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## **Femme Fatale Redux: Intertextual Connection to the Elijah/ Jezebel Narratives in Mark 6:14–29**

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*In this article we trace important intertextual connections between the pericopes of the beheading of John in Mark's Gospel and the OT narratives surrounding the figures of Jezebel and Elijah. This form of intertextuality serves three key polemical purposes in Mark's narrative:*

- 1. to highlight the culpability and despicability of Herodias in having John put to death by depicting her as another Jezebel—the epitome of female wickedness in the OT;*
- 2. to demonstrate the irony of reversal in that the OT narrative has the word of the prophet putting the wicked queen to death, while in the NT, the word of the wicked queen succeeds in bringing about the death of the prophet;*
- 3. to show that Jesus, as the Messiah, surpasses the one like Elijah. John the Baptist's ministry as a messianic forerunner ends in death; Jesus as Messiah experiences death that ends in the triumph of resurrection.*

*Ultimately, these intertextual connections strengthen the role of Mark 6:14–29 as a key text in drawing the reader's attention to the identification of John as the eschatological Elijah and foreshadowing the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth.*

*Key Words: Anat, Elijah, Herod Antipas, Herodias, intertextuality, Jezebel, John the Baptist, Mark 6:14–29, Salome*

### INTRODUCTION

Biblical narratives often mirror the images of earlier canonical stories, as in the reflection of Jezebel and Elijah in the account of Herodias and the beheading of John the Baptist in Mark 6:14–29. Both Jezebel and Herodias were from royal lines. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, King of Tyre and Sidon (cf. 1 Kgs 16:31; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.317–18), and Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, the son of Herod the Great and the Hasmonean princess, Mariamne I. Both women were married

to husbands who ruled the northern part of ancient Israel. Ahab, the seventh king of Israel, reigned from 874 to 852 B.C.E. (1 Kgs 16:29), and Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C.E. to 39 C.E. Furthermore, both women served as antagonists who manipulated their ambivalent husbands (1 Kgs 19:2, 10, 14; Mark 6:19; also cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.318, 357–58). Their ambition ultimately served as the downfall of these men. God judged Ahab and his family for the stealing of Naboth's land and, according to Josephus, Gaius banished Antipas because of his desire for a more prestigious title (*Ant.* 18.255). Finally, both royal families were confronted due to personal sin. As Elijah condemned Ahab and his wife for murdering Naboth (1 Kgs 21), John the Baptist confronted Herod Antipas for marrying his stepbrother's wife.

Despite these striking similarities, many scholars question or deny a connection between Mark 6:14–29 and the Elijah-Jezebel stories.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we seek to demonstrate the intertextual connection by establishing three major parallels between Jezebel and Herodias. First, these two royal figures are instigators who incite their husbands to do evil. Second, the portrayal of both characters involves overtones of sexual promiscuity and misconduct. And third, both figures engage in a life and death struggle with a messenger of God who confronts their sinful ways. This conflict with a prophetic figure introduces a surprise element crucial to Mark's portrayal of the Baptizer as Elijah *redivivus* and serves to connect the suffering of John and Jesus. In analyzing these literary parallels, we will also seek to develop more fully the individual characters of Jezebel and Herodias.

## JEZEBEL AND HERODIAS: THE INSTIGATORS OF EVIL

An important intertextual link between the Elijah/Jezebel narratives in the Hebrew Bible and the John the Baptist/Herodias narrative in

1. Those who feel the pericope lacks connection with the 1 Kings account include R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas: Word, 1989), 331; R. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 313; and M. Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament: Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des alttestamentlichen Propheten im frühen Christentum* (BZNW 88; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 37. R. Aus attempts to argue that the primary biblical backdrop of Mark 6:14–29 is the story of Esther (*Water into Wine and the Beheading of John the Baptist* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], 39–74; also see A. Bach, "Calling the Shots: Directing Salomé's Dance of Death," *Semeia* 74 [1996], 110–13). However, the connection to the story of Queen Esther is strained as to the circumstances surrounding the beheading, and the relationship between the characters is vastly different; furthermore, much of Aus's material is late Hebrew and Aramaic Judaic haggadic tradition (see Gundry, *Mark*, 313; and D. Hoffeditz, *A Prophet, a Kingdom, and a Messiah: The Portrayal of Elijah in the Gospels in Light of First-Century Judaism* [Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2000], 92).

