

# THE 'JEZEBEL SPIRIT': A SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

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## ABSTRACT

Queen Jezebel is rightly recognised as one of the powerful women in the Old Testament. In the biblical text she is introduced as a 'foreign' queen and wife to Ahab, the 8th century king of the northern kingdom, Israel. This article examines some of the interpretations of this character in the church over the centuries. The focus falls on the latest development in this regard whereby, in some circles, the biblical character is linked to the existence of a 'Jezebel spirit' within the contemporary church. On the basis of a narratological reading of the Jezebel texts it is indicated that such an interpretation is unfounded and fails to take cognisance of developments in biblical interpretation related to literary understandings of the text.

## INTRODUCTION

Jezebel is doubtless the most infamous of all the female figures in the Hebrew Bible. She is seen as the embodiment of feminine evil. References by evangelical preachers to Jezebel as a 'spirit' create an enemy 'outside' the individual rather than confronting personal sin. Frangipane (1994:119) refers to Jezebel as a stronghold of immense proportions, a way of thinking that exists unchecked in most churches. Some references identify Jezebel as the source of obsessive sensuality, unbridled witchcraft, hatred of male authority and false teachings in the church and society at large. Jackson (2001:11, 12) explains that the cause of the corruption of Ahab's throne was a woman: Jezebel. She brought destruction on the Israelites through her fanatical devotion to the false gods Baal and Ashtoreth. Christians today live in an age of apostasy in which society has turned its back on God and sin has infected the body of Christ and its leaders.<sup>1</sup> The central issue that this research wishes to investigate is whether or not the Jezebel from the Scriptures can at all be understood as a 'spirit' influencing the modern church or as a specific character type as portrayed by Queen Jezebel in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. In Scripture, Jezebel is a person. The Bible mentions Jezebel but does not reveal a 'Jezebel spirit' or 'spirit of Jezebel'.

The primary aim of this article is to provide a narratological analysis of the Jezebel texts in the books of 1 and 2 Kings and, on the basis thereof, evaluate the idea of a 'Jezebel spirit' as proclaimed in some Christian circles. Kaiser and Silva (1994:70) state that readers often project a moral or spiritual truth on a biblical character, paying more attention to the moral lesson than to the story itself. It is important to come to terms with how narratives are being presented and used by the writers of Scripture.

## AN OVERVIEW OF NOTIONS REGARDING JEZEBEL

The character named Jezebel in the text lived during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel between 869–850 BCE (*cf.* 1 Ki 16:31). Many subsequent interpretations of this character are found in biblical writings as well as in later literature, theatre, film and poetry, spanning a period of more than 2 000 years. Pippin (1995:228) observes that Jezebel is a fantasy space. She is a personality, a lifestyle and an ethical way of being female in the world. Her stories are parodies and as such the Jezebel texts are ironic, contradictory, ambiguous and paradoxical. Moreover, there is no closure to the narrative of Jezebel's death in 2 Kings 9:30–37; she engages the reader in a montage of images.<sup>2</sup> Bronner (1964:17) remarks that everything we know about Jezebel shows her to have been a woman born to rule. She has a strong and dominant character, a fountain of energy and determination, stopping at nothing to affect her ends. This ambitious and self-willed queen clamoured for her god, Baal, to have at least equal rights with Yahweh, the God of Israel.

## Cultural representations of Jezebel

Pippin (1995:221) writes that Southern women in the United States of America define Jezebel as a cheap harlot, scheming, promiscuous, a female gigolo, a biblical queen, evil and treacherous, wicked, wild, uninhibited, cute, happy, slinky, powerful, calculating, ambitious, ruthless and self-centred, and so the list continues. Hence Ferris Beach (2005:x) can introduce her book on the fictitious correspondence of Jezebel by asking the question, 'Was Jezebel ... really a slut?' Pippin (1995:222) states that the ambiguous and complex character of Jezebel in the Bible serves as an archetypal bitch-witch-queen in misogynist representations of women.

*Jezebel* was also a condescending term used for African American women in the time of slavery. Pippin (1995:224) says that the juxtaposition of the images of the mammy and the Jezebel served as an apologetic for the exploitation of the female slave. The image of the mammy was asexual, warm, maternal, dark-skinned, big, older, hair covered with a kerchief, loyal, religious and pious. Women slotted as jezebels were sexual, young, with changing skin colour, comely, provocative in dress, rebellious and whores. These images were created by white masters to control and dominate the female slave. The mammy represented the desire for a positive image for African Americans whereas the jezebel was an excuse for white masters to justify their adolescent and later adulterous behaviour. White women blamed

1. The Internet provides ample examples of this notion in popular church culture (*cf.* <http://christianblogs.christianet.com/1169072216.htm>).

2. Recently Ferris Beach (2005) elaborated on this character by presenting her as surviving an attempt on her life and afterwards corresponding with different people in the 9th century BCE context. In her book Ferris Beach draws on an array of literary and archaeological evidence in providing the reader with her interpretation of this remarkable woman.

the jezebels in order to deny the oppression and rape of slave women.

### Children's Bible stories

In her study, *Jezebel in the Nursery*, Christine Mitchell examined 10 children's Bibles concerning the characterisation of Jezebel. Mitchell (2001:4, 6) explains that children's Bibles generally follow a canonical order for their presentation of the narrative and are usually lavishly illustrated with colour drawings. As such they have great influence over the formation of the readings of characters such as Jezebel by the attractiveness of their presentation and their easy-to-read text. From the works examined, several features become apparent. Those retellings that abridge or slightly adapt an English translation of the biblical text leave more of the possible meanings of the biblical text intact. The works that retell more freely are more open to a narrowing of the interpretations in order to make characterisations and actions coherent within the ideology of the reader or reteller. These retellings not only almost invariably cast Jezebel in a bad light; they also often eliminate her as soon as possible from the retellings. Mitchell (2001:7) indicates that the phenomenon of the children's Bible has vast ideological implications. In her study she exposes the way Jezebel is read in the American culture through the medium of children's Bibles and shows that these readings of Jezebel have political implications, especially when it is considered that many children will never read the biblical text.

