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EXEGESIS FOR STORYTELLERS AND OTHER STRANGERS*

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If the Society of Biblical Literature gave awards for excellence in polarized thinking, the Deuteronomistic theologians would capture first prize. With rhetorical purity and power they subsumed centuries of traditions, diverse genres, and points of view under the severe rubric of opposing concepts: life and death, blessing and curse, good and evil, obedience and disobedience. They locked even divinity into this scheme. Indeed, the God of Israel versus the gods of the Canaanites apotheosized their way of thinking. Evidence to the contrary merited denial, denunciation, or dismissal.[1]

When these ancient theologians focused attention on ninth-century Israel, they found a host of stories to feed their passion for polarity. By arranging them in particular ways and adding glosses here and there, they shaped a narrative in which Elijah and Jezebel (among other characters) emerged as quintessential opposites: he the epitome of good; she of evil. So successful was the juxtaposition that it has persuaded readers throughout the ages. As they relish the clash between these characters, they make the proper Deuteronomistic choice. Elijah they love; Jezebel they hate. In other words, authorial-editorial intentionality and reader response have converged for interpretive compatibility. Yet the alliance is not inviolable. Between intentionality and response stands the malleable text, ever open to new configurations. Accordingly, we savor again the stories of Elijah and Jezebel. But this time in confirming the polarity we confound it for the sake of spicing theological discourse.

I. Introducing the Characters

Of the two characters Jezebel emerges first, in the formulaic report on the reign of King Ahab.[2] Confining the king within an *inclusio* of indictment, the

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[1] For an overview, see Steven L. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic History," *AB* 2. 160–68 and the bibliography cited there.

[2] On the reign of Ahab, see, e.g., Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel*

Deuteronomists cite as his primary evil marriage to this foreign woman. "And [Ahab] took as wife Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians" (1 Kgs 16:31).[3] Surrounded by the nouns "wife" and "daughter," Jezebel enters Israel in an arrangement between males. Husband and father define her. In addition, the scatological spelling of her name, pointed in Hebrew to yield the perverted meaning "dung," signifies utter contempt as it presages her eventual demise.[4] No woman (or man) in the Hebrew Scriptures endures a more hostile press than Jezebel.

Not surprisingly, the hostility focuses on her religious affiliation. Three times in their censure of Ahab the Deuteronomists spit out the name of her god. Ahab worshiped Baal, built a house for Baal, and erected in it an altar for Baal. The linkage of these acts to his marriage with Jezebel, as well as the repeated sound Baal, invites another look at her name. Freed from the parody of Hebrew pointing, the name means "Where is the Prince?" It resounds in the liturgy of the Baal cult, miming the cry that goes out when vegetation dries up in the land: "Where is Baal the Conqueror? where is the Prince, the Lord of the earth?"[5] The question anticipates the return of fertility, the release of Baal from the power of Mot, god of death. Thus, the faith Jezebel espouses, her name announces. This name the Deuteronomists condemn.

After their scathing introduction of her, these theologians step aside, and for a time she too recedes in the narrative. Elijah emerges. Unlike Jezebel, his entrance does not depend on others but comes through his own speech. "And said Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead to Ahab . . ." (17:1). The prophet confronts the king, and in that confrontation two deities clash. Claiming for his God the power to control drought and rain, death and life, Elijah challenges the power of Baal the storm god, "the Rider on the Clouds." "As YHWH the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word." Beginning with an oath formula that cites "YHWH, the God of Israel" as his authority, Elijah concludes by elevating his own word to equal authority. The meaning of his name, "YHWH is my God," supports the audacious move. Not unlike Jezebel, the faith Elijah espouses, his name announces. This name the Deuteronomists applaud.

Contrasting discourse presents contrasting introductions of opposing characters. Entrapped by hostile editors and male lords, Jezebel appears as evil object, neither speaking nor acting. Free of editorial restraints, Elijah appears

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(Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977) 174–78; William M. Schniedewind, "History and Interpretation: The Religion of Ahab and Manasseh in the Book of Kings," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 649–61; Ephraim Stern, "How Bad Was Ahab?" *BAR* 19 (March/April 1993) 18–29.

[3] Translations of the Hebrew follow the NRSV, but often with my alterations.

[4] On the name Jezebel, see John Gray, *I & II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 368.

[5] See Michael David Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 75–115, esp. 113.

as good subject, exalting himself in word and deed. She is female and foreign; he, male and native. She comes from the coastlands; he, from the highlands. She thrives in a sea climate; he, in a desert climate. She belongs to husband and father; he, neither to wife nor father. She embodies royalty; he, prophecy. Both bear theophoric names that unite them in opposition: Jezebel the Baal worshiper and Elijah the YHWH worshiper. The details of an economic text yield an abundance of polarities.

II. Preparing for Confrontation

For a time the polarities build through indirection and delay. Three cycles of narratives follow Elijah from his announcement of drought through related exploits to the coming of rain (17:1–24; 18:1–19; 18:20–46).[6] Throughout he commands center stage; yet these narratives also carry glimpses of Jezebel.

