

# Jezebel: A Hebrew Disaster

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**Abstract:** The Phoenician princess Jezebel who married Ahab the king of the northern kingdom of Israel had a significant effect on the religious life of the nation in her day and beyond. In the world of the ancient Near East she was one of a number of women who attained such positions of power. Her promotion of the worship of the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah was aided by the fact that Israel has shown a propensity toward these gods even before entry into Canaan. Jezebel's goal and determination led to a confrontation with Elijah who was equally committed to the worship of Yahweh. The extent to which the worship of Baal and Asherah affected Israel's understanding of Yahweh is seen in the inscriptions found at Kuntillet Ajrud. Jezebel was not fully responsible for the ongoing worship of Canaanite deities in Israel and Judah but her reign gave legitimacy to the long held tendency.

It isn't very difficult to find disasters in Hebrew history. The Hebrew scriptures are full of them - the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, the destruction of Shiloh (an important pre-monarchy religious centre and the capture of the ark by the Philistines in the period of the Judges - 1 Sam. 4:10-11) and the defeat of the Israelite army under Saul by the Philistines at Mt Gilboa, with Saul's suicide (1 Samuel 31). There was the division of the Israelite kingdom under Rehoboam (1 Kings 12) and the fall of the northern kingdom of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 BCE (2 Kgs 17:5-6). This was followed by the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonians in 587 BCE (2 Kgs 25:8-11) with the deportation of the cream of the population of Judah to sing songs (or fail to) by the waters of Babylon, the hellenising that gave rise to the Maccabean Revolt, the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70CE and the Masada mass suicide in 73CE. Quite a collection of disasters and a bit baffling for choice!

But not all these were unmitigated disasters. From the Egyptian interlude we got Joseph's "Technicolour Dreamcoat" and Cecil B de Mille's "Ten Commandments" and of course the Jewish religious festivals of Passover, Yom Kippur and Succoth. While from the sack of Jerusalem and the return of the exiles we got Bony M's "By the Waters of Babylon" and the religious rethinking and later editing of the Scriptures that formed the basis of modern Judaism. From Josephus' account of the siege and capture of Masada, and the mass suicide of its 960 defenders rather than fall into Roman hands (whether we are happy with the account or not) we have an example that has inspired the Israeli military to hold in the ruins the swearing-in ceremony of their Tank Corps with the vow "Masada shall not fall again". It also has given us a TV series and those beautiful catapults that tourists photograph at the bottom of the Roman ramp, wondering at their preservation.

What about the people that we find in the Scriptures? After all no-one could say that Samson was an overwhelming success (even though as Samson Agonistes he tricked the Philistines with his death - Jdg. 17:30), and Eli at

the time of young Samuel (1 Sam. 3:12-14) was hardly the strong religious leader needed to hold together the highly individualistic and quarrelsome tribes in the pre-monarchic period. Saul's career as the first king of Israel ended in disaster (1 Samuel 31), while Solomon wasn't an overwhelming success, despite his tremendous building projects at Dor, Megiddo, Hazor, Gezer and Jerusalem (including the Temple). His numerous and wayward harem and his own apostasy certainly earned a reprimand by the writer of Kings while his obstinate and insensitive son Rehoboam was unable to make the concessions necessary to hold the tribal groups to a united kingdom. Thereafter you can take your pick. In the northern Kingdom of Israel we have the two Jeroboams and Ahab, with at the very end Pekah (threatening attack on Judah with Syria - 2 Kgs 16:6) and Hoshea (rebelling against Assyria - 2 Kgs 17:4-5). In Judah we have Rehoboam, Athaliah (attempting to wipe out the House of David - 1 Kgs 11:1-9), Ahaz (instrumental in bringing down the Assyrians to put an end to the northern kingdom - 2 Kings 17), Manasseh, an apostate ruler (2 Kgs 21:2-9), and Zedekiah who brought down Nebuchadnezzar's army to raze Jerusalem (2 Kings 25). If you like, you could brush aside the fact that Herod was only half Jewish and include him too.

There's plenty from which to choose, but perhaps we need to focus on a disaster with a difference, a non-military one, the most disastrous marriage in those disastrous times! And the Ahab-Jezebel disaster has got to be the greatest. After all, what wife, however unpleasant, ends up as a dinner that even the dogs were unable to finish (2 Kgs 9:35-37)? I have excavated at Jezreel (1992-94) with the Tel Aviv University under David Ussishkin and I can testify that though many of us were on the lookout for the skull, feet and palms of the hands that the writer of Kings tells us were all that remained after the local dogs had had their fill at that city where Jezebel met her end, no such souvenirs turned up. Perhaps one day ...!

For the northern kingdom of Israel, the advent of Jezebel was a catastrophe of monumental proportions. The arrival

of a meek-spirited reasonably self-effacing Phoenician princess to seal the trade links between the kingdom of Tyre and Sidon and that of Israel could have been a non-event other than being of great economic usefulness to both countries. After all it was only half a century since the northern kingdom had severed its links with the south and without the religious advantages of Jerusalem and the temple and the prestige of the Davidic house had decided to go it alone. And already there had been four dynasties, three assassinations and civil war. If ever a nation needed stability Israel did!