### Religious tractates and sermons

Not surprisingly, some of the Church Fathers cast Jezebel as a wanton woman. In one of his works St Jerome uses the word *hortus* (garden) to assert that Jezebel's selfish motivation for killing Naboth is to create a 'pleasure garden' for Ahab and herself. This garden is supposed to be a playground for sexual inpropriety (Gaines 1999:98).

Much later a 16th-century author wrote that Jezebel was the veritable prototype of Catherine de Medici (1519–1589). Though the latter encouraged the arts and politics, she was dishonest and ruthless. She originally supported the Protestant Huguenots against the Catholic Guise faction in the Protestant-Catholic religious wars but switched sides later on. She was largely responsible for the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572 and it is probably this incident that caused her to be compared to Jezebel of the Naboth episode, as both women were held responsible for slaughtering the innocent (Gaines 1999:99).

The name Jezebel often appears in sermons. The Jesuit sermon *Oratio ad Milites* that was delivered to Spain's Armada fighters in the latter part of the 16th century termed Queen Elizabeth I the 'second Jezebel'. The Roman Catholic-Protestant struggles of the 16th century considered any woman on the opposite side to be a Jezebel (Gaines 1999:99). In the opening sentence of the preface of *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, John Knox (1558:3) uses Jezebel's name to call forth ancient names of wicked female rulers of the past. He states that the empire or rule of a wicked woman, a traitor and a bastard, is abominable before God. Knox (1558:11) affirmed the empire of a woman to be repugnant to nature. Nature paints women to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish, and experience has shown them to be inconsistent, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel. Knox (1558:45) considered women in authority as rebels against God.

Isaac Williams, born in 1802, is, among others, remembered for his sermons entitled *Female Characters of Holy Scripture*. This work includes his examination and evaluation of Jezebel. Williams (1859:178) poses a question: If Ahab was in wickedness beyond the wicked kings of Israel and the reason was that he was stirred up to do evil by one worse than himself (Jezebel), how bad must Jezebel have been? She appears like the type that has appeared in the history of the world – women in high places

who incite men to commit great crimes. Williams (1859:179) maintains that these women seemed as if they themselves were fully and directly under the influence of evil spirits who used them as instruments of seduction.

The Reverend Hugh M'Neile delivered a speech in 1839 at a Protestant meeting for the purpose of 'considering the best means of arresting the encroachments of the Papacy'. According to Gaines (1999:103, 104) this speech amounts to an anti-Catholic diatribe in which he declares 'Romish doctrines' to be repugnant to God and blasphemous. There is a resemblance between Jezebel and popery because Jezebel bowed down to graven images and so do Catholics. In M'Neile's view popery introduced into Christianity precisely the parallel of what Jezebel introduced among the Jewish faithful.

### Novels

Gaines (1999:107) discusses a number of biblical and non-biblical novels condemning Jezebel. Few novels retelling the biblical story of Jezebel are sympathetic to the queen. In non-biblical works condemning Jezebel, some works use the name Jezebel as point of departure while others explore the story in the Bible. Though a character may bear the name Jezebel or be called a jezebel, the stories are set in modern times and often do not refer to ancient Israel. Samuel Richardson's modern English novel *Pamela* (1740) includes nine references to Jezebel. The purpose of this epistolary novel is to advance conventional religious principles. In this novel the name Jezebel is transformed from a noun to a verb when one character beats the heroine as she exclaims to her, "I'll Jezebel you, I will so!" (Gaines 1999:115, 116).

In a few novels Jezebel is redeemed by portraying her in a favourable light. One of these writings retells the story from the book of Kings. It is entitled *Jezebel: A Romance in the Days when Ahab was King of Israel* by Lafayette McLaws and was published in 1902. This novel contains unique additions to the biblical plot and is generous to Jezebel.<sup>3</sup> Jezebel's relationship to God is explained in a sympathetic manner that is opposed to the biblical account. In the novel Jezebel honours the God of Israel though she considers him to be cruel and threatening while Baal is a kinder and gentler alternative (Gaines, 1999:132, 133).

### Jezebel in archaeology

#### The *marzeah*

*Marzeah* is a technical term for a religious association and its observances as in a ceremonial setting. The ivory carvings excavated from Samaria, to which the prophet Amos alluded in his 8th century BCE oracles to the last northern dynasty, are among the best known Iron Age remains from Israelite territory. Scholars have virtually ignored these visual artefacts and have instead concentrated on literary approaches to help explain biblical texts. According to Ferris Beach (1993:94, 96) the Samaria ivories have not been used as iconographic resources for interpreting the *marzeah* itself or for explaining biblical passages that might have been influenced by it.

Ackerman (1998:155) indicates that the series of 9th- and 8th-century BCE ivory plaques is practically identical. Each shows the head of an elegantly coiffed female who stares straight ahead, looking out of a window from the inside of a building. The decoration of the window suggests that the building represented is either a temple or a palace, which may imply that the plaques depict a goddess. Ackerman (1998:159, 161) suggests that this goddess is the mother goddess of Canaanite mythology, Asherah. The description of Jezebel in 2 Kings 9:30–31 then seems meant to present the queen mother, standing at her palace window as the human counterpart of Asherah.

Ferris Beach (1993:97, 100) agrees with scholars who see a strong

3. cf. Ferris Beach (2005) for a similar portrayal.

memorial element in biblical references to the *marzeah*. The motif of the woman at the window on the ivories suggests that the Phoenician carvers intended to emphasise certain values. In the above-mentioned text from the book of Amos, Amos rejects the false confidence of those who celebrate continuity and who seek integration of the living and the dead and who claim legitimacy through the *marzeah*. Ferris Beach (1993:101) suggests that the depiction of Jehu's encounter with Jezebel in 2 Kings 9:30–37 is strongly influenced by this imagery. Their encounter takes place when the succession is unclear, when the rites for memorialising the past ruler and establishing continuity and legitimacy for the new one should be undertaken. Jehu encounters the personified visual image from the *marzeah* in Jezebel. He shatters her as the last obstacle to the throne and thereby denies the necessary memorial rites to the murdered kings and queen and asserts his independent legitimacy. Ferris Beach (1993:103) concludes that this inquiry demonstrates that the Hebrew biblical texts were in dialogue with, drew upon and in some cases were intentionally shaped in relation to powerful visual symbols.

