

Reconsidering Jezebel

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,

on June 23, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Kings 16:29-33; 18:36-40, 19:1-3

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What do you think of when you hear the name “Jezebel?” I’m guessing that certain associations come into your mind. She’s a temptress, a sorceress, an evil and vain woman who is conniving and greedy, someone who is not loyal to any one man—one who instead loyal only to her own desires. Certain movie buffs may have recalled the image of Bette Davis in the 1938 film called *Jezebel*.

When I was searching for artwork about Jezebel this week, the results were interesting. I couldn’t find many historic works of art that depict her, and some of the more modern works totally play up our hyper-sexualized assumptions about her.

Almost none of the images I found reflected an accurate portrayal of the biblical Jezebel; they only magnified and reflected back to us the cultural assumptions about her that we already have.

It might surprise you—or maybe by now, it won’t surprise you—to learn that there are no sex scenes in any of the stories about Jezebel in the Bible. She wasn’t a temptress or a seductress. She wasn’t disloyal to her husband (she was actually very loyal). She doesn’t use her sexuality to get her way (instead, she uses her brain).

Who was Jezebel, and why did she get such a bad reputation? And how can reconsidering her, and reflecting on her story speak to us today?

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, the Phoenician king of Tyre. Tyre was an important city on the Mediterranean coast, just north of Israel, in what is now southern Lebanon. The Phoenicians were famous as sailors and merchants, and they traded all over the Mediterranean area. King Ahab’s father, Omri, had made an alliance with Ethbaal., something that would have been advantageous to both nations. Both Israel and Phoenicia were small countries, surrounded by larger, more powerful nations, like Assyria and Babylon, so the alliance was politically and militarily advantageous. It was also economically advantageous, as Israelite artisans and farmers could find widespread markets for their products through the Phoenicians’ maritime trading network. As way of sealing the alliance and guaranteeing their continued relationship, the Phoenician princess was given in marriage to Ahab, the son of the Israelite king.¹

It is quite likely that Jezebel had no desire to marry Ahab, and no choice in the matter; it was probably a necessary part of the political alliance. Nevertheless, the marriage seems to have been

¹ Janet Howe Gaines, “How Bad Was Jezebel?” *Bible History Daily* (June, 2010), published by the Biblical Archeology Society, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/#note01> (accessed June 19, 2019).

mutually cooperative. They each take actions in order to please each other; unfortunately, it's these actions that get them both in trouble with the prophet Elijah.

As a Phoenician, Jezebel was a worshiper of the Canaanite Gods, primarily Ba'al, the fertility god who controlled the weather, and the great mother goddess, Asherah, who is sometimes called Astarte, and was likely the same figure as the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. As a foreigner, it was not expected that Jezebel would convert to Israel's religion. In deference to her, Ahab built a temple to Ba'al for her to worship in, and created sacred shrines dedicated to Asherah. This is not really that unusual; earlier in the biblical narrative, we see that King Solomon does this for his foreign wives, too. Within Israel, there remained Canaanites who stayed in the cities and towns after Israel had conquered after the Exodus, and so worship of Ba'al and Asherah had continued side-by-side with the worship of Yahweh for centuries. The biblical editors would like us to believe that exclusive worship of Yahweh was widespread, but the archeological record says otherwise. Household god and goddess images unearthed from the period of the Israelite monarchy show that the worship of Ba'al and Asherah, along with Yahweh was pretty continuous throughout the period.²

The problem with Jezebel was not so much that she worshipped foreign gods. The problem seems to be that both Elijah and Jezebel are zealous fundamentalists. There's really no other way to put it. Elijah is unwilling to merely urge the Israelites to return to exclusive worship of Yahweh while tolerating the presence of the priests and temples of Ba'al; he wants to eradicate the worship of Ba'al altogether. Similarly, Jezebel doesn't seem to be content to worship her gods and allow the Israelites to worship theirs. She wants to promote and increase the worship of Ba'al, and she uses her royal privilege and power to destroy the prophets of Yahweh.

This sets up a contentious series of contests and threats between the two zealots. Jezebel kills the prophets, Elijah kills the priests, and then Jezebel threatens Elijah's life, and Elijah predicts a violent end for both Jezebel and Ahab. Neither one is willing to meet in the middle. It's all or nothing for them. And, since the winners write the history, Elijah is the one who's right, and Jezebel is wrong, even though both their behavior is similar. They are both loyal, consistent, and deep believers in their religious traditions. They are both passionate advocates for their gods, willing to take drastic measure to promote their faith. But in the exclusive patriarchal system of Israelite culture, only Elijah's behavior is considered right and just.

The fact that Jezebel is a zealot for Ba'al is probably the least of the four reasons she has such a bad reputation. The second is that she used her royal privilege and cleverness to steal a piece of land from a man named Naboth.

Naboth was a man who owned a vineyard that was next to Ahab's palace in Samaria. Ahab decided he wanted the vineyard for himself as a vegetable garden, and he offered to pay Naboth for it or offer him a piece of land in trade. But Naboth wouldn't sell, and, under Israelite law, he and his descendants were entitled to keep the land—not even the king could claim it from him.

² Barbara J. Essex, *Bad Girls of the Bible: Exploring Women of Questionable Virtue* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 56.

When Ahab took to bed and refused to eat over his frustration over the land, Jezebel determined to do something about it herself. Knowing that blasphemy against God and king is punishable by death, Jezebel writes letters to Naboth's neighbors, encouraging them to accuse Naboth of blasphemy in public. She signs the letters with the king's seal, and, apparently unwilling to go against the king's wishes, the neighbors accuse Naboth, and he is stoned to death. The land then comes to Ahab, as Jezebel knew it would.