Israel's position in the international field was equally bleak. Its instability had enabled Ben-hadad of Syria, the adjoining kingdom to the north, to ravage northern Galilee, seize Israelite towns close to the border and territory in the Transjordan, and extract concessions for Syrian traders in Israelite cities (1 Kgs 20:34). Moab had been a vassal of Israel at the time of Ahab's very able but short reigning father, Omri, but was taking advantage of Israel's preoccupation with Assyria to start to slip out from it in the reign of his son. The famous Moabite Stone (Figure 1) found in Dhiban in Jordan records:

*"As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years... And his son followed him... but I have triumphed over him and his house... Omri had occupied the land of Medeba, and (Israel) dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son (Ahab), forty years; but Chemosh (god) dwelt there in my time"* (Pritchard 1969:320).

But beyond and above all else, to the northeast was the rising power of Assyria, expanding westward to the Mediterranean to acquire agricultural produce, soldiers for her army and a corner on the lucrative Mediterranean trade, hitherto a Phoenician monopoly. Already armies under Ashurnasirpal II (883-859/8 BCE) had ploughed their way through the gaggle of Aramean states to the north of Israel, creating panic in the area. One of his inscriptions records:

*"I... crossed the Euphrates... by means of inflated goatskin... I crossed the Orontes... I conquered the other towns... defeating their inhabitants in many bloody battles. I destroyed... tore down... burned with fire; I caught the survivors and impaled... on stakes in front of their towns. At that time I seized the entire extent of the Lebanon... The tribute of the seacoast - from the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos,... Amurru and of Arvad which is (an island) in the sea... I received"* (Pritchard 1969:276).

To whom could Israel turn for help? Relations with Judah were still tense after the separation, so an alliance there wasn't obvious. The most promising ally was Phoenicia, the scatter of coastal trading cities, of which Tyre, Sidon and Byblos were the most important (Tyre indeed would go on in 814 BCE to found Carthage). At the time of Omri and Ahab, Tyre and Sidon were ruled by Ittobaal/Ethbaal, and Omri secured an alliance, apparently sealing it with the marriage of his son, Ahab, to Ittobaal's daughter, Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31). This alliance would give Israel a chance to upgrade her economy, for surplus Israelite agricultural

products could be sold to Phoenicia in return for luxury trade goods, and probably Tyrian purple from the murex shellfish. Israel too got a possible ally against Syrian expansionism – hopefully at least the alliance would cause Syria to hesitate to provoke too extensively a nation with such an influential ally.

## Queens of the Ancient Near East

Women were not completely powerless in the ancient world, though there were limitations. Religion, as indeed in the European Middle Ages, could enable women to exert power. So, too could social status and queens could become prominent in their society. This was particularly so in Egypt, however mostly in periods well before Jezebel, though we can never know what stories may have been passed down, and Egypt in the Late Bronze Age had significant relations with the Levant. Still, what motivated some women in the past could be similar to what impelled Jezebel! In the foundation period of the New Kingdom there was a group of powerful queens - Tetisheri (whose grandchildren, King Ahmose and his sister-wife Ahmose-Nefertari built a pyramid-chapel to honour her at Abydos and who may have been regent for Ahmose), Ahhotep (whose son, Ahmose proclaimed on a funerary stela that she had rallied the Egyptian military and prevented civil unrest



**Figure 1:** Replica of the Moabite Stone held by the Australian Institute of Archaeology.

and who may have been regent for him) and Ahmose-Nefertari (queen and “God’s Wife”, spouse of the God Amun) who helped in the foundation of the XVIIIth dynasty through the Hyksos expulsion.

The New Kingdom’s indomitable Queen Hatshepsut ruled as pharaoh after the death of her husband Thutmose II, even though there was a male offspring of her husband by a concubine Mutnofret (Tyldesley 1994:221) and even when that offspring, the later great Thutmose III, reached an age when he could rule. We don’t know her motivation, but she was certainly successful and the creation of her mortuary temple at Deir el Bahri with paintings of important events of her reign still captivates visitors today (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: A view of Deir el Bahri at sunrise (Photo: CJ Davey 1976).*

Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III is credited with great influence on her husband, who certainly seems to have regarded her highly and went out of his way to proclaim his marriage to one who was not of royal blood on a celebratory scarab and boasted of the lake he had made for her. She was deeply involved in politics and corresponded with the Hittite king (Callender 1993:204) and a Ugaritic queen (Gruber 1999:139). Her influence, as a worshipper of the god Aten on her son, the young Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten, will always be a matter of speculation.

Likewise Akhenaten’s wife, the beautiful but controversial Nefertiti, whose sculpted head is the pride of the Egyptian Museum in Charlottenberg, Berlin, was another who achieved prominence and power despite her sex. She has been depicted often with her husband and their daughters and perhaps even played an important part in his promotion of Atenism and move to Akhetaten, where she is portrayed as a priestess of the Aten, taking part in religious ceremonies with and without him. There are even those scholars (e.g., J.R. Harris and J. Samson) who believe that after her husband’s death she had her name changed to Smenkhare and ruled as a male pharaoh! (Samson 1972).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty Queen Twosret (“daughter of Re, beloved of Amen”) rescued Egypt during a period of instability, the turbulence of the period leaving little in the way of documentation besides a title of “Mistress of all the Land” in her tomb. We don’t even know whether she married her stepson, Siptah, though she is depicted with him in a wifely pose on a bracelet. She ruled as a male pharaoh after his death and has inscriptions in the Delta, the Sinai turquoise mines and even Palestine and an unfinished funerary temple in the West Bank of the Nile (Callender 1993:267-268).