Cycle 1: Three short narratives of departure (17:2–7, 8–16, 17–24). In the first cycle, the word of YHWH sends Elijah into hiding (17:2–7). There he drinks from the brook Cherith and eats bread and meat that ravens bring. If the Baalistic world from which he has fled, the world occupied by Jezebel and Ahab, signifies death, the Yhwistic world in which he resides signifies life—until the brook dries up. Then the word sends him ironically to Sidon, to Jezebel's own land, where a widow (אִשָּׁה אַלְמָנָה) brings him water in a vessel and a morsel of bread "in her hand" (17:8–16). All happens "according to the word of YHWH which he spoke by the hand of Elijah" (17:16). Thus Elijah and the widow join "hands." This Phoenician woman does what Jezebel will not.[7] She obeys Elijah; she ministers to him. Another incident reinforces the emphasis (17:17–24). It features a woman identified as the owner of the house (הָאִשָּׁה בַּעֲלַת בָּיִת) where Elijah sojourns. At first she perceives him as an agent of death, convicting her of sin. But when instead he restores her sick son to life, she deems him "a man

[6] For literary studies of these and related chapters, see, *inter alia*, Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17–19," *JBL* 101 (1982) 333–50; David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible I*, Supplement Series 7 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986) 66–88; Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb* (Sheffield: Almond, 1990) and the bibliography cited there; also Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 122–45. For sociological study, see Tamis Hoover Rentería, "The Elijah/Elijah [sic] Stories: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Prophets and Peoples in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel," in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (ed. Robert B. Coote; SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 75–126. For form-critical and redactional studies, see Simon J. DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 61, 86–87, 114–16; Burke O. Long, *1 Kings* (Forms of the Old Testament Literature 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 174–204.

[7] See K. A. D. Smelik, "The Literary Function of 1 Kings 17:8–24," in *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies* (ed. C. Brekelmans and J. Lust; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) 239–43.

of God" in whose mouth "the word of YHWH is true" (17:24). This Phoenician woman also does what Jezebel will not. She affirms Elijah and his god.

Israelite storytellers have used Jezebel's own people to undermine her and exalt Elijah. They are indeed masters of deconstructionist strategies. Yet the subtext carries meaning not dreamt of in their hermeneutics. Jezebel and Elijah have exchanged venues to encounter different receptions. As the pawn in a political marriage, she was taken (לקח) to his homeland. As the promoter of a religious conflict, he takes himself to hers. His turf rejects her with hostility; hers receives him with hospitality.[8] He would deny her god power in his land while readily exercising the power of his god in her land. Tyranny counters tolerance; ideology destroys civility. Those who deconstruct find themselves deconstructed.

Cycle 2: Three short narratives of return and meeting (18:3–6, 7–16, 17–19). In the second cycle of narratives direct references replace indirect contrast to seal the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel. At the beginning (18:1–2), the word of YHWH instructs Elijah to return to Ahab. The cycle then develops in three episodes, each containing a condemnatory reference to Jezebel as it testifies to her power over prophets. The narrator reports (18:3–6) that when she cut (כרת) down prophets, the faithful steward Obadiah hid a hundred in the cave and fed them bread and water. These prophets mirror and foreshadow Elijah. They eat the same kind of food earlier provided him at the brook Cherith. As they hide "in the cave" (בַּמְּעָרָה) to be protected from Jezebel, so he will later make his way to "the cave" (הַמְּעָרָה) at Horeb. Though murderous Jezebel may not be all powerful, Elijah and other prophets of YHWH can take no chances. She cuts them down.

But Elijah is like unto her. He too embodies the power of death and so threatens even those whom he favors (18:7–16). Indeed, Obadiah charges that Elijah can cause him to die (*hiphil,* לַהֲמִיתֵנִי, 18:9), a charge echoing the Phoenician woman who worried that he would cause the death of her son (לְהָמִית, 17:18). But whereas she feared the presence of Elijah, Obadiah fears the absence. The spirit of YHWH might whisk him away, and in that event Ahab "will kill Obadiah" (וְהָרָגַנִי, 18:12). If Elijah can "cause his death," Ahab can "kill" him. Distinguishing thus between the subjects Elijah and Ahab, Obadiah escalates the vocabulary of murder. Three times he uses the verb to kill (הרג). At the beginning and end he makes Ahab the subject and himself the potential object. In the middle he makes Jezebel the subject and prophets the actual object. With this verb "kill" he identifies her for Elijah. The prophet who can cause death hears about the queen who kills prophets. For the first time Jezebel's

[8] This irony was not lost on nineteenth-century feminists. See the comments by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in *The Woman's Bible*, Part I (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895) 73.

name and deeds directly enter Elijah's world. He will not forget her, for he is like unto her.

At last Ahab and Elijah exchange accusatory words (18:17–19). They lead to the proposal for the contest on Mount Carmel. Among the reasons for the choice of this locale, its proximity to Phoenicia lends special meaning. On the horizon of Jezebel's homeland, Elijah throws down the gauntlet to her.[9] There he intends to oppose "the four hundred and fifty prophets of the Baal and the four hundred prophets of the Asherah who eat at the table of Jezebel" (18:19).[10] On the divine level the contest pits Baal against YHWH; on the human, Elijah takes on Jezebel.

His condemnation of her ironically allows the reader alternative glimpses of this woman. First, in citing the large number of her prophets, Elijah witnesses to her religious zeal. Jezebel is first-class theologian and missionary. She promotes her faith. Second, in specifying that these prophets eat "at the table of Jezebel" (not the table of Ahab), Elijah suggests her economic independence as well as her abundant resources.[11] She supports her prophets, feeding them even in drought and famine. Jezebel is provider and nourisher. Third, in structuring his speech, Elijah gives her the power of end-stress. The last word from his lips is the name Jezebel. As it ends this cycle of stories, her name becomes the prelude to a fierce struggle.

