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 confounded 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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² The presidential address delivered 19 November 1994 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago, Illinois.

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). 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. 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?" 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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3 Translations of the Hebrew follow the NRSV, but often with my alterations.
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). 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 Yhwaistic 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 (עָלָהּ בָּנוֹת) 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. 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 (זְבָא בְּנֵיהֶם אֶלֶּקָּה) 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


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 (נָלָכָה) 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 (נָכָה) 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" (חֶבֶר הַמַעֲרֵי) to be protected from Jezebel, so he will later make his way to "the cave" (חֶבֶר הַמַעֲרֵי) 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 (חֵיפִיל, נָלָכָה, 18:9), a charge echoing the Phoenician woman who worried that he would cause the death of her son (נָלָכָה, 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" (נָלָכָה, 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 (נָלָכָה). 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

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8This 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.


“took them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered (מָשַׁלְתּוּ) them there” (18:40). Elijah emulates Jezebel. As she killed (מָשַׁלְתּוּ) the prophets of YHWH so now he slaughters (מָשַׁלְתּוּ) 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 (מָשַׁלְתּוּ) 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 Yhwhistic 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


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” (כָּלָה יָמָה תָּחֵת), 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

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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 [_pagination] 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-

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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.
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 [28], 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).
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. Alongside her crimes of murder and possession, theirs of misogyny and xenophobia are alive and well.

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.


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). 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). 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). 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. Jehu dies. 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.
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

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33 On רְשֵׁם (things being right) as the binding motif in the story of Jehu’s revolt, see Saul Olyan, “Hashalom: 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).

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 (נַחַם הָאָדָם), 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 (דּוֹמֶן) 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

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.
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! 

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. 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 (יהב) 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.


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....

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. 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.”

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 Mattityahu Shoham (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 17–49.


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

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

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.