In Mesopotamia, too, there were early examples of outstanding royal female figures. Queen Puabi/Shubad, by virtue of her rich grave-goods, would seem to have been powerful, but we have nothing more than the tomb objects. Sargon of Akkad’s daughter Enheduanna is, however, one about whom we know quite a lot. She lived some time round 2350 BCE, certainly a long time before Jezebel. Sargon appointed her as high priestess of Nannar the moon god of Ur. Hallo in his work, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, looks on her as “a kind of systematic theologian” adapting traditional Sumerian beliefs to the conquering Akkadian culture of Sargon - no mean task! We know about her through the forty-two or so temple hymns which she composed and from portrayals of her. It is a tribute to her reputation that, when Sargon’s empire started to disintegrate in his old age and she, with symbols of Akkadian conquest was expelled, she was eventually reinstated and her commanding position filled by royal princesses of the ruling powers until the time of Nabonidus (Nemet-Nejat 1999:100). Enheduanna was a virgin, something we know Jezebel was not. Nor do we know that Jezebel knew of such religious change as Enheduanna might have effected, but perhaps she was trying to influence the religion of Israel in a similar way!

Enheduanna of Ur wasn’t alone as a woman wielding religious power in the ancient Middle East. In Ebla (Tel Mardikh), a fascinating site in present day Syria, Italian excavators under Paolo Matthiae have found an inscription of Sanib-Dulum, the sister of King Ibrum of Ebla (about the same time as Enheduanna), being given a valuable gift of cattle on her installation as ‘Lady of a Deity’ in Luban, one of his cities (Gruber 1999:126). Was she a “plant”? Was this Jezebel’s function? Such activity was certainly too early to have any direct influence, but the idea of control through religion might still have been there in her time.

Information about queens in the Levant at the time of Jezebel is sparse and there is little that we know of any contemporary who could have been a role model. However excavations at the city of Ugarit/Ras Shamra (which flourished from ca. 1400-1180 BCE and is our source of the Baal stories) show an interesting practice which we can see in Israel. Gruber (1999:138-139) points out that the wives of the king in Ugarit are not addressed as “queen”, only “wife of” (Jezebel is similarly described in 1 Kgs 16:31). However, once the wife’s son was on the throne, she was addressed as ‘queen mother’ which may have been, as in Israel and Judah, a formal position and there are documents showing her considerable power. In Judah we see King Asa on his accession formally deposing his grandmother Maacah: “he even deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother because she had made a repulsive Asherah pole” (1 Kgs 15:13).

Mayer Gruber writes:

“The kings of Ugarit habitually kept the queen mother informed concerning the affairs of state. Moreover queen mothers were from time to time sent on diplomatic missions on behalf of the state. In personal letters recovered from both Ras Shamra and Ras Ibn Hani, sons of the queen express their obedience to her by using the same formula that a subject king or queen of a levantine city-state would use in addressing an emperor or empress: ‘Seven times I bow down from afar at the feet of my sovereign lady’” (1999:139).

This is interesting when we look at Jezebel’s devastation at the death of her sons. Her status, even if Jehu hadn’t stepped in to alter it permanently, would have changed considerably.

Gruber records very interesting evidence of the power of queens (titular or real) in two letters, the correspondence of Queen Pudu-Heba (the wife of King Ammishtamru of Ugarit) and the Egyptian Queen Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III (1403-1364) (1999:139). In it Queen Pudu-Heba greets Tiye as her sovereign, thanks her for an unspecified gift, and promises to send her a gift of balsam.

There are records of two Ugaritic queens, both called Pizidqi, handling property negotiations and one, Queen Ahatmilki, who ruled in her own right after the death of her husband, until her son was old enough to reign. Gruber reports her as having been involved in arbitrating a dispute between two of her sons and their brother who was king and goes on to point out that “On at least one occasion an Assyrian envoy to the Ugaritic court was directed to read to Queen Ahatmilki the letter he had received from Assur” (1999:139).

### Queen Jezebel

The marriage treaty probably had a clause in it agreeing to let Jezebel have the comfort of her own religion. This would have been a reasonable concession for a young woman uprooted from her own people and her gods and all



*Figure 3: Replicas of Asherah and Baal images.*

that had been familiar and despatched to a foreign country whose gods were not hers, whose code of ethics prohibited many activities to which she was used, and whose mate was a boorish and weak prince, Ahab, all no doubt without consultation. The Israelites were not strangers to such religious accommodations. Hadn’t the great king Solomon done as much for his wives and built temples for their gods and worshipped them himself? (1 Kgs 11:1-8).

What they were all probably taken aback by was the scale of the religious support that Jezebel brought with her. The writer of Kings claims (1 Kings 18) that 400 prophets of Baal and 450 of the goddess Asherah “ate at her table” (probably indicating her support). (The statement may reflect the Hebrew use of parallelism and they may have been fewer in number, though both were important Canaanite deities). Such concessions would have included the inevitable temple to Baal built at Samaria (1 Kgs 16:32ff) which Omri had chosen as the capital and Ahab had continued building. (So successful was this that Israel thereafter was called by the name of the capital as Aram/Syria was often called by the name of its capital Damascus). And there was an asherah (1 Kgs 16:33), about which we are less clear, but which was probably a wooden pillar symbolising the goddess.