Cycle 3: One long narrative with three episodes of confrontation (18:20–24, 25–29, 30–40) and the grand conclusion to the three cycles (18:41–46). In the third cycle, the biases of the storyteller skew the dramatic conflict between the characters. Jezebel herself does not appear for the contest on Mount Carmel. Nor is her name invoked. Instead, her husband Ahab and all Israel watch as Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal. But let not the reader be deceived. Every move of Elijah—chiding the people for their equivocation, proposing generous terms for the contest, taunting the Baal prophets in their failure to elicit fire, building suspense through deliberately paced measures that eventuate in the consuming fire of YHWH—every move of Elijah is calculated to destroy Jezebel.

Yet in a peculiar way his incendiary victory exalts her. After all, her blatant actions occasioned the contest. Now they presage the aftermath. "Seize the prophets of Baal," instructs Elijah; "let not one of them escape," whereupon he

[9] Gray, *I & II Kings*, 395.

[10] On historical and religious issues relating to YHWH, Baal, and Asherah, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 41–114; Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) esp. 6–8; Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 112 (1993) 385–401. For theological reflection, see Michael Fishbane, "Israel and the 'Mothers,'" in *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 49–63.

[11] See Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 22.

"took them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered (שחט) them there" (18:40). Elijah emulates Jezebel. As she killed (כרת) the prophets of YHWH so now he slaughters (שחט) the Baal prophets. But in emulating her he exceeds her. On foreign turf she has achieved partial success; many YHWH prophets survived her massacre. On home turf he achieves total success; all the Baal prophets he annihilates. The ironies in his victory leave the reader to ponder who has triumphed over whom at Mount Carmel. Elijah against Jezebel; Jezebel against Elijah. Winner and loser exchange identities to expose the futility of the contest.[12]

III. Running from Jezebel

As Elijah leaves Carmel, spurred by "a little cloud like a man's hand rising out of the sea," the "hand of YHWH" returns him to the wrath of Jezebel (18:44, 46). Ahab reports to her all that Elijah had done, how "he killed (הרג) all the prophets by the sword" (19:1). Immediately she sends her nemesis a message. For the first time scripture assigns her speech, albeit reported through another. Its content endures in two versions. The Septuagint and Old Latin quote her as saying, "If you are Elijah, then I am Jezebel."[13] This stark juxtaposition of their names bespeaks the theological antithesis of YHWH God versus Baal the Prince. The juxtaposition also encapsulates the human battle. Jezebel repudiates defeat; unbowed she takes on Elijah. The juxtaposition likewise affirms the convergence of opposites. "If you are Elijah, then I am Jezebel."

In the Hebrew text, however, she never utters these words. Instead, her speech begins with the second sentence of the Septuagint version. She takes an oath, "So may the gods do to me, and more also . . ." (19:2). The formula parallels Elijah's first speech. It too began with an oath, "As YHWH, the God of Israel lives . . ." (17:1).[14] These verbal debuts share a genre but not a deity; they share a theme but not the specificities. Elijah used a Yhwistic oath to announce death in the land. Jezebel uses a Baalistic oath to announce *his* death because of the slaughter of her prophets. "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (19:2). As Elijah emulated Jezebel in murder, so now Jezebel promises to emulate Elijah in murder. The cycle of violence thrives. Yet by delaying her action, Jezebel allows Elijah to escape (even as other YHWH prophets have escaped her slaughter).[15]

[12] Cf. the attempt of Augustine to distinguish ethically between these deeds so as to vindicate Elijah: Saint Augustine, "Letter 93 to Vincent," *Letters* II (83–130) (trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons; New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953) 56–106.

[13] See Otto Eissfeldt, "'Bist Du Elia, So Bin Ich Isebel (1 Kon. xix, 2),'" in *Hebräische Wortforschung* (VTSup 16; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 65–70.

[14] Cf. the oaths by the Phoenician woman (17:12), by Obadiah (18:10), and by Elijah (18:15).

[15] Cf. the negative interpretation that A. S. Peake gave to this delay as a "confession of impotence" ("Elijah and Jezebel: The Conflicts with the Tyrian Baal," *BJRL* 2 [1927] 18).

Full of fear he runs away. His putative victory has become defeat; a sentence of death hangs over him. This time Jezebel, not Elijah, seems to prevail. But winner and loser may again exchange identities, for if one is Elijah, then one is Jezebel.

IV. Seizing the Vineyard

At this juncture the narrative takes a different road. Elijah's journey to Horeb and the events that transpire there subvert all that has preceded.[16] If on Mount Carmel he manipulated the God of Israel to win a dubious victory over Jezebel, on Mount Horeb the God of Israel defies all efforts at manipulation. A new mode of revelation, "a sound of sheer silence" (קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה), undermines earthquake, wind, and fire (19:12). Only then does YHWH send Elijah back to overthrow the Omri dynasty. But other narratives intervene to delay the deed and enhance the drama.[17] "After these things it came to pass a vineyard was to-Naboth . . . beside the palace of Ahab . . ." (21:1). Thereupon unfolds a story of intense polarity.[18] Jezebel dominates scene 1 and Elijah scene 2. The contrast between them, heretofore indirect, now bursts forth with full intensity. To discern ambiguities amid the clarity of their opposition taxes the skill and the will of the interpreter. Most surely, the Deuteronomists know how to control authors, characters, text, and readers.