### The seal of Jezebel

Avigad (1964:274) reports on a seal of unknown provenance belonging to the Voss-Hahn collection of ancient seals, donated to the Israel Department of Antiquities. According to Avigad (1964:275) the seal was not manufactured with the intention of inserting an inscription. It was probably purchased for its attractive appearance by a lady who had her name engraved in the lower register of the seal. The inscription on the seal reads 'Jezebel'. There is, however, no basis for identifying the owner of the seal with Jezebel, although they may have been contemporaries and the seal seems worthy of a queen.<sup>4</sup> Jezebel is also a rare Phoenician name, nowhere previously documented other than in the Old Testament. In 2006 Korpel revisited this issue and set the proverbial cat amongst the pigeons by claiming this seal to be in fact that of Queen Jezebel (Korpel 2006). This led to a heated debate in a public domain, sometimes crossing the boundaries of academic discourse.<sup>5</sup>

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE JEZEBEL SPIRIT IN POPULAR CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

The focus of this section is a discussion of the Jezebel phenomenon referred to in some Christian circles as 'the Jezebel spirit'. Two publications concerned with this issue are *The Three Battlegrounds* by Francis Frangipane (1994) and *Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit* by John Paul Jackson (2001). These works are analysed separately by looking at their descriptions of the characteristics of the 'Jezebel spirit' phenomenon as well as methods and techniques this 'spirit' employs and how it operates. This section closes with an inquiry into the exegetical method employed by the authors.

### The Three Battlegrounds – Francis Frangipane

The purpose of Frangipane's discussion of the Jezebel spirit is to help equip the church in the battle in the heavenly places, which is known as the spirit realm (Frangipane 1994:157). In the introduction to his book Frangipane (1994:9) indicates that his book is about spiritual warfare. Frangipane states that:

*... to understand the spirit of Jezebel, we must understand the genesis of this personality in the Bible. The first mention of Jezebel is seen in the rebellious, manipulative wife of King Ahab. It was actually this spirit, operating through Jezebel ....*

(Frangipane 1994:119)

This citation indicates that he directly links the existence of a Jezebel spirit to the actual historical personality of Jezebel. Frangipane (1994:120) further states 'that the spirit which produced Jezebel existed before its namesake was born'. This spirit is operating through women who publicly humiliate their husbands and control them by their fear of public embarrassment. Jezebel uses the power of sexual passion, whether it is through

4. Ferris Beach (2005) builds her argument on this premise.

5. cf. <http://www.bib-arch.org/debates/jezebel-seal-00.asp>

physical contact or seductive glances, to control men (Frangipane 1994:121). The spirit of Jezebel seeks to manoeuvre itself into leadership positions in female ministries and comes to the fore when women insist upon recognition, disregard male leadership in the church or manipulate men. Jezebel abhors humility, prayer and the Word of God (Frangipane 1994:122–124).

### Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit – John Paul Jackson

Throughout this book Jackson recounts stories of many who have battled the Jezebel spirit. In discussing Jezebel of 2 Kings 9:22, Jackson (2001:19) states, 'I believe an evil spirit motivated Jezebel's actions.... I also believe the influence of this spirit exists today and has never been eradicated from the Church.' Jackson (2001:12–15) discerns the Jezebel spirit as a celestial power that has worldwide influence. It works in consort with demonic powers, which include spirits of manipulation, religion, control, lust, perversion and the occult. Jackson goes on to elaborate on specific characteristics of Jezebel and the spirit that is associated with her name. Here these are only briefly listed:

- Spinning a web of deceit (Jackson 2001:44–51)
- Using seduction as strategy (Jackson 2001:54–62)
- Devising even deadly ploys in order to succeed in driving her host into occult involvement (Jackson 2001:65–106).

### Interpretive method(s) employed by authors of popular Christian literature

The task of hermeneutics is to ascertain to the best of the exegete's ability what the text means and therefore to hear God's Word in the text. In their exegesis of biblical texts concerning the Jezebel spirit, Frangipane and Jackson do not apply the principles of Bible interpretation in a scholarly manner, perhaps because they present their writings as popular literature to a specific religious community. However, this is all the more reason for applying proper exegetical methods in interpretation. With regard to a specific religious community, Hayes and Holladay (1987:141) explain that the Bible is read and interpreted in many different contexts and in many different ways in contemporary culture. Within Christianity, the Bible has the status of sacred texts and plays a normative role. As such, it is read and employed in ways that are different from those of the general reading public.

Since the earliest days of the Christian faith and through the centuries believers were admonished to equip themselves for spiritual warfare. The New Testament is often cited to underline this:

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*  
(Eph 6:12 NIV)

If these 'rulers' exercise power in different areas of the world, some of the world's most intractable problems may be due at least partly to spiritual forces behind the scenes rather than merely the obvious overt factors such as geography, history or political conditions. It is from this awareness and understanding of the spiritual dimension that Frangipane and Jackson present their views on the phenomenon of the Jezebel spirit. However, exegetes should always keep in mind that an awareness of the spiritual dimension does not safeguard them from reading their own convictions into the Scriptures.

### The Three Battlegrounds – Francis Frangipane

Frangipane (1994:119) opens his discussion on the Jezebel spirit by quoting from the book of Revelation:

*But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and teaches and leads my bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.*

(Rv 2:20)

Obviously this text indicates that the congregation in Thyatira is led astray by a woman called Jezebel. In sketching the

background of the Jezebel spirit, Frangipane mentions Jezebel as the wife of King Ahab. He then cites 1 Kings 18:22 and 19:4, 14–18 as well as 2 Kings 9:21–26, 30–33. To explain the spirit of Jezebel, he draws on the characteristics of Jezebel, but he also relies on several New Testament texts in which the name Jezebel does not surface to support his discussion. Frangipane alternately calls the phenomenon of Jezebel a spirit, a stronghold and a demon, but nowhere is this stated in the texts that he cites.

Frangipane (1994:127) employs the genre of apocalyptic literature in his argument for an ancient war between the spirit of Jezebel and the spirit of Elijah. The war between Jezebel and Elijah continues today. Just as Jezebel had viciously and systematically murdered all of God's servants until only Elijah remained, so this spirit of Jezebel continues in our day with modern-day prophets. However, in reading the Old Testament it is important to keep in mind the interpretative methods developed by biblical scholars. When these methods are applied properly, they yield verifiable results that give the reader more accurate information about the meaning of the Bible (Barton 1996:8, 9). Either Frangipane is not aware of the literary genres of the Scriptures or he chooses not to employ interpretative methods concerned with these genres.