Such wide scale prominence given to Canaanite gods in a population that may well have been mixed in its religious allegiance (the wide scale conquests of David and Solomon bringing in those who were not originally Yahweh worshippers) was disastrous to the religion of the new nation. The reaction of Jeroboam, the first king, to the loss of the Jerusalem temple and its religious memorabilia and hierarchy had been to set up two golden calves (at least

connected, albeit discredibly, with the Hebrew's past) at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:28-29) and perhaps to solve some unemployment problem by drafting such people into the newly formed priesthood (1 Kgs 12:31). What they could teach and what religious leadership they could provide no doubt accounted for the gradual drift away from Yahwism. The choice of calves had been unfortunate as the bull was the symbol of the god Baal, and though Jeroboam probably intended that the calves should serve as nothing more than the cherubim in the Jerusalem temple - a resting place for the presence of the invisible god and a tangible reminder to the people of his presence, there were no doubt many who worshipped the calves or even the Canaanite god Baal shown at times riding on a bull (Pritchard 1958:illustration 140) or described as "Bull El" in the Ugarit documents. Indeed Bright (2000:245) suggests that Ahab was as willing as his subjects to go along with such a potential for syncretism as a suitable ideological "glue" for such a diverse population as was his.

What do we know of the gods Baal and Asherah, whom Jezebel worshipped? From the Hebrew writings we know that Baal was a god and Asherah both a god to be worshipped (1 Kgs 15:13; 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:4,7), and an object (a wooden pillar?) which could be chopped down and burnt (Ex. 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:3; Jdg. 6:25; 2 Kgs 18:4; 23:14; 1 Kgs 14:15, 23; 15:13; 16:23; 2 Kgs 17:10, 16; 2 Kgs 21:3; 23:15).

Excavations at Ugarit from 1928 onwards and in 1975 at Ras Ibn Hani (to Syria's credit this site, discovered when foundations were being laid for a five star hotel, was protected and the hotel moved) have told us more than the scant information in the Hebrew writings (more in the order of who worshipped Baal and Asherah). Both sites are near Latakia on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, though today the shore is over 100 metres away from Ugarit, as the area has silted up since its heyday in the 2nd millennium BCE.

Tablets and depictions found at Ugarit deal with gods and goddesses which we know to be Canaanite, but we cannot say for certain that Ugarit was Canaanite (though most scholars claim this was the case). Ugarit is only one particular site, and that site is in the northernmost part of the Syria-Palestine region. When, however, the Ugarit documents are compared with the very few religious texts we have from indisputably Canaanite areas, and the record we have of Canaanite beliefs and practices in the OT, they do seem to reflect similar beliefs, so that even if the people of Ugarit were not actually Canaanite, the materials found there are similar enough to cast light on our other information about these people. There is no possibility that such information came directly from Ugarit. The city-state was destroyed by the "Sea People" in about 1190 BCE before the Hebrews were properly established in Palestine. However religious tradition tends to be passed on carefully and we can trace some of the elements found in the Jezebel story to Ugarit information.

One of the most famous of the temples found at Ugarit was that of Baal (40 x 20 metres), built on the acropolis (Figure 4). It had a small outer courtyard, with an altar (2.2 x 2 metres), a smaller court opening from it, and an inner sanctuary, doubtless holding the cult statue. As Baal was the effective head of the pantheon we would expect this temple to be special - and it did not disappoint. In a scribal school and library adjoining the temple was a real prize - twenty tablets of mythological poems telling the stories of the gods as well as stelae and fragments of stelae, one with a depiction of the god. (Perhaps this was the kind of monument called in the OT "pillar of the Baal" - 2 Kgs 3:2).

Unlike the river-dependent civilisations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, most of Syria-Palestine got its water from rain storms, much to the surprise of the Egyptians, who were disparaging about those whose "Nile was in the sky". The prevailing winds blew the clouds across from the west (Atlantic and Mediterranean) to be caught by the north-south mountain ranges of the Levant, and condense as dew and seasonal rains. These not only made agriculture possible, but percolated down through the porous limestone rock to collect in caves and appear as springs. All of this had its effect on the religion, and we find the storm god assuming great significance.

In the Ugarit texts the storm god was known as Baal (Dagon, the son of the grain god), and it is under this name that we meet him in the Hebrew records. The word actually means "lord", but from an early date it came to refer to the Semitic storm god Hadad whose voice was heard in the thunder. He was a cosmic god but seems to have been worshipped in local forms as the Hebrew records indicate - Baal-zephon, Baal peor, Baal-hazor etc. He was the god who revealed himself in the rains and autumn and winter thunderstorms, and of course brought about plant growth - obviously a very important god. There was also uncertainty attached to such dependence on the rain, and both the Ugarit records and the OT tell of droughts - as of course we find in the story of Jezebel.



*Figure 4: Temple of Baal at Ras Shamra (Photo: CJ Davey, 1977).*

Baal rose to the active leadership of the Ugaritic pantheon by refusing to be handed over to Prince Sea, and with two clubs made by Kothar-wa-Hasis, the craftsman of the gods, he defeated the forces of chaos - Sea and Death. The goddess Astarte lauded him: "Hail Baal the conqueror, hail rider on the clouds". Asherah also prophesied that when Baal was given a house: "Baal will begin the rainy season, the season of wadis in flood: and he will sound his voice in the clouds, flash his lightning to the earth".

Baal was killed by Mot (death/sterility) and he was mourned by several of the gods. In a manner similar to the actions of the prophets of Baal in their clash with Elijah (1 Kgs 18:28) we read that:

*"(El) sat on the ground: he strewed straw of mourning on his head, dust in which a man wallows on his pate: he tore the clothing of his folded loincloth;... he gashed his two cheeks and his chin, thrice harrowed the upper part of his arm, ploughed his chest like a garden, thrice harrowed his belly like a vale. He lifted up his voice and cried: Baal is dead. What will become of the people of Dagon's son, what of the multitudes belonging to Baal?"* (Pritchard 1969:139).