Scene 1.a: Introduction (21:1–4). Scene 1 begins with Ahab sulking because Naboth refuses to relinquish his vineyard to the crown, either for a better vineyard or for money. As a citizen of the kingdom and a man of substance, Naboth exercises his right, grounded in tradition, to refuse the king.[19] A lesser power defies a greater power. But the greater power then reverses the

[16] See Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 230–36; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 190–94.

[17] On the genre and the placing of 1 Kgs 20:1–43, see Gray, *I & II Kings*, 414–18; and Long, *1 Kings*, 207–22.

[18] For form-critical studies, see DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet*, 115f., 131–33; Long, *1 Kings*, 223–30; for literary studies, see Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984) 379–405; Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 138–45; Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, 145–52; Jerome T. Walsh, "Methods and Meanings: Multiple Studies of 1 Kings 21," *JBL* 111 (1992) 193–211. For sociological studies, see Rentería, "The Elijah/Elijah [*sic*] Stories," 90f.; Martin A. Cohen, "In All Fairness to Ahab: A Socio-Political Consideration of the Ahab-Elijah Controversy," in *Eretz-Israel* 12 (1975) 87–94; Francis I. Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident," *JBL* 85 (1966) 46–57. Cf. R. Boulen, *Der Fall Naboth* (Trier Theologische Studien 35; Trier: Paulinus, 1978) 279–307, 320–49; Robert Martin-Achard, "La vigne de Naboth (1 Rois 21) d'après études récentres," *ETR* 66 (1991) 1–16.

[19] See Cohen, "In All Fairness to Ahab," 92; cf. Davie Napier, "The Inheritance and the Problem of Adjacency," *Int* 30 (1976) 3–11.

order of the relationship. The king perceives himself a loser, an underdog in a system he cannot change.[20] Sullen and angry, Ahab "stretches out upon his couch, turns away his face, and does not eat" (21:4). He is a defeated man.

But he has a devoted wife. Thus, the narrator brings her into the story, identified not as the queen but as "his wife Jezebel" (21:5, 7). For the first time she emerges as a major character, though not in her own right. She belongs to her husband and to the vicissitudes of a hostile press. She also belongs to a genealogy of schemers, connivers, and murderers who populate the story of Israel.[21] The list includes males and females, foreigners and natives: Abraham, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Jael, Abigail, Joab, David, and on to Esther and Judith. The company Jezebel keeps is large and complex. Judgments about them vary, usually based on the principle of whether they promote the purposes of Israel and its god. As a group, these characters surround Jezebel like kindred spirits. She the stranger joins her own, though they receive her not. Yet their machinations, especially when approved, allow to her values and perspectives that run counter to the harsh indictment heaped upon her.

Scene 1.b: Inclusio (21:5–16). An *inclusio* (ABA') sets the limits for Jezebel's activities. Her words to Ahab open (21:5–7) and close (21:15–16) her efforts on his behalf (21:8–14).

Scene 1.b.A: (21:5–7). The opening mirrors in miniature the structure of the whole. The words of "Jezebel his wife" (21:5, 7) surround the words of Ahab (21:6). His wife spoke to him, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" When he tells her about Naboth's refusal, she first sets him straight about who he is. Her speech evokes several interpretations.

"*You* [אַתָּה] now, you act as king over Israel" (21:7). The sentence may be interrogative, asseverative, or hortatory.[22] Whichever it is, with the emphatic use of the second person pronoun Jezebel twits her husband for his impotence even as she reminds him of his power. After all, the underdog is king.

Her view of kingship enjoys a precedent in Israel. The revered Samuel chastised disobedient Saul for sparing Agag the Amalekite with the words, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel . . . ?" You are "king over Israel" (1 Sam 15:17). Much as Samuel once chided Saul, so Jezebel chides Ahab. "You now, you act as king over Israel." To be sure, differences lie in the bias of the storyteller who would promote Samuel and debase Jezebel. Nevertheless, to hear in her words echoes of his is to per-

[20] King Ahab as underdog presents an ironic reversal of the concept; see Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), esp. the description on p. xi.

[21] See O. Horn Prouser, "The Truth about Women and Lying," *JSOT* 61 (1994) 15–28.

[22] For the interrogative, see the NRSV and the NEB; for the asseverative, see the NAB and the JB; for the hortatory, see the NJV.

ceive once again the stranger and the enemy as kindred spirit. What narrators seek to put asunder, their listeners find cause to join.

