Introduction: Understanding the Story of Jezebel

The following article is taken from Patricia Dutcher-Walls' (professor at Univ. of Toronto) book, Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen. It offers a brief historical background and then goes into her book's approach to analyzing the narrative. I'll be giving you a more detailed historical background to the age of Jezebel in the first session, so your real interest in this article will be her introduction to the Biblical criticism tools she will be using: narrative criticism and sociological criticism. Both are relatively new in our field. In fact, a local scholar, Robert Alter, might well be considered one of the founding fathers of modern narrative criticism with his book The Art of Biblical Narrative.

For both the Jezebel and Athaliah material, we'll play with Dutcher-Walls' approach to the text. Of course, we need to keep in mind that we're dealing with the Deuteronomist's didactic perspective, put to writing centuries after the lives of our three principal subjects.

See ya in class,

Jehon
Evil, arrogant, malicious, conniving—all these adjectives and more have been used to describe Jezebel, the queen of ancient Israel. She joined her husband, King Ahab, in ruling that small ancient kingdom and made a lasting impact on the lives of their subjects, including the prophet Elijah. The story of this powerful queen in the books of 1 and 2 Kings is intriguing and powerful. Jezebel as a character in the story and as a queen in an ancient society commands our attention in much the same way that she seemed to command the fear and obedience of her ancient subjects. Being able to read her story using different perspectives will give us insights into how an interfacing of biblical study methods can draw out ideas about the world and theology of the Old Testament writers.

In particular, this study of biblical character will focus on Jezebel to explicate and demonstrate two biblical methods, *narrative criticism* and *sociological criticism*. Each method will be briefly introduced and then employed to present a detailed “portrait” of Jezebel. The first portrait, drawn from narrative criticism with a focus on the rhetorical strategies of the storytelling, will be of Jezebel as a character in the story world—how she is portrayed, how she impacts the plot and other characters. The second portrait, drawn from sociological criticism with a focus on ancient agrarian monarchies, will be of Jezebel as a typical queen in an ancient monarchy—how a queen in such a society had an impact on her subjects and what actions she used to gain and keep power.

But we have a goal beyond that of developing two “portraits,” even though these portraits are interesting and compelling on their own. While each method contributes to a reader’s understanding of the text, the *interface* of the methods can be used to explore the worldview and theology of the ancient writers. Our assumption is that these writers knew about and remembered Jezebel as a queen with royal powers that were typical of rulers in ancient agrarian monarchies. But they highlighted in their writing particular elements of such royal power in the portrayal of Jezebel. A comparison of the portraits developed by the two methods reveals aspects of
the writers’ “theology”—that is, what they thought was important for their readers to understand about God and God’s interactions with humankind and about God’s expectations for human life. Thus Jezebel became a construct to convey, by presenting a starkly negative example, the writers’ values and commitments, such as covenantal loyalty to God (or “YHWH” to give the most likely form of the ancient divine name), worship of YHWH alone, respect for the covenantal requirements of equity and justice, and obedience to the voice of YHWH’s prophets.

Thus our study exploits the interface of two methods, one based within the narrative world of the text and one based outside the text in its larger social world. Such an interface allows a reader to view the deliberate construction of a character that was used to convey the theological interests of the writers. So the goals of our study are that readers should be able to understand the approach of two significant biblical study methods and to see how the methods interact to gain useful interpretive perspectives. Also, readers should be able to appreciate the theological commitments of the storytellers. Finally, but not least important, readers should be able to enjoy a dramatic Old Testament story in new ways.

Lurking behind these goals for our study are my own interests as a reader of biblical texts and as a professor of Old Testament. By using a wide variety of biblical study methods over the years, I have tried to be sensitive to the creation of impelling stories by the ancient writers of Scripture. Jezebel’s story is one of the best of all biblical tales. As a woman of the twenty-first century who tries to be faithful to God’s intentions for life, I cannot approve of her religion or her brutal and self-centered ways. However, there is a part of me that is impressed by her self-assurance and her power in a world of powerful men. Further, by studying her story and others like it, I have learned to appreciate the ancient storytellers as masters of the art of making important theological statements while telling a good story. I find them to be faithful witnesses to God’s action and compassion in the world, and we do well to listen to them.