Against this background, Jezebel's position allows for several interpretations. It is possible that she was naive enough to believe that her religion could be accommodated within Yahwism in the easy way that deities came and went in polytheism - and there were obviously those within Israel, her husband included, for whom this may not have been a problem. Or she may have been a devout worshipper of the Canaanite deities and even, as Bright (2000:245) suggests, have seen herself as a missionary of the Tyrian Baal, Melkart. On either score she had reckoned without the prophets of Yahweh, Elijah in particular, and the relationship of the two was to prove disastrous for both, though in the final count the prophet won despite having to flee to the desert to escape her wrath. His end was an ascent to God in a whirlwind sent for the purpose (2 Kgs 2:11), hers an ignominious throwing from a window by eunuchs expressly assigned to protect her, and a meal for the dogs after she hit the ground (2 Kings 9:30-37).

The whole course of her ill-fated marriage could point to her spirited protest at what was happening to her - her uprooting from family and friends, her marriage to such an unpromising husband as Ahab, the restrictions of the religion which surrounded her, the naming of her two sons after a god that was not hers - Ahaziah and Jehoram. Her promotion of Baal may have been her protest as she smothered in Israel's hostile environment. We've seen the same reaction in people today - the desperate clinging to Irish culture and Catholicism as the expression of antagonism to England's treatment, the aggressive Catholicism which expressed Poland's national identity when they were almost submerged in Communism.

And even at the end when she had lost her husband in battle with the Syrians (1 Kings 22) she could still make her presence felt, though widowhood seems to have cramped

her style somewhat. Still, she had her sons but the loss of them, her elder son in a fatal fall and her younger son in a coup led by Jehu, must have made her more and more desperate. But it didn't break her spirit, and at the end we are grudgingly told of how she met her death, accosting the usurping Jehu as he came from the murder of her son Joram/Jehoram. The scene is reminiscent of the stance of the famous ivory plaque, "woman at the window" found in the remains of Ahab's "ivory palace" at Samaria (1 Kgs 22:39).

*"When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; and she painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window. And as Jehu entered the gate, she said, 'Is it peace, you Zimri, murderer of your master?' and he lifted up his face to the window, and said, 'Who is on my side? Who?' Two or three eunuchs looked out at him. He said 'Throw her down'. So they threw her down; and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled on her. Then he went in and ate and drank; and he said, 'See now to this accursed woman, and bury her; for she is a king's daughter'. But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands"* (2 Kgs 9:30-35).

It is interesting to note that although her sons were named after Yahweh, they were not ignorant of their mother's religion, and the elder may even have been a devotee, for when Ahaziah had his fall he sent to Baal-zebub ("Lord of the Flies"), at the earlier Philistine/Phoenician centre of Ekron, rather than to Yahweh or his prophets. For this he received a stinging rebuke from Elijah:

*"... he arose and went down... to the king, and said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron - is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word? - therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.'"* (2 Kgs 1: 15-16).

The younger son certainly was not a follower of Baal (perhaps his brother's early demise by the prophet's prediction affected him), for we're told that when he came to the throne he had the asherah that his father Ahab had erected, cut down.)

And what of the princess Athaliah? Was she the sister of Ahab, as 2 Kgs 8:26 and 2 Chron. 22:2 might suggest, (obscure in the NRSV and NIV as the translators have her as Omri's "granddaughter" rather than "daughter" on the grounds of the ambiguity of the Hebrew) or his daughter as 2 Kgs 8:18 and 2 Chron.21:6 declare. If daughter is correct, was Jezebel her mother or stepmother? We're told that Ahab had other wives (1 Kgs 20:5) and certainly Jezebel could not have produced the seventy sons recorded of him in 2 Kgs 10:1! She seems to have been the favourite/dominant wife, however, and it is her sons who become kings of Israel. Some historians (eg Bright 2000:242) think that the marriage between Ahab and Jezebel could not have produced a daughter of marriageable age in time for a marriage alliance to have been made by Jehoshaphat, the

king of Judah (2 Chron. 18:1) with Ahab for the marriage of Athaliah to the crown prince Jehoram of Judah. We are not told however when the marriage was consummated, and the alliance sealed by this marriage could have taken place when Athaliah was very young. Athaliah is never referred to as Jezebel's daughter, though by the time Chronicles would have received its final editing, this may well have been a thing of shame. Athaliah's Hebrewness may have been in question if she were Jezebel's daughter. She certainly has all the traits of a spirited mother, though if she were a step-niece fostered by Jezebel after Omri's death, she might well have taken Jezebel as her role model! When Athaliah's son, Ahaziah, was killed, Athaliah slew as many of the Davidic house as she could find. She ruled as sole monarch for seven years till challenged by seven year old Joash, who had been rescued from the massacre by his aunt, the daughter of the high priest, and hidden in the temple quarters until he was of a suitable age to rally support.

What of the marriage from Ahab's point of view? After all he too was caught in an arranged marriage, and probably with little consultation. However as a man he was in a stronger position, for if he didn't like a wife she could be safely ensconced in the harem and ignored - and we've seen Ahab had other wives and many other children, so Jezebel needn't have loomed large in Israelite history. But she did! Jezebel is held responsible, presumably through her influence on Ahab, for Israel's apostasizing, and the drought that was its punishment. The murder of Naboth is also sheeted home to her, though it was done under Ahab's seal (1 Kgs 21:8). Women in Israel could transact business and women's seals were not uncommon. Gruber reports seals with the Hebrew script dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE (1999:147). Even more significant, we have what is probably Jezebel's own seal, in red jasper, displayed in the Israel Museum. Jezebel obviously knew what she was doing in using Ahab's!