Having admonished Ahab about his kingly role, Jezebel next orders him to start eating and stop sulking. "Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful." Then in conclusion, with the emphatic use of the first person pronoun, she contrasts herself to him as she promises him the vineyard. "I [אֲנִי], I will give to you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (1 Kgs 21:7). Structure and content show the devoted wife Jezebel ministering to her deprived husband. She will get for him what he wants. The sullen and defeated king neither questions nor objects. In silence he acquiesces.[23]

Scene 1.a.B: (21:8–14). The center of the overarching *inclusio* reports her activity and its successful outcome. Jezebel is a woman of letters; she writes. But she is a woman who knows her place; she writes "in the name of Ahab." She is a woman with official power; she seals the documents with the king's seal, not her own.[24] And she is a woman who knows the center of authority; she sends the documents "to the elders and the nobles who dwelt with Naboth in his city" (21:8). In reporting these activities, the narrator shows Jezebel operating within the conventions of patriarchal and royal prerogatives.[25]

Her letter seeks to secure the vineyard for her husband. Through an elaborate ruse she orders that Naboth be charged with blasphemy, convicted, and stoned to death. Without explanation, defense, or condemnation, the narrator reports, "And the men of the city, the elders and the nobles who dwell in the city, did as Jezebel instructed them, as written in the documents that she sent them" (21:11). These men do not question her power; they do not consult the king; they do not protest the ruse. Instead, they fully cooperate. They "do as Jezebel instructed them." When they complete the deed, they send words to her: "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead" (21:14). From writing the instructions to receiving their fulfillment, Jezebel has well served her husband Ahab. All that remains is for her to tell him.

Scene 1.b.A': (21:15–16). Unlike the beginning, the end of the *inclusio* does not mirror the structure of the whole. This time, rather than surrounding Ahab, the words of Jezebel free him to move (21:15–16). Parallel introductions set the context for wife and husband. "As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead" finds its match in "as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead . . . ." For Jezebel, the introduction leads to speech: "Jezebel

[23] Cf. analogies to the portrayal of the woman and the man in Genesis 3.

[24] On her "letters" as legal documents, see Andersen, "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident," 52. Cf. also a recently discovered seal inscribed with the name Jezebel (Stern, "How Bad Was Ahab?" 25, 28).

[25] See Gösta W. Ahlström, "King Jehu—A Prophet's Mistake," in *Scripture in History and Theology* (ed. Arthur L. Merrill and Thomas W. Overholt; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1977) 54–55.

said to Ahab, 'Arise, possess the vineyard . . . for Naboth is not alive, but dead.'" The report omits the details of the event, specifically her own role. In contrast to her earlier emphatic declaration, "I, I will give you the vineyard" (21:7), no first person singular pronouns assert themselves. The absence may suggest that Jezebel seeks to distance herself from the evil deed. Perhaps she dreads confrontation with Elijah. Or the absence may be self-imposed modesty to bolster the ego of the dejected king. Jezebel then becomes the invisible wife working behind the scene. Whatever the reason for her choice of words, Ahab again asks no questions. As soon as he hears, he but follows her instruction to take possession.

Who is Jezebel? What is she that Ahab so obeys her? Why, she is the good wife who supports her husband.[26]

> The heart of her husband trusts in her,
> and he will have no lack of gain.
> She does him good, and not harm,
> all the days of her life.
> . . . .
> She considers a field and possesses it;
> with the fruit of her hands
> she secures a vineyard.
> She girds herself with strength
> and makes her arms strong.
> (Prov 31:11, 12, 16, 17)

All this Jezebel has done for her husband Ahab the king who thinks of himself as an underdog. Moreover, she has acted on her own initiative, having no religious authority to invoke. After all, Elijah has discredited her Baal and slaughtered the prophets who ate at her table.

Scene 2. But the accolades of the reader meet the accusations of the text. Scene 2 (1 Kgs 21:17–29) counters Jezebel's action on behalf of Ahab. Though she does not appear in it, she, along with her husband, is indicted. Elijah dominates, ensconced in Deuteronomistic language and venom.

In symmetry and theology he replaces Jezebel. The ominous prophetic rubric "the word of YHWH came to Elijah" begins and ends the scene (21:17, 28). At the opening (21:17–19) Elijah meets Ahab in the vineyard and convicts him, not Jezebel, for the murder of Naboth and the possession of the property. Elijah predicts a vengeful death for the king. Dogs will lick up his blood in the place where they licked up the blood of Naboth (cf. 22:37–38). The narrative continues with Ahab's brief response, describing Elijah as the enemy who has overtaken him, and with a lengthy excoriation by Elijah that allows the king no

[26] Cf. the commentary of Ellen Batelle Dietrick, in *The Woman's Bible*, 75.

exit from destruction (21:20–24). Stereotypical language of doing "what was evil in the sight of YHWH" announces the total annihilation of Ahab's house.

Elijah's scathing words turn next on Jezebel. They promise for her a vengeful death that matches the prediction about Ahab. "The dogs will eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel" (21:23). The narrator continues the condemnation, claiming that no one surpasses the evil of Ahab, "whose wife Jezebel urged him on" (21:25). But the last section of the scene (21:27–29) brings an unexpected twist to the denunciation. The narrator allows Ahab to express regret. He "rent his clothes, put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly." As a result, the word of YHWH postpones evil from Ahab to his sons. Yet the story permits Jezebel no release. However unlikely she might have been to express regret, it bars even the possibility. It excludes her from hearing the words of Elijah; it names her the culprit behind Ahab's evil; and it gives her no opportunity to reply. Unlike Ahab, she receives only the wrath of the Deuteronomists.[27] Alongside her crimes of murder and possession, theirs of misogyny and xenophobia are alive and well.[28]

In the two scenes of the Naboth story, Jezebel and Elijah stand forth as polar opposites. She epitomizes evil (cf. 21:25) and he good. Never the twain shall meet. Indeed, they do not interact. She never even alludes to him. Though he condemns her, he never confronts her. But again, polarity produces similarity. In parallel structures each character prevails to exercise authority on behalf of others. Violence characterizes their stances. She acquires the vineyard through the murder of the one man Naboth. To avenge the deed he escalates the violence, announcing not only her end as dog food but also the extermination of Ahab's entire house. That his prophecies are *ex eventu* makes this portrayal of him no less horrendous. Between opposite yet corresponding characters, the lines for battle are drawn unto death. From separate narrative encampments Jezebel and Elijah await their endings.

