

Jezebel

Omri (1 Kgs 16:15-28) established new dynasty in Israel & built new city of Samaria as capital (previously Shechem, Tirzah)—dynasty lasted only 34 years, but greatest dynasty in terms of military might & wealth in history of Israel—so influential that Assyrians sometimes called Israel “Omri-land,” even after his death

after a reign of about 7 years, his son Ahab succeeded Omri as king & took as his wife Jezebel, daughter of Eshbaal of Sidon, the dominant city in Phoenicia in the 9th C—450 year power vacuum, 1200-750 B.C.E., allowed several small states to flourish in the Levant (Canaan & Aramea)—in the 9th C, the most powerful was Israel, led by Ahab—greatest military accomplishment was defeat of Assyrians at Battle of Qarqar in 853, where Ahab led a coalition of Levantine states

אֵיזָבֵל Jezebel—vocalized as in HB, might mean “where is the exalted one/Prince?” or “no nobility/honor,” or even “where is dung?” (Aram)—likely that Jezebel’s real name consistently replaced with insulting name by Dtr (cf. Ishbosheth/Eshbaal son of Saul, or Mephibosheth/Meribaal son of Jonathan)

1 Kgs 19:2 LXX: “If you are Elijah, I am Jezebel” seems to suggest “If you are ‘Yahweh is my god,’ I am ‘The exalted one is my god’” (אֵלִיזָבֵל) or even ‘Baal is my god’ (בַּעַל־זָבֵל, a name found in a Phoenician inscription)—cf. also 2 Kgs 1:2 Baalzebub “Lord/Baal of the flies,” a corruption for Baalzebul “exalted Lord/Baal,” as in Mk 3:22

Jezebel’s husband (Ahab), son (Ahaziah), son (Jehoram), and daughter (Athaliah) all ruled as monarchs over Israel (first three) or Judah (Athaliah)—serious confusion in chronology of kings of Israel & Judah between MT & LXX suggests possibility that Ahaziah & Jehoram, sons of Ahab, ruled over both Israel and Judah after the death of Jehoshaphat of Judah (or Jehoram over Israel & Ahaziah over Judah), followed by their sister Athaliah, & Davidic line only restored with Joash

Jezebel traditionally viewed as a wicked woman, from Rev 2:20 to Elvis’ “Hard-headed Woman”

I heard about a king
who was doin' swell
till he started playing
with that evil Jezebel.
Oh yeah, ever since the world began
a hard headed woman been
a thorn in the side of
man.

this is a one-sided, distorted view of one of the most interesting characters in the HB, and one of the strongest women

Jezebel a strong-willed woman with two convictions: (1) she refused to abandon her ancestral religion, which involved the worship of Baal; (2) she was a staunch believer in the divine right of kings to rule their subjects as absolute masters—in the text she is contrasted with Elijah, who also (1) refused to abandon his ancestral religion in the light of new political realities; (2) was a staunch believer that kings were subject to divinely established laws (i.e., the Dtr law code)—

note that when Elijah is hiding out at the beginning of the story (1 Kgs 17:8-9), he is in Zarephath, a village “which belongs to Sidon,” taunting the daughter of the king of Sidon

1 Kgs 16:29-33

Ahab a worshiper of Yahweh (contra 16:31), but he accommodates his wife, as kings at least as far back as Solomon had done, by allowing her to continue worshipping her ancestral deities, building her a small temple & altar for the worship of Baal in Samaria (not found in archaeological excavations)—also built a sacred pole, representing the goddess Asherah, often represented in Canaanite texts & art as consort of Baal (cf. also Yahweh & his Asherah from Sinai)

although Dtr authors condemned the practice of accommodating worship of other deities by foreigners living in Israel or Judah, it was common practice until reign of Josiah (late 7th C)—Dtr theology specified only one valid place to worship Yahweh: the temple in Jerusalem—as a result of anachronistic historical/theological evaluations, no kings of Israel received a positive theological evaluation (since Israel destroyed before reign of Josiah), & no kings after David except Hezekiah & Josiah receive unqualified positive evaluation

introduction of worship of Phoenician Baal (as opposed to indigenous Canaanite Baal) seen as greatest threat to worship of Yahweh by Dtr historians, so much so that traditional Israelite names changed—shift probably began earlier, perhaps in waning days of Israelite kingdom (cf. Hos 2:16)

