² Even in the final scene, as she faces her own death, “Jezebel talks to Jehu from her high window within female space. When she enters the male world, she is thrown to her death.”⁶³ Jezebel’s major crime may have simply been that she was too powerful for a woman, since “it seems that [she] enjoyed an exceptional position within society, although biblical writers are loath to admit it.”⁶⁴ This could only have been seen as unacceptable, so that the authors of the story felt compelled to correct the matter. Brenner points this out when she finds that “the claim that a woman can act in a priestly capacity – especially a foreign woman who worships a foreign god – was probably considered by those who wrote down our stories, and those who later edited them, as bizarre and ridiculous.”⁶⁵ Such is the case with much of women’s stories, which have been told by men throughout recorded history; but the times indeed are changing.

As women are empowered to take control of writing and interpreting their own history, they are not content with allowing Jezebel to remain a pariah. There is a real sense of indignity in the words of feminist writers seeking to reclaim Jezebel. Trible says of Jezebel’s time in Israel that “this land not only obliterates her but it defecates on her identity and memory.” For many of those who seek to reform the queen’s image, there may be a personal motivation, a feeling of solidarity with Jezebel, because, like her, they may have felt “captive to male power,” and finding solidarity is a remedy to this feeling of powerlessness. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that Jezebel has been resurrected in many ways, and although the fight for her image continues, it is no longer such an unbalanced fight; no longer the ghost of a single woman against the entire body of Judeo-Christian patriarchy speaking in one voice against her. Accepting of all of her human faults and failings, women are standing beside their lost sister, Jezebel, and reclaiming her story as part of their own.

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- ⁸ 1 Kings 21:23.
- ⁹ 1 Kings 21:25.
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- ¹¹ 2 Kings 9:30.
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