### **Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit – John Paul Jackson**

Unlike Frangipane, Jackson begins by drawing a parallel between the age of apostasy in which the Israelites lived and the apostasy of our day. He builds his exegesis on the narratives in 1 Kings 21:35, 2 Kings 8:25–27 and 2 Kings 9:6–7, 22. He also cites several passages from both the Old and the New Testament to support his in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the Jezebel spirit. Jackson identifies a major battle between the spirit of Jezebel and modern-day prophets, just as in the days of old. He discerns Jezebel as a celestial power, a demonic power, a demonic spirit and a stronghold in the minds of people. No scriptural passages cited in his discussion reveal Jezebel as a spirit.

## **INTERPRETATION OF THE JEZEBEL NARRATIVES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **Introduction**

John Goldingay (1995:1) opens his introduction to the varied forms of Scripture by quoting from the Letter to the Hebrews, which observes that 'God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets'. This indicates that the Bible has a variety of ways of speaking and that the process of interpretation requires a variety of interpretative approaches, with the goal to reach an informed understanding of the text. Hayes and Holladay (1987:23) relate in this respect that the exegete cannot present the exegesis of a passage as if it were the final word. This implies that exegesis is an ongoing process, since there will always be new dimensions of the text that may come to light.

The most common genre in the Old Testament is narrative. Narratives in the Old Testament relate to the origin of the world, the sins of humanity, its destruction and the covenant and history of Israel (*cf.* Gn–2 Ki). Reeves (1996:265) states that the biblical stories should be read on microscopic and macroscopic levels. This implies that readers should not only pay attention to every detail of a narrative but also keep the whole picture in focus. Each narrative portion of the Old Testament has its own plot, prominent and less prominent characters,<sup>6</sup> settings, narrator, heroes, villains and so forth. The recognition of these details enhances the reader's understanding of a narrative.

### **Discussion of a model to be used**

Narrative criticism has been one of many new methodologies to arise in biblical studies. Tannehill (1996:488) defines narrative criticism as a method of interpreting the biblical narrative with the assistance of ancient and modern literary theory. It approaches the biblical narrative as a literary text that can be analysed in

literary terms. Newport (1996:135) says that the literary aspects of narrative have increasingly become the centre of interest since the late 1960s. Rhoads (1999:265, 269) explains that narrative criticism arose in the context of the predominance of traditional historical-critical methods. It arose when New Criticism was prevalent among secular literary critics. It argued for the study of a text in its own right apart from authorial intention or reader responses. Subsequent literary studies indicated that there is no narrative world apart from the social context and there is no narrative world apart from the reading experience. The major contribution of narrative criticism to biblical studies in general has been the establishment of the surface narrative of the text as a legitimate object of study.

Rhoads (1999:265) says that narrative criticism has come to be understood as the analysis of the story world of a narrative and the analysis of its implied rhetorical impact on readers. Analysis of the story world focuses on the world inside a narrative with its own times, places, characters, set of values, past and future, and series of events moving forward in a meaningful way. This story world is an imaginary world created by the telling of the narrative. Analysis of the rhetoric of a narrative also focuses on the implied impact of a narrative, both from the story itself as well as from the way it is told. On this point Kaiser and Silva (1994:71) explain that the biblical narrative presents matters indirectly. It depends on the selection of details, arrangement of events and rhetorical devices to establish the principles it wishes to convey. Kaiser and Silva (1994:68) list and discuss the following key elements of the narrative: scene, plot, dialogue and rhetorical devices. These elements assist the interpreter to understand the meaning and purpose of each episode. Elements of structure are exhibited at four levels, namely verbal, narrative technique, narrative world and conceptual content.

### **Focusing the model on the Jezebel texts**

#### **Background to the books of 1 and 2 Kings**

Nelson (1998:38) lists the Old Testament as the main source for the history of the monarchy of Israel. This period spans roughly the 10th–7th centuries BCE. The books of 1 and 2 Kings deal with the decline and fall of the Davidic Empire and the reasons thereof. Dumbrell (1988:91) comments that the history of this period is cast into a pattern of rebellion and punishment. This theme is typical of the manner in which the Deuteronomists cast the history of Israel when they edited it during the exile. Robinson (1972:9) explains that the Deuteronomists were concerned with more than the purging of pagan influences. They had worked out a comprehensive theological system that is expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. The political experience of Israel is unique since the state was understood to be a theocracy under God. Wiseman (1993:17) suggests that the books of Kings also contribute to the modern reader's understanding of the cultural milieu of the period. They tell of the writings and wisdom, the law, justice and injustice, the dangers of interfaith and mixed marriages, international trade, famine, wars and so on. Provan (1995:1) points out that in the books of Kings the narrative nature can be seen in the fact that a story is told, a number of characters are presented, events follow each other in chronological sequence and verbal and thematic links bind the whole unit together.

Nelson (1987:47) suggests that the books of Kings were finalised in the early years of the Babylonian exile. By reading the books of Kings, the reader can learn a great deal about the intended audience. The books of Kings expect their audience to know the saving traditions of Israel. This knowledge includes the patriarchs, the exodus, the ancient tribal system, the exterior of the Temple and the geography of Jerusalem. Great respect for the law is implied by the books. Wiseman (1993:26) notes that the author felt free to vary the repetitive formulae that served as the framework in which he wrote and to introduce his own review at different points in the composition. The introductory formulae include the king's name and relation to his predecessor. To this is added the date of accession with a synchronism to

6. *cf.* Van der Bergh (2008) for a recent discussion on characterisation in the Hebrew Bible.

the corresponding contemporary ruler in the other kingdom, whether Israel or Judah. Next given is the king's age on coming to the throne. The length of his reign is recorded in total years, with months and days when it was less than a full year. The place of reign is given – the kings of Judah resided in Jerusalem while for the kings of Israel it was initially Tirzah until the capital was relocated to Samaria under Omri. The king's mother's name is added for the kings of Judah. A theological appraisal of each reign is given by a statement judging the reign as 'right' or 'evil'. This judgement is an evaluation of the individual's life and rests on theological criteria. The account of each reign is usually terminated by a series of statements arranged in a common order. The concluding formulae include a citation of sources that provide additional information. The name of the successor concludes the concluding formulae. In some instances a postscript has been added after the concluding formulae, as in 2 Kings 10:36.