1 Kgs (18:1-46)

Jezebel has begun killing prophets of Yahweh (18:4)—not priests, who worked within the temples of Dan & Bethel, & undoubtedly Samaria & elsewhere as well—prophets in this context presumes opposition to policies of Ahab & Jezebel & to their authority to rule—Jezebel’s persecution more political than theological

Elijah challenges priests of Baal to a showdown, which Elijah wins when Yahweh consumes sacrifice with fire from heaven—Elijah urges the people to kill the 450 prophets of Baal (title “prophets” chosen to contrast with prophets of Yahweh, though more likely priests), leading to direct confrontation with Jezebel, since they were probably her fellow countrymen—although the implication here is that all the prophets were killed, 2 Kgs 10:19 indicates that many remained

1 Kgs 19:1-3

first direct confrontation between Jezebel & Elijah, although carried out through intermediaries—contrast face to face confrontations between Ahab & Elijah at Mt. Carmel and in Naboth’s field

acc. to LXX, Jezebel issues a direct theological challenge to Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:2—in both MT & LXX, she warns Elijah that she is coming after him, & Elijah believes her & flees

1 Kgs 21:1-29

Naboth has a vineyard that Ahab wants, but Naboth is unwilling to sell, because it is part of his family’s traditional heritage—when Ahab is unable to attain what he wants, he sulks, but Jezebel is a woman of action, & she trumps up charges against Naboth by bribing two witnesses (as required by law—Deut 19:15) & orchestrates Naboth’s death—she presents Ahab with the field, but when he takes his first walk in his new acquisition, he encounters Elijah (21:20-24), who

threatens him and his family with horrible destruction—Ahab repents & is granted forgiveness (21:27-29)—last section probably required by historical facts of Ahab’s death in battle (ch. 22, but is it really Ahab or just an unnamed “king of Israel”?—cf. 22:37-38 & chronological confusion)

1 Kgs (22:51-53)

Ahaziah reigns over Israel in place of Ahab, follow in footsteps of father & mother

(2 Kgs 3:1-3)

Jehoram reigns over Israel in place of Ahaziah his brother—he removes “pillar of Baal” from Samaria—apparent Yahwistic reform, but not enough to earn praise of Dtr historians

2 Kgs 9:30-37

revolt of Jehu results in death of both Jehoram (of Israel?) and Ahaziah (of Judah?)—revolt perhaps spurred by desire for Yahwistic reform, but at least as important was desire to appease Assyria, whose power was growing again (Jehu pictured on Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III as bringing tribute to Assyrian king)

after death of two kings, Jehu orders murder of Jezebel in Jezreel—Jezebel, knowing her end is at hand, adorns herself like a queen and taunts Jehu by calling him Zimri—Jezebel’s body eaten by dogs, in accordance with Elijah’s prophecy

Jehu slaughters the descendants of the house of Ahab (2 Kgs 10)—Athaliah, probably daughter of Ahab & Jezebel (8:26) & mother of Ahaziah of Judah, seizes throne of Judah (2 Kgs 11), where she remains queen until the ascent of Joash 7 years later

was the wholesale slaughter of priests & worshiper of Baal condoned by the biblical authors?—Dtr historians seem to condone it, but Hosea decries bloodshed associated with the reign of Jehu

who was Jezebel?

- a strong woman who holds fast to her ancestral religious beliefs, absolutely convinced in their superiority to the religion of her adopted country (cf. Esther)
- a woman completely committed to her marriage (cf. Ruth’s attachment to Naomi, also related through marriage)
- an ambitious woman who is portrayed as the power behind the throne
- a manipulative woman who “games the system” to her own benefit and the benefit of her family
- a fearless woman in a world dominated by men, not intimidated by a prophet of Yahweh, a usurping rebel, or even her own husband
- an intelligent woman, who understands the ways of the palace, the laws and customs of the land, and the commitment of her greatest adversary (Elijah)

- in the end, she outlasts her husband, her sons, and even her adversary, and dies—in her mind at least—with dignity, refusing to surrender