The Story of Jezebel

The story in which Jezebel is a character spans a number of chapters in 1 and 2 Kings—from 1 Kings 16, where Jezebel is introduced as the wife of King Ahab, to 2 Kings 9, which recounts her death in a coup led by Jehu, the usurper of the throne. In the intervening chapters Jezebel is either a major player in the narratives of King Ahab and his successors or a behind-the-scenes player who nonetheless has an impact on the ongoing story line. When we focus on the queen we will need to keep in view as well the other characters with whom she interacts. These include King Ahab her husband; Elijah and Elisha among other prophets; the successors to Ahab in his dynasty, Ahaziah and Jehoram; and King Jehu whose coup overthrew and eliminated that dynasty. The text of these chapters often focuses on one or more of these other characters, and so for us to focus on Jezebel instead involves shifting our attention in some cases off the main story line. But we will be well rewarded for such attention because Jezebel is portrayed in the story as having an impact on the whole story and the other characters.

We first hear of Jezebel in 1 Kings 16 during the introduction to the reign of Ahab, who followed his father King Omri as king in Israel in the early ninth century B.C.E. The text highlights the information that King Omri established a dynasty, founded a new capital city in Samaria, and acted as a powerful king of this small nation. His son Ahab reigned for twenty-two years and was married to Jezebel, the daughter of Israel’s northern coastal neighbor and trading partner, the Phoenician kingdom of Tyre and Sidon. The two sons of Ahab who followed him on the throne were Ahaziah, who reigned two years, and Jehoram, who reigned for twelve years.

The story portrays how these years of the Omride dynasty were times of national and international tensions. These tensions included an extended drought; ongoing warfare with Aram-Damascus, Israel’s northern neighbor along the inland trade routes; and the threat of the Assyrian empire lurking on the northeastern boundaries of the region. Further, there were both tensions and cooperation with Judah, the “cousin” state to the south of Israel, and rivalry between those who followed Israel’s God and those who worshiped Baal, the god of Israel’s neighbors, including Jezebel’s family and nation. Intertwined in these stories are the tales of the prophet Elijah who interacted with both the kings of Israel and the common people of the land. Fleeing for his life from the wrath of Jezebel, Elijah encountered YHWH on the mountain of God and received a commission to anoint new kings for both Israel and Aram and to anoint Elisha to be his successor as God’s prophet. Elisha is likewise portrayed as being the messenger of God who warned and advised kings and helped the common people. The tales of the prophets include their aid and defense of the poor of the land and their pointed advice to and critique of the kings of Israel. The story moves forward to the point where the commissioned prophetic intervention in the affairs of the nation came to a fulfillment when Elisha anointed Jehu, an army commander, to take over the throne and establish a new dynasty. The Omride dynasty was destroyed, and Jezebel was killed in the bloody coup that established Jehu on the throne in 2 Kings 9–10.
Introductory Issues

This brief summary of the story line in which Jezebel plays a leading role serves to give enough of the story to raise several necessary introductory issues before we start the actual detailed analysis of the tale. The first introductory issue is the historical and geographical setting of the story. In order to orient ourselves to the general historical scene, consider how many biblical historians would portray the history of this time period. The people of Israel had emerged as a self-identified people and then nation in the land area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean during the late centuries of the Bronze Age and the early centuries of the Iron Age (approximately 1300–1000 B.C.E.). Mixed among other peoples, some of whom were also becoming states in the same region in the same time period (for example Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia), Israel was a collection of clans and tribes. These peoples settled in the hill country of Palestine and centered their life together around local shrines or holy places and found common league in their faith and way of life as the people of the God YHWH. They shared memories and traditions of their ancestors from earlier days who had been chosen by God, descended into Egypt during a time of famine, prospered there but over time became slaves, and were led out from slavery by God’s agent and intermediary, the great lawgiver Moses.