### An overview of the Jezebel texts

Frangipane and Jackson want to lay biblical foundations for their argument concerning the 'Jezebel spirit' by citing the Jezebel texts from the books of 1 and 2 Kings. The texts concerned are 1 Kings 16:31–33; 18:4, 9; 19:1–2; and 21:1–15, 23, 25; and 2 Kings 9:7, 10; and 9:30–37. These texts should now be analysed as to their bearing on the notion of a 'Jezebel spirit'.

#### 1 Kings 16:31–33

1 Kings 16:31–33 forms part of the formulaic report on the reign of King Ahab. The two characters under discussion in this introduction are King Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab's primary evils are cited as marrying Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; erecting an altar for Baal, whom he began to worship; and making an Asherah pole. Gray (1977:367, 368) explains that the name Jezebel is a parody, meaning 'no nobility', 'where is the prince?' (a cultic cry known from Ugarit texts) or 'dung' (a perversion of the title of Baal). Wiseman (1993:163) suggests that Ahab married Jezebel early in the reign of king Omri to mark the political and economic treaty between Israel and Sidon.

Nelson (1987:100, 101) refers to 1 Kings 14:21–16:34 as paradigmatic history. The nature of these chapters makes it the centre of a network of negative evaluative judgements. In Israel the king is always the focus of disobedience. The loyalty of Israel to God reaches a low point in Ahab. In Deuteronomistic evaluative language the setting up of an Asherah is a common crime. However, Ahab reflects further apostasy by building an altar and temple for Baal. The narrator cites this as evidence to give the impression that Ahab was the worst king of Israel thus far. Wiseman (1993:162) indicates that the usual introductory formulae on Ahab is followed by an evaluation of the increasing evil of the family as progressively worse than the evil done by Omri. By his marriage to Jezebel Ahab introduced the worship of Baal officially alongside that of Yahweh. Tribble (1995:4) explains that in the Deuteronomists' censure of Ahab, Baal's name is repeated three times. Jezebel is introduced with hostility due to her religious affiliation and thus the faith she espouses, her name announces.

#### 1 Kings 18:4, 19

Rice (1990:140) comments that 1 Kings 17, 18 and 19 centres around a great drought that lasted about three years. The confrontation between Elijah and the Baal prophets and the ending of the drought fall within the action of Chapter 18. Tribble (1995:6) states that Chapter 18:3–6 is a short narrative of return and meeting. In Chapter 18:1–2 the Word of God instructs Elijah to journey to Ahab. Verse 4 contains a condemnatory reference to Jezebel by testifying to her power over the prophets of God. The reference to Jezebel's killing the prophets of the Lord in Verse 4 forms part of the gradual revelation of Jezebel's character. It also amplifies the negative image of her already established in the introductory formula. Verse 4 is repeated in Verse 13. In Verse 4 the narrator informs the reader that while Jezebel was killing

off the Lord's prophets, the faithful character Obadiah hid 100 of them in two caves and fed them with bread and water. In Verse 13 Obadiah relates the same information to Elijah.

An interesting comment is made by Gray (1977:389) when he observes that Verse 4 is the first explicit reference in the books of Kings to associations of prophets. It is also the first explicit reference to organised prophetic resistance to the assimilation of the Baal cult. Nelson (1987:115) remarks that the necessary background of hostility has been established by Verse 4. The violence Obadiah anticipates against himself parallels Jezebel's murderous violence against God's prophets. Obadiah and Jezebel are contrasted concerning feeding the prophets. Whereas Obadiah fed the prophets of God, Jezebel fed the prophets of Baal. This is indicated in Verse 19 where Elijah asks Ahab to also summon to the assembly on Mount Carmel the 450 prophets who eat at Jezebel's table. Rice (1990:149) points out that to eat at the table of the king or queen was to be subsidised by the state. Jezebel was so aggressive that she promoted the worship of Baal and Asherah at state expense. Tribble (1995:7) says that in citing the large number of Jezebel's prophets, Elijah witnesses her religious zeal. In specifying that these prophets eat at her table, Elijah suggests her economic independence as well her resources. This episode as narrated leaves the reader with an ever-increasing negative image of Jezebel, an awareness of her murderous violence that knows no bounds.

#### 1 Kings 19:1, 2

1 Kings 19:1–18 forms the last of three acts described by Rice (1990:140), namely the drought as a challenge to the Canaanite religion in Chapter 17; the confrontation between Elijah and the leaders of the Canaanite religion and the ending of the drought in Chapter 18; and Elijah's flight and self-examination following his victory in Chapter 19:1–18. Wiseman (1993:171) relates that it is not certain whether the historian intended to recount events in chronological sequence. Jezebel sent a messenger because she was afraid to confront Elijah in person, with a strong curse referring to the gods.

Rice (1990:157) suggests that Ahab's report to Jezebel in Verse 1 was a great opportunity for him to take a stand for God. Instead, he passively yields to the desire of Jezebel for revenge, which is expressed by her vowing to take Elijah's life. Ahab reports to her, as though religious and political power is allocated to her. For the first time the narrator assigns speech to Jezebel in Verse 2. This speech affirms the development of her character in the narrative. The result of her threatening message to Elijah is his flight to Beer-Sheba in Judah. The role and importance of her Canaanite gods are emphasised through the force of her words in Verse 2. The oath that she utters, 'May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely...', parallels Elijah's first speech in Chapter 17:1. Here Elijah and Jezebel are contrasted concerning their calling on their gods. Tribble (1995:8) suggests that these utterances share a genre but not a deity. They also share a theme but not the specificities.

The strength of Jezebel's character is revealed through this narrative not as a positive trait but negatively. She is shown to be fearless in her revenge and capable of extreme violence to attain her goal of establishing the worship of Baal.