Ahab is presented as very much under Jezebel's influence, which may well mean he was infatuated with her: "There was no one who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab whom Jezebel his wife incited" (1 Kgs 21:25).

Certainly she was different from other royal wives as we hear nothing much of them. The disaster of Ahab's marriage was that he was in a position of leadership of a nation where the religious traditions were held in honour by at least some.

Office carried responsibilities and Hebrew kingship was exercised under God, and though the monarchy had no priestly connotations the king had religious duties (as had all Hebrews) and was expected to give the lead in Yahweh's worship. (The accounts of Kings and Chronicles judge the ruler's relation to Yahweh and his acquittal of the responsibilities and duties of his office against Yahweh's criteria). Ahab's father, Omri, seems to have been an able monarch by human standards. The Assyrians long

after his death were calling Israel Beit Humria (house of Omri), evidenced in the records of Tiglath-Pileser III over a century after his death. And Shalmaneser III thought the usurping Jehu was of "the House of Omri". The Moabite Stone, a record put up by Mesha king of Moab when he had finally shaken off Israelite suzerainty, also testifies to the ability of Omri: "Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years". But all we get in Kings about Omri is eight verses and the dismissal of the value of his rule as: "Omri did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did more evil than all who were before him" (1 Kgs 16:25).

And yet Omri had done wonders for the nascent kingdom of Israel. The Jezebel-Ahab marriage had benefited Israel's economy and frightened off Syria from further inroads into Israelite territory (no mean achievement), Judah's friendship had been secured by the Jehoram-Athaliah marriage, and the establishment of Samaria, on virgin territory and untainted by previous bloodshed, as his capital was a stroke of genius. In an historical summary of his reign he deserved better. But Kings, though history, is theological history, and the events and lives featuring in it are presented and assessed in terms of other than historical criteria. (It would be wonderful to get hold of the "Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and Judah" which we are told contained the "deeds" of these kings, but so far they have disappeared, presumably there being less incentive to preserve merely historical records than the works and judgements of Yahweh as in Kings and Chronicles).

Ahab was up against the same judgement. The selection of incidents that the writer/s of Kings preserves indicates the way he was regarded by later Hebrews. He is recorded, not as continuing his father's inspired building programme at Samaria (Mazar 1990:406), nor as expanding and fortifying Hazor (Mazar 1990:382-384), Megiddo (Mazar 1990:414), Jezreel (Mazar 1990:410), and the port of Dor (Stern 2001:67) but as building a temple for Baal and making an asherah. This is all presented in the context of disapproval of the marriage:

*"And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him"* (1 Kgs 16:31).

Yahweh brought a drought on the land because of this worship of Baal and we next meet Ahab concerned over the effects on his stock and the need to find pasturage, something of which no Australian needs to be reminded.

The very real architectural achievements are only hinted at in 1 Kgs 22:39. The strategic significance of the winter palace at Jezreel became clear when I was excavating there with Tel Aviv University under David Ussishkin. In 1991, for one nightmarish day, Jezreel became the headquarters of the northern division of the Israeli army simulating a recapture of the Golan Heights from a foreign power. The commander-in-chief was helicoptered in and out, as were his scouts, deluging us with dust, while army lorries full of soldiers were parked all around the excavations!

We find Elijah challenging Ahab over his and his people's Baal worship and demanding and orchestrating the Mt Carmel confrontation (with which Ahab seems to agree) between the prophets of the storm and fertility god, Baal, depicted with the thunderbolt in his hand, and Yahweh's prophet Elijah. A knowledge of Baal's attributes is important for a full appreciation of the significance of the drought recorded as occurring when Israel worshipped that god, and the theological implications (and irony) of the test of the "god that answers by fire". This whole episode has definite Canaanite overtones. Excavations in the Canaanite archives at Ugarit have produced many of the legends of Baal (Pritchard 1969:129-142) and it is interesting to read the account in Kings with this background.

After Elijah had seen to the slaughter of the Baal priests (again without hindrance from Ahab) and presumably the people had accepted the implications of the demonstration of Yahweh's power and his vindication of his servant, the drought broke. Ahab, we are told, immediately reported the event to Jezebel who seems to have been in his confidence regarding matters of state. Jezebel certainly recognised a worthy opponent in Elijah and started her pursuit of him, forcing him to flee for his life to the desert.

The selective nature of the account of Ahab's reign is seen in the failure of the author/s to mention Ahab's astute move in joining a consortium of kings of the eastern Mediterranean littoral to halt the Assyrian advance into that area. Shalmaneser III in 853 BCE was opposed at Karara in Syria by a coalition of twelve kings from whom the major contributions were:

*"1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalymen, 20,000 foot soldiers of Adad-'idri [Hadadezer] of Damascus, 700 chariots, 700 cavalymen, 10,000 foot soldiers of Irhuleni from Hamath, 2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers of Ahab, the Israelite"* (Pritchard 1969:278-279).

A sizable contribution! And it seems to have been successful, despite the Assyrian claim of victory. Shalmaneser did not venture again into the area during Ahab's lifetime. That the writer/s of Kings fails to mention it may well point to a victory. Ahab was not the writer's/s' most popular monarch and a defeat may well have been hailed as Yahweh's punishment for apostasy!