Gradually the clans and tribes extended their hold into the valley lands and coastal plains of the area. Under the first kings to unite the clans, David and his son Solomon (around 1000–930 B.C.E.), the new state enjoyed a time of political and economic welfare that allowed it to begin to establish the institutions of its ongoing life. These institutions included cities, particularly the new capital in Jerusalem; alternately hostile or friendly interactions with neighboring small nations, including warfare and trade; a temple and priesthood within an extended system of local sanctuaries; and the further settling and consolidation of villages and towns. Political tensions between the more prosperous northern area and the more isolated, mountainous southern area resulted in a division of the country, after Solomon’s reign, into Israel in the north and Judah in the south (around 930 B.C.E.). Each nation then began its own dynasties and political interactions, but they remained “cousin” nations that had inherited the traditions and practices and religion of their ancestors.

After fifty years of civil strife in the northern kingdom, the Omrides emerged as the first strong dynasty in Israel. The rulers of this dynasty were able to take full advantage of the favorable agricultural regions in the northern valleys while also establishing profitable trade relations and political ties with more powerful neighbors like the maritime trading nation of Phoenicia. Archaeological remains from this time period (approximately 880–840 B.C.E.) show indicators that the state became better established and more wealthy and influential in these years. In particular, material remains show the establishment of larger walled towns and cities. These areas show the marks of better-organized political administration, including citadel areas within urban sites and storehouses for collections of taxes and tithes within regional networks. Signs of the accumulation of wealth among the upper classes include better architecture, more finished building materials, and urban planning. And the existence of trading relations is marked by imported wares and foreign cultural influences. Literary remains from Israel’s neighbors establish that ancient Israel of this time had some influence on its local region, dominating the neighboring country of Moab for a time and participating with a significant military presence in a coalition against the Assyrian empire in 853.

This historical sketch gives a general background for the Jezebel story in the books of Kings that is important to give the reader a plausible historical setting for the story. But such a sketch also raises a second introductory issue. How does any judgment about the history of ancient Israel at this time intersect with the study of narrative and sociological criticism that will be undertaken in this book? In essence, this study is not attempting to write a history of Jezebel or a history of the state of ancient Israel at the time of Jezebel. Neither narrative nor sociological criticism depends on historical judgments—that is, judgments about the occurrence of events, or the accuracy of depictions of the persons involved, or the probability of causal factors of events and trends, all of which are often described in a “historical” account or discussed in a history of an event or persons.  

1 For a more detailed accounting of the relevant history see any good basic history of ancient Israel, such as J. Maxwell Miller and John Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

2 The term “Israel” refers both to God’s people as a whole and the northern kingdom in particular. Most often this study will use the term as the name of the northern state.

3 For an introduction and overview of various biblical study methods that raises and addresses the kinds of issues discussed here see Steven McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993; revised and expanded ed. 1999).
In contrast, narrative criticism studies the shape, impact, and artistry of a story without making any judgments about the “truth” or historicity of the story. Such a study is often used for entirely fictional stories and can be applied quite well to stories that may be based in history without making any judgments about the history involved. Narrative criticism draws insights from the study of literary aspects of a story such as characterization, plot development, timing, and point of view. Whether the “real” Jezebel actually did and said the things that are reported in 1 and 2 Kings is not a question narrative criticism can answer; rather, it studies how the narrated events, characters, and speeches are depicted and portrayed in the account to create a “story world” that is believable, entertaining, and in some cases instructive.

Sociological criticism is more related to “the real world” in that it studies the shape and patterns of the social institutions and groups that make up human societies. But sociological criticism does not depend on the factuality of specific events or persons or causal factors on which history bases even its broadest judgments and insights. Rather, sociological methods study broader patterns and interactions that transcend the particularities of time and place. Sociological criticism draws insights from the accumulation of data across various groups and cultures and time periods and focuses on plausibility and patterns rather than factuality and specifics. Whether the “real” Jezebel actually did and said the things that are reported in 1 and 2 Kings is not a question sociological criticism can answer. Instead, it studies how the events and persons depicted in the story “fit” into typical social patterns and roles and what such correspondence between the story and typical social patterns tells us about the story, the story world, and the author(s) of the story.

These considerations mean that we will not be attempting to assess whether the story we are reading is “accurate” or historical. And the judgments we can draw from narrative and sociological criticism will not be insights about what Jezebel really did or did not do. We will assume that there was a historical person named Jezebel who was a queen and participated in events in ancient Israel in the ninth century B.C.E.. We will assume that the story in 1 and 2 Kings that involves Jezebel is a more or less plausible rendition and reconstruction of that time. And I have given a sketch of the time period (above) in order to situate the story broadly in its probable time and place and to give our imaginations as readers a more or less probable perspective in which to “see” the story. But I am not writing a history of Jezebel or her time.