#### 1 Kings 21:1–5, 23, 25

Nelson (1987:140) comments that 1 Kings 21:1–15 is an episode of royal tyranny. The situation is presented in verses 1–2. The chapter is held together by the themes of eating and fasting: Ahab's reaction to the oath of Naboth is a refusal to eat in Verse 4; in Verse 7 Jezebel insists that he eats while she instigates a fast; Ahab's blood will be licked up by dogs and Jezebel will be devoured by dogs; those belonging to Ahab who die in the city will be eaten by dogs and the birds will feed on those who die in the country. In his examination of the literary artistry of the chapter, Nelson (1987:140) sees Jezebel as the prime mover in the narrative and Ahab as the centre of attention, though Naboth is

also strongly present. Naboth's oath introduces a complication in the plot, as he will not have the vineyard given by God to his ancestors turned into a vegetable garden. When Ahab becomes angry and sulks, Jezebel takes the initiative. Jezebel's words to Ahab in Verse 7 may be a rhetorical question, a sarcastic indicative of his kingship or a prediction. Nelson (1987:142) comments further that Jezebel literally took over the royal authority by writing letters in Ahab's name. The repetition of the content of her letter and the repetition of 'Naboth' is a narrative technique that communicates precise fulfillment. The words in Verse 10, 'stone him to death', clarify the purpose of her legal charade. The two witnesses distorted Naboth's refusal into an abusive use of God's name. In verses 10 and 13–15 the mention of the stoning becomes a refrain. Trible (1995:12) explains that Jezebel's words to Ahab in Verse 15 freed him to move to fulfil his desire. Her report to Ahab that Naboth is dead omits the details of her role in the matter.

This narrative portrays Jezebel to be more active as a character. She dismisses the Israelite tradition of land ownership since she is rooted in another set of values concerning kingship and landownership. She devises a legal frame-up cloaked in piety to steal Naboth's land. The matter of contrast surfaces also in this story. Just as Jezebel planned Naboth's death, Elijah speaks of her death through a word of judgement from God. Deuteronomistic language takes over in this condemnation. Rice (1990:179) says that Jezebel is singled out in Verse 23 to be devoured by dogs and thus denied a proper burial, which was a major disgrace to the people in antiquity.

#### 2 Kings 9:7, 10

2 Kings 9:1–16 encloses the designation of Jehu. Wiseman (1993:220) comments that when the prophets had completed the anointing of Jehu, he expanded the divine declaration in verses 7–10. This defined Jehu's mission: He was to terminate Ahab's house. This would include the vengeance required by Deuteronomy 32:43 for the slaying of the servants of God. Emphasis is placed on Yahweh as an avenging God who uses a human agent in Jehu as the avenger of blood. Again we observe the occurrence of repetition in Verse 7. The divine speech through the prophet sent by Elisha reaches back to Jezebel's act of violence against the prophets and servants of Yahweh. Verse 10 is a repetition of Elijah's prophecy delivered in 1 Kings 21:23 concerning Jezebel. Verse 10 creates tension in the narrative for the question arises whether Jezebel will survive the Word of the Lord.

#### 2 Kings 9:30–37

Nelson (1987:203) comments that chapters 9:17–10:36 are organised on the basis of seven violent acts. The killing of Jezebel in 9:30–37 is the third act. It opens with Jezebel's painting her eyes, arranging her hair and looking out of the window. Nelson (1987:203) points out that this final toilet of Jezebel could be evaluated as a reflection of her idolatries referred to in 1 Kings 9:22. An alternative interpretation is to see her final act as a seductive preparation for lovemaking in the expectation that Jehu would take over Jehoram's harem. Wiseman (1993:223) disagrees here. He suggests that Jezebel was not necessarily acting coquettishly and her question 'Have you come in peace?' could be sincere and not sarcastic. Her request may have been made in the hope of some agreement. Jezebel's looking out of the window does not necessarily mean that she acted in a shameless way as a prostitute. Jezebel's reference to Zimri could be irony in taunting Jehu as one unlikely to survive his attempt on the throne. This is an allusion to the events described in 1 Kings 16:8–20.

After Jehu's order that Jezebel be thrown out of the window and she is trampled by the horses, he went into the palace to eat and drink. Nelson (1987:203) says that Jehu's words 'that cursed woman' (v 34) agree with those of God and the narrator. Jezebel's gruesome death is described in graphic detail without the slightest trace of compassion. The narrative itself does not

reveal why so little was left of her. In Verse 36 Jehu recalls the prophecy that dogs would devour her on the plot of ground at Jezreel. He interprets this as a fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy.

In conclusion then, Jezebel is characterised in the books of Kings as an unscrupulous foreigner. In the introductory formula of King Ahab, Jezebel is introduced as the wife of Ahab and the daughter of Ethbaal. Ahab's primary evil was his marriage to Jezebel. This immediately paints her in a very negative light, which remains with the reader as the narrative unfolds. Her deeds of murder, violence, theft and support of other deities arouse revulsion. Jezebel can be known only as she is presented in these narratives, and the reader can only refer to them. Kam (1995:139) comments that Jezebel the person gets lost in the rhetoric. Only if one moves beyond the stereotypes can one find the woman whom no one seems to have mourned. Feminist interpretations concentrate more on this aspect of Jezebel the woman.

### Feminist interpretations

Fokkelman (1999:22, 23) points out that a Bible text is a living text in search of a competent reader. With every new reader the text moves through constantly changing times and contexts. It always meets new audiences and is always subject to new and different views. Fokkelman (1999:24, 26) continues to say that the reader's subjectivity does not mean that the reader is at liberty to subject the text to any wild speculation. The reader is unconsciously subject to the influence of his or her expectations, religious beliefs and prejudices.

Concerning reading the Bible from a feminist perspective, Bal (1989:87) explains that feminism's most valuable contribution to modern scholarship consists of the emphasis on the ideological position of the Bible scholar. Achtemeier (1988:45) explains that there is not only one feminist approach to the Bible and its theology or a single system of thought but a multitude of different views.