V. Endings

The departure of Elijah comes first, near the close of the Omri dynasty. After a break of many chapters, the demise of Jezebel follows, near the beginning of the Jehu dynasty. This ordering corresponds inversely to their introductions. Structurally Jezebel envelops Elijah, but narratively he overcomes her.

[27] For a counter view on the authorship of 2 Kgs 21:21 and 27–29, see Marsha White, "Naboth's Vineyard and Jehu's Coup: The Legitimation of a Dynastic Extermination," *VT* 44 (1994) 66–76.

[28] On Jezebel as the evil foreign wife, see J. Alberto Soggin, "Jezebel, oder die fremde Frau," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (ed. A Caquot and M. Delcor; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1981) 453–59. See also A. Rofé ("The Vineyard of Naboth: The Origin and Message of the Story," *VT* 38 [1988] esp. 95–102), who argues that the story "has secondarily transferred the guilt from Ahab to Jezebel and her partners" and so illuminates the postexilic period; cf. Schniedewind, "History and Interpretation," 652f.

Elijah and Jezebel contrasted. Before his departure Elijah engages in lengthy and spirited confrontation with King Ahaziah, successor to Ahab (2 Kgs 1:1-18).[29] While the king sends messengers to ask Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, if he will recover from illness, Elijah sends the king a death notice through the same messengers. Unable to identify Elijah, they describe him by his sartorial makeup: "a man, owner of haircloth and a belt of leather tied about his waist" (1:8). Ahaziah knows. "Elijah the Tishbite is he." Before her demise Jezebel engages in brief but spirited confrontation with King Jehu, who murders to destroy the dynasty and possess the throne (9:30–37).[30] He has come to Jezreel, indeed to what is still known as "the property of Naboth," to complain of no peace in the land "so long as the whoredoms of Jezebel . . . and her sorceries are many" (9:22). For these accusations he gives no evidence (nor does any other section of the text).[31] As Jezebel prepares to meet him, the storyteller describes her cosmetic makeup. "She painted her eyes and made beautiful her head" (9:30). Jehu has no trouble identifying her. As Elijah and Jezebel confront Israelite royalty, they offer striking contrasts: he in hair-cloth and leather belt; she with painted eyes and beautiful hair.

From elevated positions the two characters behave in similar ways. Sitting on top of a hill, Elijah taunts Ahaziah (1:9–16). Looking down from a window, Jezebel taunts Jehu (9:30–37). Elijah descends the hill to repeat his question, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?" Jezebel stays at the window to ask her question, "Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?" Elijah shows no fear in taunting Ahaziah; Jezebel shows no fear in taunting Jehu. Yet the outcomes diverge radically. Elijah wins. Ahaziah dies "according to the word of YHWH that Elijah had spoken" (1:17). Jezebel loses. Jehu orders her murdered. But long before that happens, Elijah disappears.

Elijah alone. The narrative never says that he dies. Instead, he is "taken up by whirlwind into heaven" (2:1). Repetition, travel, and new characters impede the event. Elisha journeys with Elijah. Three times Elijah instructs him to stay behind, but he refuses (2:2, 4, 6). Together they go from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River. Sons of the prophets witness from a distance as Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up, and strikes the water. It parts on either side. On dry ground Elijah and Elisha go over to Transjordan. Their movement brings

[29] For literary studies, see Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, 152–58; DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet*, 61–63; Burke O. Long, *2 Kings* (Forms of the Old Testament Literature 10; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 10–18.

[30] See Long, *2 Kings*, 128–31.

[31] The lack of evidence has not deterred scholars from supplying it: e.g., Gray, *I & II Kings*, 547; Simon B. Parker, "Jezebel's Reception of Jehu," *MAARAV* 1 (1978) 67–78; Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 203; but cf. Long, *2 Kings*, 129; Saul M. Olyan, "2 Kings 9:31—Jehu as Zimri," *HTR* 78 (1985) 203–7; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 110–12.

not only physical but psychic separation. From ordinary times, places, people, and events, they cross the threshold to the numinous.[32]

Only the final separation awaits. As they walk and talk, suddenly Elijah ascends (2:11–12). Fiery language defines the boundary. "A chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them." Four Hebrew words, repeating the motif of translation that introduced this story, capture the climactic movement. "And-went-up Elijah by-whirlwind to-heaven" (2:11). Elisha exclaims enigmatically, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" Just at that moment the narrator renders the vision invisible. "And he saw him not again!" In Transjordan, the land from which Elijah the Tishbite abruptly appeared, he now disappears without a trace. In his end is his beginning. What a triumph!