Setting aside “history” as the focus of our study raises a third introductory issue. Aren’t 1 and 2 Kings historical documents in the Bible, and why are we not reading them as history? Don’t the biblical writers tell us what actually happened, and don’t we want to know that? To answer these questions we must consider the type of writing that is contained in the “historical” books of the Bible. Unlike books that are printed as poetry (like Psalms or many of the prophets) that at least appear to be a different type of literature, 1 and 2 Kings appear and sound like a historical account. People and places and events are mentioned and described in some detail, there is a sense of chronological flow, and the writing seems to be explaining causes and consequences. For some if not many readers, the statement that the Bible is “true” or an accurate portrayal of the history of God’s people is an important part of their faith.

The study of biblical history and of the issue of the historicity of biblical literature are fields of study in their own right that are important parts of biblical scholarship. And the questions about history and truth and the accuracy of the Bible are significant questions for faith and theology. However, beyond our assumptions noted above, we cannot explore these issues further. But we can describe the ways in which we will understand the nature of the literature we are reading in the story of Jezebel.

For this study we will assume that 1 and 2 Kings, taken together, represent a type of writing that is historical in the sense that it refers to and tells about events and people of a particular time and place. But it is “history writing” that has as its goal not an “objective” reporting of history (which some would say is impossible for any history writing, ancient or modern) but an interpretive recounting of the past in order to convey a set of assumptions and commitments and values. The ancient writers told the story of Israel in order to convey a worldview or theology about God, God’s relationship with humanity and expectations for human life, and how those expectations played out in the rough and tumble reality of human life and human choices over the years. They recounted what happened and why it happened according to their own interpretive commitments and wrote so that their readers would understand and adopt the same religious commitments in their own lives.

We noted above that this study would apply both narrative criticism and sociological criticism to the story of Jezebel in order to gain useful interpretive perspectives about the theological interests of the ancient writers. Because the ancient writers were attempting precisely to convey their theological interests in telling the story, our goals in reading it have

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coherence with their intentions. We will just be more transparent and direct about exploring how those commitments are portrayed in and through the story than readers of the Bible sometimes are.

This leads to a fourth and final introductory issue. Who were these ancient writers we are talking about so much? Again, we can do no more than summarize our assumptions and starting point. The books of Joshua through 2 Kings reveal a marked commonality of language, theology, and viewpoint, which has led many scholars to assume that they were written or edited by the same person or group. This long section of the Old Testament has been termed the "Deuteronomistic History" because of the seemingly influence of the language of Deuteronomy on the story. Many scholars also assume that the Deuteronomistic History ("DH") was written around the time of Judah's exile to Babylon (587-539 B.C.E.). Perhaps there was a first edition in the decades just before the exile under the assertive King Josiah (640-609) as he attempted to reestablish Judah's power after a century of Assyrian occupation. Likely there was an edition or re-editing in the time of the exile itself, in which the writers sought to explain the disaster of the exile and give some hope and direction for the future of God's people. There may have been further commentary and updating as the story was preserved in the centuries following the exile.

Whether in one or two editions, the DH was probably written by upper-class scribes who were part of the monarchy before the exile and part of the exilic community during the exile. This is the case because most people in ancient societies were largely illiterate, perhaps having a level of functional literacy that enabled them to write a few words and numbers. But "literature" and record keeping were the tasks of professional scribes who wrote to preserve the administrative, political, and religious heritage of the monarchy and/or governing classes. Since most people could not read the literature produced, the impact on the common people of the ideas and worldview conveyed in the literature was limited. It would have been felt through the public reading of documents and through the more visual and immediate avenues of monumental architecture, public ritual, and governmental administration including taxes, tithes, and judicial procedures.

We will assume that such groups or "schools" of scribes were responsible for the production and preservation of the story that tells us about Jezebel. More than two centuries after the events they describe, these scribes used earlier sources and their own imaginations and insights to tell a story. The sources for these storytellers perhaps included oral collections like the stories of the prophets and written sources like administrative and royal annals. This interpretive history was written not only to entertain but also to instruct and convey what was important for God's people to know and remember about the life of the people through the ages.