Frost (1964:504) comments that history has pronounced adverse judgement on Jezebel and he takes an instructive look at other women of gentile origin in the Old Testament. Frost (1964:505) concludes that it seems as if treason, seduction and murder are praiseworthy when done to Israel's advantage but are deserving of censure when used by the enemies of Israel. It would seem that the Bible upholds a double standard of judgement. From the above it is clear that Jezebel, who was opposed to Israel, had no chance of a fair trial in a biblical court. An important aspect of Jezebel's marriage to Ahab is that she achieved a husband-wife relationship with him that is unique in the Old Testament. This alone is a testimony to the strength of Jezebel's character.

Holt (1995:83) comments that the Old Testament literature often portrays opposing tendencies in the description of events and persons. Jezebel is here presented as scapegoat. As such, Holt (1995:93, 94) underlines Jezebel's death as the outcome of her double responsibility. She actively seduced Ahab to turn away from God and passively seduced him to institute the cult of Baal. Jezebel died the death of the scapegoat.

Trible (1995:4) states that no woman or man in the Bible endured a more hostile press than Jezebel. The focus of this hostility was her religious affiliation. The Deuteronomists shaped a narrative in which Elijah and Jezebel emerged as opposites – he was the epitome of good, she of evil. Trible (1995:3) says that this juxtaposition was so successful that it has persuaded readers throughout the ages to make the proper Deuteronomistic choice to love Elijah and hate Jezebel. In the end Elijah is triumphant while Jezebel is looked upon contemptuously.

Appler (1999:67, 68) states that when Jezebel is devoured her symbols of power, which are the head, feet and hands, are left behind. These are perhaps the power symbols of the goddess

Anat. As daughter of Ethbaal it is likely that Jezebel worshipped Anat in conjunction with her devotion to Baal. This may offer clues to the reason for the left-over body parts of Jezebel. Anat had two symbols of power: a necklace of skulls that was worn around the neck, and hands that she wore as a belt around her waist. Thus, Jezebel leaves behind the symbols of a Canaanite goddess.

### THE JEZEBEL NARRATIVES: A NARRATOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

#### Queen Jezebel as a character type

Bar Efrat (1997:47) points out that characters can transmit the values of the narrative to the reader, since they usually constitute the focal point of interest. Their personalities and histories attract the reader's attention and arouse emotional involvement. In a work of literature it is the portrayal of a character that creates the character. Ackroyd (1983:256) indicates that Jezebel was defined as alien in origin, and in this line of interpretation, she becomes a type. The hostility to what is believed to be alien practice is projected in detail onto her figure.

In her discussion Bach (1999:357) indicates that character can exist in the consciousness as an element independent of the narrative in which the character originally was discovered. In reading, a sequence of events can lend itself to various interpretations, depending upon the perspective or context in which the reader places the material. The reader does not respond passively to characters as they have been presented in a story but actively and even appropriates them. When the reader responds negatively to the narrator and rejects his or her codes, the reader in question may reject the story altogether. However, at the same time one of the characters from the narrative may live on in the reader's mind. According to Chatman (cited by Bach 1999:357), the experience of reading often involves the retention of the reader's image of a character, not just apart from events but also long after the reader has forgotten most of the narrative. The reader then creates a paradigm of traits. From the narrator's report about the character, gestures, actions and thoughts of the character, the reader transforms the paradigm of traits into a character. This process results in the character taking on an existence independent of the original narrative.

Trible (1995:3) explains that the Deuteronomist authors shaped a narrative in which Jezebel and Elijah emerged as opposites. She was for the Baals and Asherah and he was for Yahweh, the God of Israel.

#### The narrator

In his discussion on the narrator and his or her characters, Fokkelman (1999:55, 56) indicates that the narrator is an attitude or a pose. He or she could be called a subpersonality of the author. The narrator draws the lines and selects the details that suit him or her, structures time, sketches space and brings characters on and takes them off; the narrator also enforces his or her point of view. In the books of 1 and 2 Kings we know that the point of view is that of the Deuteronomists. Bar-Efrat (1997:15, 16) states that the point of view of a narrative is important for several reasons: First, it is a factor in according unity to the narrative; second, it dictates what will be narrated and how; third, it can enhance the interest or suspense of a narrative; finally, the point of view is a means by which the narrator influences the reader. It is important to note here that the author's attitude and views are usually intertwined with the facts of the narrative, manifesting in the way the narrative unfolds. The effectiveness of the narrative is to a considerable extent dependent on the point of view. This technique in biblical narrative attempts to influence readers by imparting a view of people, God, life, good and evil and God's activity in the world. The narrator does not often provide the reader with information about God's feelings. When such information is given, the issue is of great importance. This is the case with God's judgement on Jezebel in 1 Kings 21:23 and 2 Kings 9:10, 36–37. Judgement by God is more effective and convincing than judgement by the narrator or one of the

characters in the plot, since God is the absolute and supreme authority (Bar-Efrat, 1997:19).

Fokkelman (1999:65) points out that the narrator sometimes lets the reader share in prior knowledge about characters as in 1 Kings 16:30–33 by relating the evil that Ahab did and in 1 Kings 21:25 by telling the readers that Jezebel urged Ahab to do evil. The relation between the narrator and every character in a narrative is that of creator and creation. Where communication is concerned, the narrator is outside the story while the character lives inside the story and is part of that world. Characters cannot escape from the level where the narrator has placed them (Fokkelman, 1999:59, 63).

#### The character Jezebel

Bar-Efrat (1997:47) mentions that many of the views in a narrative are expressed through the speech and fate of characters. Characters' actions, emphasis on their characteristics and revelations about them by the narrator reveal the values and norms within the narrative. The decisions that they make when confronted with different alternatives and the results of these decisions provide evidence of the ethical dimension of the narrative. Characters can arouse either sympathy or revulsion in the reader but never indifference. We can know characters from the biblical past in a narrative only as they are presented in the narratives.