Instead the writer/s of Kings chose to report a series of minor wars between Ben-hadad of Syria and Ahab where the Syrian demanded his silver and gold, fairest wives and children (1 Kgs 20:3) to which Ahab agreed (we might wonder what Jezebel thought of that). Israelite resistance was successful but even this wasn't attributed to Ahab's military prowess. An obscure prophet is recorded as foretelling victory and advising on the tactics to be used. After the escape of Ben-hadad, the prophet warned him of further Syrian retaliation. Again Ahab was successful, but Kings attributes this success to Yahweh punishing the Syrian mocking of Yahweh's power, not Ahab's leadership. Ahab's restoration of the captured Ben-hadad in return for trade concessions in Damascus was rebuked by the prophet,

whereupon he was recorded as sulking: "And the king of Israel went to his house resentful and sullen" (1 Kgs 20:43).

The author's selection of the Naboth's vineyard affair was also meant to show Ahab as being under his wife's control. Naboth had a vineyard at Jezreel near Ahab's palace and Ahab wanted it to extend the palace domain. Naboth refused to part with it for money or exchange it on the grounds that it was "the inheritance of my fathers" (1 Kgs 21:3). Ahab is then recorded as sulking: "and he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food" (1 Kgs 21:4). Jezebel's concern for her husband would indicate that there might even have been some love in the marriage and after discovering the cause takes over: "and Jezebel, his wife said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (1 Kgs 21:7). Under cover of Ahab's seal she had a fast proclaimed and at the height of the religious fervour had Naboth arraigned for treason and blasphemy. (No-one seems to have been surprised by Ahab's sudden burst of enthusiasm for Yahweh). The result was a foregone conclusion. Naboth was stoned to death and Ahab got the vineyard!

This too has Canaanite overtones and is certainly told to discredit Ahab and Jezebel. One of the Ugarit legends tells of the goddess Anat who coveted a bow belonging to the hero Aqhat. Like Naboth, Aqhat would not surrender it and Anat had him killed to obtain it (Pritchard 1969:149-155).

The advent of Jezebel was certainly disastrous for the prophets of Yahweh. These would have been the spokespeople for Yahweh, and they seem to have been reasonably strong in Israel, where we have already seen religious leadership was weak. It seems that they worked in groups, for one of Ahab's chief stewards, Obadiah, a Yahweh worshipper, hid groups of fifty to escape Jezebel's pogrom: "Now Obadiah revered the Lord greatly and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord., Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and fed them with bread and water" (1 Kgs 18:3-4). The Elisha cycle of stories (2 Kings 2, 4, 6 and 9) suggests, too, that they lived communally.

Elijah was the focus of Jezebel's attacks on the prophets and though he was persecuted he is shown as finally winning. Under her sons' reigns she seems to have had a less free reign, and we are not told of any confrontation or attack on the prophets or Elijah or Elisha after Ahab died. Perhaps her sons realised the public backlash that such an attack would bring, or indeed, given who had won in the end, the futility and even danger of it. And, of course, we've seen Jezebel's unpleasant end!

Elijah suffered considerably from Jezebel's attentions. It is clear that Jezebel regarded him as the leader of the Yahweh party and the frustrater of her plans for the promotion of the Canaanite gods, especially after Ahab had told her of the massacre of the Baal priests after their Mt Carmel debacle! It's interesting that Kings stresses that he told Jezebel about what had happened):



*“Then Jezebel sent a message to Elijah, saying: ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow’. Then he was afraid, and he went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah ... and he asked that he might die”* (1 Kgs 19:2-4).

Elijah took Jezebel’s threat seriously! Yahweh did not grant the request and after some food and encouragement and a special vision of God, he returned to continue his denunciation of the royal pair, confronting and challenging Ahab over the Naboth affair. Finally, Yahweh sent him to confront Ahab and deliver his rebuke and punishment:

*“In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood.’ And of Jezebel the Lord also said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel. Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat”* (1 Kgs 21:19, 23-24).

Ahab, we’re told repented, and the evil was prophesied for his son’s days, an occurrence which doesn’t seem to have disturbed him. We’ve seen the record in Kings of the fulfilment of this, firstly in the end of Ahab: “And they washed the chariot [in which Ahab had bled to death] by the pool of Samaria and the dogs licked the blood” (1 Kgs 22:38) and then in the end of his son:

*“And Jehu drew his bow with his full strength, and shot Joram between the shoulders, so that the arrow pierced to his heart, and he sank in his chariot. And Jehu said to Bidkar his aide, ‘Take him up and cast him on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite; for remember, when you and I rode side by side behind Ahab his father, how the Lord uttered this oracle against him: “... the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons - says the Lord - I will requite you on this plot of ground”. Now therefore take him”* (2 Kgs 9:24-26).

The last picture we have of Ahab is of his sally against Damascus to retake some of his territory with the help of Jehoshaphat of Judah, Athaliah’s husband. The prophet Micaiah warned against the venture, but Ahab was more encouraged by the false prophets who promised victory, though he did disguise himself, presumably to thwart the prophecy. This proved to be of no avail and he was seriously wounded, but with great courage he stayed with the battle till he bled to death, leaving Jezebel a widow for twelve years.

Jezebel, too, met her end bravely. She is recorded as painting herself, braiding her hair and challenging her killer (2 Kgs 9:30-32) before suffering her end, which we’ve seen already. Jehu’s words were recorded as a fitting epitaph:

*“This is the word of the Lord, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, ‘In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be of dung upon the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, “This is Jezebel””* (2 Kgs 9:36-37).