Jezebel alone. Jezebel lives on in Jezreel, awaiting the violent end Elijah forecast for her (1 Kgs 21:23). One of the sons of the prophets, who from a distance earlier foretold the departure of Elijah, underscores the coming event. Anointing Jehu king of Israel, he quotes YHWH, ". . . so that I may avenge the blood of my servants the prophets . . . by the hand of Jezebel" (2 Kgs 9:7). Next he quotes Elijah, "Jezebel the dogs will eat in the territory of Jezreel." And then he adds his own condemnation, "And no one shall bury her" (9:10). To promote itself, Deuteronomistic ideology has sacrificed narrative suspense. Poor storytellers are these theologians.

The tale resumes. Arriving in Jezreel, Jehu does not answer Jezebel's provocative question, the last words accorded her in the text. "Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?"[33] Rather, lifting up his face to the window, he asks a counterquestion, "Who is with me? Who?" (9:32). Eunuchs, guardians of the now queen mother (cf. 10:13), look down at him.[34] As Jezebel has taunted him, so now he taunts them, daring them to side with her. They do not. Whereas the sons of the prophets supported Elijah when he approached his ending, the eunuchs attending Jezebel betray her when she faces her demise. In a single Hebrew word Jehu commands, "Throw-her-down." In a single word

[32] For literary studies, see Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, 158–66; Long, *2 Kings*, 23–32; cf. M. A. Beck, "The Meaning of the Expression 'The Chariots and the Horsemen of Israel' (II Kings ii 12)," *The Witness Tradition* (ed. M. A. Beck et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 1–10; Jack R. Lundbom, "Elijah's Chariot Ride," *JJS* 24 (1973) 39–50.

[33] On שלום (things being right) as the binding motif in the story of Jehu's revolt, see Saul Olyan, "Hāšālôm: Some Literary Considerations of 2 Kings 9," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 652–68; cf. Long, who deems Jezebel to be "a kind of unwitting prophetess" for the Deuteronomistic writer; she sees through Jehu's front to his eventual failure (*2 Kings*, 130).

[34] On Jezebel and the role of the queen mother, see Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel*, 156–57. Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society," *CBQ* 45 (1983) 179–94; Zafrira Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *Gĕbîrâ*," *JBL* 110 (1991) esp. 27–18; Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," esp. 398–99.

they obey: "they-threw-her-down." As with Elijah, the narrative never says that she dies. But it describes a gruesome scene. "Some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses which trampled her" (9:33). Horses clothed in fire whisked Elijah away to heaven; horses splashed with blood crush Jezebel on site. The might of these magnificent creatures, in the majestic reds of fire and blood, bends to the will of the narrator.

Along with the narrator and the eunuchs, Jehu witnesses the bloody mess. Indeed, he savors it. "He went in and he ate and he drank." Jehu has satisfied himself. Only one detail remains, to give royalty a proper burial. So he issues an order that yields an Israelite epitaph for Jezebel. "Attend, pray (פִּקְדוּרְנָא), to the cursed female, this one, and bury her, for the daughter of a king is she" (9:34).[35] "The cursed female": her name he never uses; her status as queen in Israel he never recognizes; her royal identity he derives from her father. As in her beginning, so in her end Jezebel remains captive to the machinations of kingly men.

This time, however, Jehu's command cannot be obeyed. A proper burial is impossible because the attendants find "no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands" (9:35).[36] The hand(s) that once caused the blood of YHWH's prophets to flow (9:7) now symbolizes the defeat, death, and disgrace of the perpetrator. Jehu's response to the remnants furthers the irony. Her remains but fulfill "the word of YHWH spoken by the hand of his servant Elijah the Tishbite." The "hand" of Elijah has prevailed over the "hand" of Jezebel to authenticate prophecy: "In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel" (9:36).

> The horrid carnage dogs contending tore,
> And drank with dreadful thirst the floating gore.[37]

Jehu seeks yet more revenge. He adds a prophecy: "The corpse of Jezebel will be like dung (דֹּמֶן) on the field in the territory of Jezreel" (9:37). Scholars propose a horrendous wordplay between the terms *dōmen* (dung) and *zebel* (also dung).[38] For Je-zebel the vocabulary of disgrace knows no bounds. Jehu gives his reason: "so that no one can say, 'This is Jezebel.'" His words thus confirm the earlier prophecy "that no one shall bury her" (9:10). In the beginning Jezebel forfeited her Phoenician homeland for Israelite territory. In the end

[35] See Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 120–22.

[36] Cf. the Jewish legend that these limbs and organs were left intact, because with them Jezebel had executed good deeds toward those in joy and sorrow (Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962] 4. 188–89). Cf. Dana Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 164–74.

[37] George Frideric Handel, "Athalia," an English oratorio completed in 1733; see Booklet for the performance by the Academy of Ancient Music in London (May/June 1985) 56.

[38] E.g., Gray, *I & II Kings*, 551; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 113.

Israel not only obliterates her, but it defecates on her identity and memory. She disappears without a trace. What ignominy![39]

Elijah and Jezebel contrasted. Elijah triumphant; Jezebel ignominious. In death as in life they are so divided. His departure happens in an isolated region of Transjordan with only Elisha and the narrator as witnesses. Her departure happens in the city Jezreel with a royal retinue as witnesses. Whirlwind sweeps him up; eunuchs throw her down. Horses transport him; horses trample her. He ascends into heaven; she descends to earth. He leaves no signs; her blood spatters. And after the dogs have had their feast, her skull, feet, and hands remain, but only for a time. As Elijah first appeared, so he disappears, mysteriously unconnected to human relationships. As Jezebel first appeared, so she disappears, tenaciously identified as "daughter of a king." The numinous clothes Elijah; excrement clothes Jezebel.