Outline of the Book

A brief outline will indicate the contents of the chapters of the book. In Chapter One, "Introduction to Narrative Method with a Focus on Rhetoric," we will set out a non-technical survey of the narrative study of biblical texts. Analytical tools like the study of characterization, narrative timing, plot development, and dialogue will be explained. A further interest will be a focus on how narrative study can discover the persuasive elements of a text. These rhetorical elements, like repetition, dramatic language, and symbolic liaisons, make an argument through the telling of the story in order to convince or persuade the reader of the storytellers' point of view.

Two chapters will constitute our study of the narrative portrait of Jezebel. In Chapter Two, "Narrative Analysis: Jezebel the Queen," and Chapter Three, "Narrative Analysis: Jezebel the Queen Mother," we undertake a detailed study of the texts in 1 Kings 16 through 2 Kings 9 that mention or reflect Jezebel as a character. The goal of the chapters is to demonstrate how narrative method with a focus on rhetoric works to "read" the character of Jezebel that is embedded in the text. The study not only will show how the story portrays Jezebel as a powerful, assertive, and yet decidedly evil character but also will demonstrate the gains achieved from being able to see how the text makes that characterization convincing.

In the following chapter we turn to the second method. Chapter Four, "Introduction to Sociological Analysis," will set out a non-technical survey of the sociological study of biblical texts. The primary analytical tool of building a sociological model of a society or social group will be explained and illustrated. The delineation of an ancient agrarian monarchy as an identifiable type of social organization with characteristic elements will occupy most of the chapter. In particular, the chapter will explain what such a model shows about the social dynamics by which elite and powerful social actors, like kings and queens, make an impact on the rest of the social fabric.
Chapter Five, "Sociological Analysis: Jezebel the Queen and Queen Mother," will contain a detailed study of the same texts as in Chapters Two and Three. The goal of the chapter is to draw a social portrait of Jezebel and to demonstrate how a sociological method with a focus on ancient monarchy works to "read" the probable social realities behind the text. The study not only will show how the story reflects the ancient social dynamics centered around any rich and powerful queen but also will demonstrate the gains achieved from understanding the social world of the text and the social status and role of a queen.

The final chapter of the book will carefully interface the two methods through a comparison of the narrative and sociological portraits of Jezebel. Chapter Six, "The Methods Interfaced: The Portraits of Jezebel," will draw a comparison that reveals what the ancient writers considered important to communicate based in their worldview and theology. The starkly negative portrait of Jezebel conveys by negative example the storytellers' positive values and commitments, such as covenant loyalty to YHWH, worship of YHWH alone, respect for equity and justice, and listening to the voice of YHWH's prophets. The chapter suggests that the positive commitments incorporated into the dramatic story of Jezebel confronted the ancient readers and hearers of the story with a challenge to make decisions that embodied such covenantal values.

We begin our study of Jezebel with a survey of narrative criticism in order to acquaint the reader with the tools critics use to study a story. This chapter will give a brief survey of the types of questions a narrative analysis asks about a text in order to understand how a story develops and communicates. The focus of the chapter will be a concise description of the elements a narrative critic looks for. We will also need to pay some attention to rhetorical criticism, a particular type of narrative criticism that studies how a story is persuasive so that the reader is convinced about the themes and concepts that are carried by the story. This is especially necessary for the type of narrative that is found in the Old Testament, where history is shaped in order to convey themes and ideas that the authors wanted to communicate to their audiences. In the next two chapters we will apply these narrative and rhetorical study skills to the Jezebel story.

Narrative criticism is a fairly recent addition to the tools that biblical interpreters can use in understanding texts. Only since about 1970 have the stories of the Bible been treated as stories that can be analyzed using literary-critical tools. As a general description, narrative criticism is a branch of biblical criticism that treats the stories in the Bible in much the same way as a critic would treat a story or play or novel in the field of literature. In many ways biblical narrative critics use the same tools and techniques and analyses as their colleagues in literary criticism. And, as in the literary field, there are a number of types of narrative criticism, some of which focus on storytelling elements like plot and character, some of which focus on underlying "deep" or even "universal" structures in the story or text, and some of which focus on the response of readers in constructing