

4.9 - Jezebel

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4.9.1 - Her Origin

Her name means either “dunghill,” or “without cohabitation, un-husbanded.”¹ [Jezebel](#) was the daughter of a Phoenician king, Ethbaal of Sidon (1Ki 16:31).

The identity of this Ethbaal and [Ειθώβαλος](#) [Eithōbalos], mentioned in a fragment of the *Tyrian Annals* of Menander, . . . is sufficiently made out, and is not, I believe, called in question by any. Of this Ethbaal we there learn that he was a priest of Astarte, and, by the murder of his predecessor Pheles, made his own way to the throne and kingdom. Jezebel, so swift to shed blood (1K. 18:4; 19:2; 21:10), is a worthy offshoot of this evil stock.²

Ahab, the sinful king over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, took her in marriage as an accommodation with the pagan culture of the Sidonians:

And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1K. 16:31-33)

4.9.2 - Her Sins

[Jezebel](#) is perhaps the most evil female personage appearing within the Old Testament. She promoted Baal worship (1K. 18:19) and practiced spiritual harlotry and witchcraft (2K. 9:22). She actively sought to exterminate the prophets of God (1K. 18:4, 13) while supporting 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah at her royal table (1K. 18:19). Upon hearing of her husband's desire for Naboth's vineyard, she wrote a warrant in Ahab's name to have Naboth unjustly accused and killed so that Ahab could take the vacant property (1K. 21:1-16). Eventually, her sins caught up with her and she was consumed by dogs as Elijah had prophesied (1K. 21:23; 2K. 9:30-37). Jezebel's sin of promoting the worship of *other gods* was particularly noteworthy:

Idolatry in the Northern Kingdom began with Jeroboam I, the first king. But there was a difference between the sin of Jeroboam and the sin of Baal worship introduced by Jezebel. The sin of Jeroboam was a corruption of the true religion. Jeroboam set up a golden calf in Dan and Bethel, but these golden calves represented the God that brought them out of the land of Egypt. This was idolatry, but it was a corruption of the true Jehovah worship (1K. 12:25-33). Furthermore, Jeroboam could cite a precedent in the worship of the golden calf built by Aaron. His words concerning the golden calf in 1 Kings 12:28 are a quotation of Aaron's words in Exodus 32:4. With Jezebel, it was not merely a corruption of the true religion; a whole new god and system of worship were introduced in Israel (1K. 16:29-33). Through Jezebel, Baal worship came into the Land, resulting in more idolatry than ever before. Involved in the worship of Baal was sexual immorality. In the corruption of Jehovah worship morality was still present, but in the worship of Baal there was complete immorality.³

Throughout the Scriptural record concerning Jezebel, one sees an overbearing woman who constantly exerted her strong will over the weak will of her husband, a role reversal common in our day.

4.9.3 - Jezebel of Thyatira

The letter to the church at Thyatira mentions a self-proclaimed “prophetess” named [Jezebel](#). Some have taken her mention as a symbol, one of several of female figures personifying evil (Zec. 5:7; Mat. 13:33; Rev. 17⁺).⁴

Conceivably there may have been a woman by that name in the local Church at Thyatira, but this is highly unlikely. The name Jezebel is a Phoenician name, and by this time the Phoenicians had disappeared as a separate ethnic identity and had become part of the Greek-speaking world. Furthermore, Thyatira was not located in Phoenicia, but in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).⁵

Yet, there are reasons for understanding Jezebel to be a real woman within the Thyatiran church:

Many think Jezebel is a symbolic rather than real name, as the biblical Jezebel (I Kings 16:31; 18:13, 19, 21; II Kings 9:22) was the sort of woman after whom no parent would be likely to name their child. However, as the name means “chaste,” like the English name “Agnes,” this argument is not all that forceful. Furthermore, Scripture does not portray Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, as licentious, for II Kings 9:22 seems to refer to idolatry rather than immorality. On the other hand, this woman achieved the same results as did her infamous namesake (I Kings 21:25). Finally, Rev. 2:23⁺, “kill with death,” is very emphatic in Greek; so again it seems more appropriate to preserve the literal threat of physical death rather than favor some allegorical or symbolic meaning. Physical death would be a crystal-clear sign of God’s obvious disapproval, and that is exactly what the text says.⁶

In favor of a personal identification of Jezebel is that she is distinguished from her followers (Rev. 2:22-23⁺). The solution may be that a woman by a different name with characteristics matching those of the Phoenician Jezebel resided at Thyatira, but she is given the name Jezebel in the letter to call attention to and condemn her practices as being like those of Jezebel of old. “The approach that has the least objection to it is to take Jezebel as a symbolical name for some prominent woman in the church of Thyatira. She was like the infamous wife of Ahab.”⁷ Jezebel of Thyatira not only taught error, but exercised teaching authority over men in opposition to role distinctions set forth by Paul (1Ti. 2:12). As Paul explains, such role distinctions are not cultural, but grounded in God’s created order (1Ti. 2:13-14).⁸ The error of the Thyatiran church was not just that Jezebel was allowed to promote unbiblical concepts, but that she evidently held a position as a *teacher over men*. This is another point of identification with the strong-willed, domineering Jezebel of the [OT](#). No doubt, both her *position of influence* and the *content* of her teaching were repugnant to God.

The . . . Thyatiran Jezebel . . . taught her followers ‘to eat things sacrificed to idols’. The syncretism exemplified in the city is in point here, but the particular problem seems to have been the guild-feasts, as the occasions when the Christian may have been particularly pressed by the need to conform to his environment. . . . Presumably Jezebel argued that a Christian might join a guild and participate in its feasts without thereby compromising his faith. He was initiated into a superior wisdom. he knew the idol was nothing and he could not be defiled by that which did not exist. . . . The local situation favoured the accommodation of incompatible beliefs and practices: the letter insists on individual devotion to a Lord who searches the hearts of men and demands a consistency of life. The love and faith commended in the church might easily be corrupted by compromise with pagan society: the guilds themselves were devoted to good works.⁹

Here is the similarity between Jezebel, queen of Ahab, and Jezebel of Thyatira: both led the people of God in accommodating pagan influences resulting in syncretistic practices and sexual immorality. See [The Great Harlot](#).

Notes

¹ “Jezebel. i.e. a dunghill; without cohabitation.”—Jerome Smith, [The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), Rev. 1:20. “Noncohabited, un-husbanded.”—Merrill Frederick Unger, R. K. Harrison, Frederic F Vos, and Cyril J. Barber, [The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988), s.v. “Jezebel.”

² Richard Chenevix Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1861), 138.

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [The Footsteps of Messiah](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 59.

⁴ “When a woman is used symbolically in Scripture, she represents a religious entity. This might be either positive or negative. On the positive side, there is Israel as the Wife of Jehovah and the Church as the bride of Messiah. On the negative side, there is the woman with the leaven (Mat. 13:33), the Great Harlot of Rev. 17⁺, and here, the woman Jezebel.”—Ibid., 58.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Monty S. Mills, [Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John](#) (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1987).

⁷ Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 214.

⁸ Much like the members of the Trinity are equal in value and standing, but occupy different roles in the plan of God, so too male and female believers are equal in standing and access to God, but are to occupy different roles according to His will.

⁹ Colin J. Hemer, [The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 120, 123.

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