#### Introducing Queen Jezebel

Bar-Efrat (1997:111, 112) notes that the presentation of the situation existing in the beginning of the narrative is called exposition. It serves as an introduction that supplies background information, introduction of characters (their names, traits and state in life) and details that are important for understanding the narrative. Two methods are applied for bringing expositional material to the attention of the reader: One is to concentrate all information at the beginning of the narrative and the other is to reveal it gradually in the course of the narrative. Jezebel is introduced in the opening of the file of King Ahab in 1 Kings 16:31–33. Bar-Efrat (1997:90) remarks that character is existential since it is revealed in actual real-life situations and that epithets relating to biblical characters do not refer to their personalities but to their origin. Jezebel is introduced as 'daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians'. The reader is also oriented to the sins of Ahab with reference to Jezebel as instigator of them. A gradual revelation of the character of Jezebel is found in the Jezebel texts following this introduction:

- Jezebel is introduced as instigator of Ahab's setting up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria as well as making an Asherah pole
- She shows her loyalty to the prophets of Baal and Asherah by feeding them
- Her witchcraft is revealed as she invokes a curse over Elijah as well as herself
- Jezebel bends the Deuteronomistic law concerning property in Israel to her own ends, which reveals her as a schemer, plotter and murderer
- She draws on the name of Yahweh (her enemy) to her own profit, and she assumes royal authority by writing letters in Ahab's name and placing his seal on them
- The narrator reveals Jezebel as exterminator of Yahweh's prophets
- The narrator reveals the judgement of Yahweh by stating the horrible death awaiting her
- Her final toilet can be evaluated as an assessment of her idolatries or a reflection of a decision to meet her death with dignity as a queen, or it can be understood as preparation to sexually seduce Jehu.

#### The shaping of her character

Bar-Efrat (1997:48, 49) says that biblical narratives do not give detailed descriptions of the physical appearance of characters.

When information of this kind is given it serves solely as a means of the plot. In the case of Jezebel, no description is given of her outward appearance concerning facial expressions or clothing. Explicit mention of her painting her eyes and arranging her hair is made in 2 Kings 9:30.

In discussing the personality of a character Bar-Efrat (1997:53) states that there are two kinds of direct statement about this. One refers to character traits and one relates to mental state. Direct characterisation entails an element of judgement. This is evident in the Jezebel texts, as indicated above. The references to her idolatry, witchcraft and murdering constitute both characterisation and judgement. Characters are indirectly shaped by external features such as speech or actions. These are revelations of their inner states. From this the reader has to interpret and construct the character's mental and emotional make-up (Bar-Efrat 1997:64). The Jezebel texts give ample evidence of this.

### Reflection of her viewpoint

Bar-Efrat (1997:39, 41) says that the way in which the narrator refers to a person reflects either the narrator's own attitude or that of another character. In the Jezebel texts the narrator, Elijah, Obadiah and Jehu reflect the Deuteronomistic view and attitude towards Jezebel in their references to her. Whenever Jezebel uses direct speech in the narrative her point of view is reflected. Her views are based upon her upbringing in Tyre against the background of Baal and Asherah worship and the values and norms influenced by her religion.

### Her ethical stance

In reading the Bible, readers can sense a distinct ethical appeal. Janzen (1994:20, 31) explains that particular characters are shaped by their particular stories. When we consider the conflict between Ahab and Naboth, it seems that it is a conflict over real estate that might raise a question concerning general ethical principles of private property in light of government purchase or expropriation. If both Ahab and Naboth had been shaped in their ethics by Israel's story of relating to land, Ahab would never have made the request to buy Naboth's vineyard. On the other hand, if both had been shaped by Canaanite history with its assumption of absolute kingship, Naboth would never have considered refusing Ahab's request. Thus, no ethical quandary would have existed. However, this quandary came about because Naboth had been shaped by Israel's history whereas Ahab hovered at its edges. For Jezebel, acting within Canaanite history, Naboth, acting outside her history, had to be coerced to conform to her norms.

The Jezebel texts then portray a character in direct opposition to the Deuteronomistic laws; a character who kept to the values, norms and convictions of her religious background; a character who never compromised her own convictions; a character who ruthlessly promoted ungodliness and influenced the erection of pagan worship places and sponsored pagan priesthood. This character persecuted righteousness and tried to eradicate the true worship of God. She engineered the death of a landowner to acquire his property to her own advantage and used treason and false accusation to this end. This character invoked curses on her enemies. In the end she died and was destroyed according to the Word of God delivered through his prophets.

### The theology of the Jezebel texts

Freeman (1996:307) explains that since most lay people do not have access to the critical tools of biblical study, they are dependent upon the preaching they hear to provide an accurately interpreted Word of God to them. Hermeneutics should be seen as a servant of the work of preaching rather than as an exercise for a few academicians. Ramm (1996:277) states that the proper alternative to spiritualising the Jezebel texts is to principalise them. This means to discover in the narratives basic theological principles. These principles are latent in the text and

it is the process of deduction that brings them to the surface. By principalising the preacher is able to obtain devotional and spiritual truth from Scripture and avoid the charge of eisegesis.

Nelson (1987:120) comments that the books of 1 and 2 Kings as canonical Scripture insist that the real fabric of history is the issue of faithfulness to God. These narratives reflect a variety of intentions: They seek to evoke loyalty to Yahweh as the only God, they demolish any attempt at syncretism, they convince the reader of the power of God's Word to structure history and they provide an example that calls the unfaithful to repentance. Rice (1990:2) comments that the narratives of 1 Kings prod the reader to identify the equivalent of Canaanite religion in his or her own society. The book of 1 Kings directs the Christian to look for God's presence in the arena of public life and service. Nelson (1987:145) urges that the community that accepts the Scriptures should ask itself some hard questions. The community of faith should always ask whether it is functioning as Elijah, bearing the Word of God, or whether it is playing the role of Ahab or Jezebel. Nelson (1987:145) concludes that like Ahab, the church is not just under the influence of Jezebel but also under the power of God's Word.

## CONCLUSION

This article proposes to present Queen Jezebel of the books of 1 and 2 Kings as a character type. The discussion indicated that her image has lived on in readers' minds ever since the Jezebel texts were compiled. A paradigm of traits was created from this and then transformed into a character that took on an existence independent of the original narrative (Bach 1999:357). In considering her character as shaped by the narrator of the books of 1 and 2 Kings, her viewpoints and her ethical stance, one may conclude that she is not a significant, albeit peculiar, character. She exhibits the nature of all human beings.

This article indicated that reference to a Jezebel spirit in the modern church is based on a misreading of the biblical narratives in the books of Kings as well as a misunderstanding of the notion of characterisation in narratives. Recent developments in hermeneutical methods that draw attention to these matters should be taken seriously by preachers of the Word in the church as well as by institutions preparing men and women for the ministry.

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