At last, however, the words of witnesses ironically link them. The narrator reports that Elisha saw Elijah "not again." Jehu declares, "No one can say, 'This is Jezebel.'" In their disparate endings, neither Elijah nor Jezebel has a burial place. Both vanish. And yet another irony, this one more horrendous for Deuteronomistic biases, marks their vanishments.[40] By the action of YHWH, Elijah, the symbol of good, disappears outside the soil of Israel (2:6–14). In his ending Israelite storytellers remove him from the land. Conversely, by the word of YHWH, Jezebel, the symbol of evil, disappears upon (עַל) the soil of Israel (9:37). In her ending Israelite storytellers receive her into the land. Good departs; evil remains. The winners have undermined themselves.

VI. Pondering the Polarity

Elijah and Jezebel, beloved and hated. In life and in death they are not divided. Using power to get what they want, both the YHWH worshiper and the Baal worshiper promote their gods, scheme, and murder. A reversal of the context in which their stories appear illuminates the bond between them. In a pro-Jezebel setting Elijah would be censured for murdering prophets, for imposing his theology on the kingdom, for inciting kings to do his bidding, and for stirring up trouble in the land. The epitaph for him would be, "See now to this cursed male." By contrast, Jezebel would be held in high esteem for remaining faithful

[39] Negative evaluations of Jezebel abound. See recently Adin Steinsaltz, "Jezebel: The Great Queen," in *Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Bible* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) 183; the poem "Song for the Clatter-Bones" by the Irish playwright F. R. Higgins, in *Chapters into Verses* (ed. Robert Atwan and Laurence Wieder; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 1. 249. For counterviews, see Cohen, "In All Fairness to Ahab," 88–89; Stanley B. Frost, "Judgment on Jezebel, or a Woman Wronged," *TToday* 20 (1964) 503–17; Peter R. Ackroyd, "Goddesses, Women and Jezebel," in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983) 245–59.

[40] For this insight I am indebted to Professor Claudia V. Camp of Texas Christian University.

to her religious convictions, for upholding the prerogatives of royalty, for supporting her husband and children, and for opposing her enemies unto death. The epitaph for her would be, "My mother, my mother! The chariots of Sidon and its horsewomen." In Elijah, Jezebel dwells; in Jezebel, Elijah dwells. No wonder each threatens the life of the other. And they do more. They challenge time-honored rubrics of biblical theology.

Contrary to the unrelenting ideology of the Deuteronomists, the polarity of Elijah and Jezebel turns in upon itself. Opposites converge. Gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and land: dissimilarities produce similarities to unite the incompatible.

> For every Jezebel and Elijah, from time immemorial
> There have been laid up their struggles,
> To contend with the anger of eternal enemies,
> of uncompromising foes.
> To deny and to believe one the other,
> In the innermost depths of the heart,
> That is both repelled and attracted,
> To fear, to hate and to love in secret
> The one who is the enemy. . . .[41]

In behavior and mode of being Elijah and Jezebel become mirror images that haunt the ages. To have one is to have the other. Wherever he appears, she is there. She haunts not only him but all that he represents in the saga of faith. To understand their inseparability is to find her on the Mount of Transfiguration and to invoke her at the Seder meal.[42] To understand their inseparability is to perceive the limits of polarized thinking and so alter the strictures of theological discourse. Though we may find the convergence repugnant, we can be sure that we are heirs to it, indeed that we participate in it.

Look and see, if you will, "as it were in a Vision at shut of the day" not only the "gaunt mournful shade" of the Tishbite but also the phantom "of that queen, of that proud Tyrian woman who painted her face."[43] To enhance this

[41] See Mattahias Shoham, *Tyre and Jerusalem*, a drama written in Hebrew in Palestine in 1931 and published two years later (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1933). For translation and discussion, see Menachem Ribalow, *The Flowering of Modern Hebrew Literature* (ed. and trans. Judah Nadich; New York: Twayne, 1959) 365–75, esp. 369; see also Ruth Kartun-Blum, *From Tyre to Jerusalem: The Literary World of Matityahu Shoham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 17–49.

[42] Cf. the reappearance of Elijah and Jezebel in the NT characters of John the Baptist and Herodias and Salome; see Janice Capel Anderson, "Feminist Criticism: 'The Dancing Daughter,'" in *Mark & Method* (ed. Anderson and Stephen D. Moore; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 127–30.

[43] Thomas Hardy, "Jezreel," in *Modern Poems on the Bible* (ed. David Curzon; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994) 234–35. For other literary references to these characters, see Alan Jacobs, "Elijah," and Marnie Parsons, "Jezebel," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 233–34, and 401–2.

Vision, allow storytellers and other strangers a place in the exegetical enterprise. Their presence may just upset our cherishing of polarity.[44] As they spice theological discourse, "strange things and spectral" we may behold in the Society of Biblical Literature.[45]

[44] Note that the issue is not polarized versus anti-polarized thinking; that scheme is but another polarity.

[45] Sections of this article have been adapted from Phyllis Trible, "The Odd Couple: Elijah and Jezebel," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (ed. Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel; New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 166–79.