Can Jezebel (and her daughter/step-daughter/niece Athaliah) be held totally responsible for Israel and Judah’s apostasy? We’ve seen that well before their time Baal had been worshipped by the Hebrews. Even at the time of Moses in the wilderness wanderings some of the people worshipped Baal (Numbers 25). In Judges 2 we’re told that after the death of Joshua the Israelites served Baal and Ashtoreth. Judges 6 records that Gideon’s father, Joash (a Yahweh name), had an altar to Baal and Gideon who was a Yahweh worshipper had at least tolerated his father’s shrine. He was told to cut down the asherah pole (6:26) and burn a sacrifice to God with the wood. This he did to the consternation of the “men of the town” (v28-31) so it wasn’t just Joash’s aberration! At the time of Jephthah we have the same situation (Judges 10).

Just before Samuel’s victory at Mizpah he ordered the Israelites: “rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only’... So the people put away their Baals and Ashtoreths” (1 Sam 7:3-4). Solomon was recorded as following Ashtoreth, a Sidonian goddess (1 Kgs 11:5), so there was a very real potential for apostasy, even among the leadership! And we’ve seen Maacah, a Judaeen queen mother worshipping Asherah (1 Kgs 15:11). Even in Jehu’s purge of Baal worship he left the asherah pole in Samaria (2 Kgs 13:6).

This is interesting in the light of Zev Meshel’s excavations at Kuntillet Ajrud in the Negev desert. The site was very small, two buildings on a flat-topped hill with wells at the foot, but its contents sent shock waves round the world of OT scholarship. The contents date from the mid 9<sup>th</sup> to the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and analysis of the pottery (Barkay 1992:328) shows that it came from Israel, Judah and the coast, but the pithoi from the Jerusalem area. This was obviously a time when the two kingdoms were at peace, indeed it could have been established at the time when Jezebel and Athaliah were powerful. Its position in the eastern Sinai on an important road could have made it a way station for travellers into the Sinai or to Eziongeber (where there seems to have been an attempt to get sea transport established (1 Kgs 22:49). Mazar even suggests pilgrims to Mount Horeb/Sinai may have travelled that way (1990:449).

Before its discovery scholars believed that though one might find Israelites who worshipped Canaanite gods (the OT is full of polemics by the prophets against what was in fact a very tempting religion), nowhere did you find Israelites copying pagan practices by depicting Yahweh or following pagan tradition in attributing a consort to him. (It is possible that the naked figure is not Yahweh, but there is no ambiguity in the way in which the inscriptions can be regarded.)

The discoveries took the form of paintings on the plaster of the walls - some even on the lintels of doors (see Deut. 6:9) - and inscriptions and depictions of what may well be Yahweh and a consort on pithoi, the depiction of the

god Bes, and a procession of five male figures with their arms lifted as if in prayer (interesting in itself). They were exhibited in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem where I was fortunate to see them in 1986 and 1987 before they were returned to Egypt as part of the Camp David Accord.

The really remarkable inscriptions proclaim (according to the captions at the Israel Museum): “I bless you by Yahweh of Shomron (Samaria) and by his Asherah” and “Amarya says, “say to my lord the King: I bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by his Asherah. May he bless you and guard you and may (God) be with my lord””.

These inscriptions show two things. One is the linking of Yahweh with a consort (and a Canaanite one at that!) in a way that abrogates the first commandment - and the second commandment too, if the depictions are those of Yahweh - but also the fact that Yahweh has taken on almost tribal or cult centre attributions. Meshel believes that the site was not only a trading centre (there was little connection with the surrounding Negev in the pottery sherds found there, though the pithoi on scientific analysis prove to have come from Jerusalem), but also the station of a group of northern priests (noting the reference to Samaria) who blessed traders and travellers (for a price?). This was at a time when there was peace between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and there was Israelite trade through Eziongeber and the Red Sea - perhaps at the time of the Jehoshaphat-Ahab alliance (I Kgs 22:49), a view held by Mazar (1990:449). It could however be an Israelite outpost established after king Jehoash of Israel had defeated king Amaziah of Judah (2 Kgs 14:11-16). Less than 100 years separate the two possibilities, and the pottery isn't indicative enough to pin it down more precisely. The real issue for Meshel is to attribute it to the northern kingdom of Israel, and here the mention of Samaria is useful, and to show, therefore, that though Israel was capable of such heresy, Judah wasn't! He also uses it to show the justice of the prophets' denunciations of northern apostasy, perhaps the result of Jezebel's influence?

But could such foreign influence have been lasting? We've seen the tendency to worship Baal and the Canaanite deities well before Jezebel. And with the overthrow of Jezebel, the House of Omri, and Athaliah, it could be expected that this would have been eradicated if they alone were to blame! To sheet home the responsibility to Jezebel overlooks the fact that despite purges by Hezekiah and Josiah, it was still endemic in Judah at the time of Jeremiah, who rebuked the people of Judah for following “other gods” (Jer. 7:6), burning incense to Baal (7:9) and the women for making cakes to offer to the “queen of heaven” Indeed he threatened them with drought (8:13) and the destruction of Jerusalem and their land by the Babylonians.

In summing up the impact of Jezebel we observe the strength of her commitment to the worship of Baal and Asherah. If it had not been for Elijah her impact would have been far greater. It is clear however that she was not fully responsible for the adoption of these gods in the

northern kingdom in particular as Israel had been attracted to Canaanite religion even before entering the land of Canaan. On the other hand, it is equally apparent that her reign and that of Athaliah gave legitimacy to this tendency which led ultimately to the political and spiritual demise of both kingdoms

It would be an ironic addendum if it could be proved that the economic wealth that resulted from the Phoenicia-Israel alliance was what attracted the Assyrians to the area and brought their attacks on the Phoenician cities and the end of the northern kingdom of Israel as an independent nation.

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