This does not make Jezebel a paragon of moral behavior, by any means. But notice that she does not use her sexuality in order to get her way, she uses her brain and her royal privilege, and—unusual for a woman of her time—she writes the letters herself, indicating that she was well-educated. She is as clever and deceitful as any of the male rulers in Israel. And I think this is the problem that patriarchy has with her.

Although this part of her story is cruel and conniving, let us recall a similar story of King David, that most revered of Israel's monarchs. When David saw how beautiful Bathsheba was, he desired her for himself, although she was married to Uriah, one of the soldiers in David's army. In an act that was almost certainly not consensual, David began a sexual relationship with Bathsheba, and she became pregnant. In order to cover up his transgressions, David schemed to have Uriah go into battle alone and unprotected, so he would die.

Both of these monarchs had similar transgressions, sending a man to his death in order to achieve a personal goal; but because of patriarchy, David is celebrated, and Jezebel is condemned.

Next time we hear of Jezebel in the biblical narrative, years have passed, and Ahab has died in war. Joram, Ahab and Jezebel's son, is on the throne. But Elisha, the successor to the prophet Elijah has been conspiring against the house of Ahab, and has told Jehu, the general of Joram's army, that he is to kill Joram and take his place, eradicate all the descendants of Ahab, and kill Jezebel, all as punishment for her zealous treatment of the prophets of Yahweh.

As Jehu approaches Joram on the battlefield, Joram calls out, "Is it peace, Jehu?" Jehu responds: "What peace can there be, so long as the many whoredoms and sorceries of your mother Jezebel continue?"³ Jehu then shoots an arrow through Joram's heart and, in a moment of great irony, orders Joram's body to be dumped on the land once owned by Naboth.

From this one sentence—uttered by the man who is about to kill Jezebel's son—stems Jezebel's long-standing reputation as a witch and a slut. The Bible never offers evidence that Jezebel is unfaithful to her husband while he is alive or promiscuous after his death. In fact, the opposite is apparent; she is always shown to be a loyal and helpful spouse, though her style of assistance is considered morally deplorable by the biblical narrator. Jehu's charge of harlotry may be unsubstantiated, but it has stuck anyway, and her reputation has been permanently damaged by the allegation.⁴

Finally, the last scene in which Jezebel appears is her death scene. Knowing that her son has been murdered and that Jehu is approaching the palace, she understands what her fate will be.

³ 2 Kings 9:22 (NRSV)

⁴ Gaines, *ibid.*

“She does not disguise herself and flee the city, as a more cowardly person might do. Instead, she calmly prepares for his arrival by performing three acts: [‘She painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window.’] (2 Kings 9:30). The traditional interpretation is that Jezebel primps and coquettishly looks out the window in an effort to seduce Jehu, that she wishes to win his favor and become part of his harem in order to save her own life, such treachery indicating Jezebel’s dastardly betrayal of deceased family members. According to this reading, Jezebel sheds familial loyalty as easily as a snake sheds its skin in an attempt to ensure her continued pleasure and safety at court.”⁵

But as a modern woman reading this, I know something a male interpreter does not. When you face your enemy, your need to look your best. “Jezebel is donning the female version of armor as she prepares to do battle. She is a woman warrior, waging war in the only way a woman can. Whatever fear she may have of Jehu is camouflaged by her war paint.”⁶ She is going to go to her death looking every inch like the powerful queen that she is.

And her death is gruesome. She is thrown from the palace window by two supporters of Jehu, her body trampled in the streets below by Jehu’s horses, and her corpse eaten by dogs until there is nothing left to bury.

Jezebel was no angel. She was not a model of moral virtue. But she is also not a harlot, sorceress, temptress, or slut, or any of the other things she has been called. Her story has been told first by a patriarchal society that had a stake in condemning her and making her an object lesson, “a warning to women who would usurp power and to men who marry foreign women.”⁷ Her story, interpreted by centuries of patriarchy, has continued to be used as a way to condemn women who try to gain power and authority in the world of men.

Reclaiming Jezebel’s story and stripping away the layers of patriarchal interpretation is important to do for the sake of women and women’s voices. When I do that, I feel like I can access the real message in this story, at least the message that is revealed to me in this time. When I get rid of the centuries of condemnation of Jezebel’s character, what I see are Jezebel and Elijah—two very powerful, strong-willed people standing at opposite ends of a great cultural and religious divide. Both are victims of their own narrow world views. Both are unwilling to compromise or cede anything to the other. Both remain utterly convinced that they are all right and the other is all wrong. They stand firmly fixed at either end of this chasm, and they refuse to meet in the middle. It’s telling that Jezebel and Elijah never actually meet face to face.

Does this sound at all familiar? It reminds me so much of the polarized political and cultural atmosphere that we find ourselves in today. Whatever our political or religious or cultural perspective, it seems that, more and more, we retreat into the safety of “our side” and hunker down in our narrow world views, lobbing insults at the folks on the other side of this great divide, never daring to venture into the chasm, never trusting each other to talk about what’s really important to each of us, never finding middle ground.

⁵ Gaines

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 245.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul counsels a church that was struggling to figure out how to follow Jesus. He urges them to remember that the divisions they once had—slave and free, Jew and Greek, Male and female—are no longer the things that define and divide them.⁸ Instead, they are all part of one body, all equal. It's not that they have to give up their individual identities, but that their individual identities no longer matter for their inclusion in the body of Christ.

What if, instead of behaving like Elijah and Jezebel, we behave as Paul encouraged the Galatians? What if there were now no Republican or Democrat, no immigrant or native, no Fundamentalist or Progressive? What if we all met in the middle, face to face, and talked about what is really important, finding common ground and common purpose? That, my friends, might just be what the Kin-dom of God looks like. Amen.

⁸ Galatians 3:28