Mark 6 is that a strong-minded queen initiates the opposition to God's messenger and incites her vacillating husband/ruler to perform acts of wickedness in both sets of stories. Jezebel "dominates her husband Ahab by inclining him toward pagan religious practices . . . and by grabbing the initiative in seizing Naboth's vineyard for her pouting husband."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Herodias "hoodwinks her husband into granting her whatever she wishes when her daughter dances before him."<sup>3</sup>

### *Jezebel's Pagan Agenda*

While two key summary/editorial statements in Kings condemn Ahab as Israel's most wicked king (cf. 1 Kgs 16:29–33; 21:25–26), these evaluative statements directly connect Ahab's wickedness to his wife, Jezebel.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Kgs 16:31, Ahab's marriage to Jezebel and his consequent promotion of Baal worship are the king's supreme acts of evil. 1 Kings 21:25 states that Jezebel "urged on" (כִּוְרָה)<sup>5</sup> Ahab's practice of excessive wickedness. Holt comments: "Every time his [Ahab's] sins are emphasized it is said in the same breath that Jezebel seduced him to do it."<sup>6</sup>

Jezebel's role as initiator and instigator of evil appears in several specific ways. It is Jezebel as the wicked, foreign queen who aggressively promotes the cult of the Tyrian Baal in Israel. The 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah eat at "the table of Jezebel" (1 Kgs 18:19).<sup>7</sup> Brenner comments that this extensive patronage of

2. "Domineering Mother, Wife," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (ed. L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, and T. Longman III; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 214.

3. *Ibid.*, 215. Note other biblical examples of women who attempt to incite or seduce men to do evil—for example, Eve (Gen 3), Potiphar's wife (Gen 37), Delilah (Judg 16), the foreign wives of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:4), the adulteress of Proverbs (Prov 2:16–19; 6:24–26; 7:5–27; 9:13–18), and Babylon, the great prostitute (Rev 17).

4. Note also the unusual reference to walking "in the way of his mother" in the evaluation of Ahaziah, the son of Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kgs 22:51. Josephus also writes of Jezebel's evil influence: "Now this woman, who was a creature both forceful and bold, went to such lengths of licentiousness and madness that she built a temple to the Tyrian god" (*Ant.* 8.318).

5. Elsewhere, the verb כִּוְרָה refers to Satan's "inciting" David to take a census of Israel (1 Chr 21), the potential "enticement" of a friend or relative to worship false gods (Deut 13:7), and Ahab's "urging" of Jehoshaphat to join in the attack on Ramoth-gilead (2 Chr 18:2). Contrast Jezebel's negative urging of Ahab to Achsah's positive urging of her husband in Judg 1:14. This word effectively connotes the persuasiveness of Jezebel's influence on her husband.

6. E. K. Holt, "'Urged on by His Wife Jezebel': A Literary Reading of 1 Kgs 18 in Context," *SJOT* 9 (1995): 96.

7. Appller notes that two key contrasts and ironies in the text of 1 Kgs 18 heighten the wickedness of Jezebel's provision for the pagan prophets. First, the wining and dining of the prophets at the palace during a time of national famine stands as an example of royal excess and disregard for the needs of the people (as does Ahab's searching for food and water for his animals in 18:5–6). Second, the feeding of the prophets of Baal and

these pagan prophets indicates that Jezebel had “not only her own compound within the royal court but also an independent administrative organization” that was financed and answerable to the queen alone.<sup>8</sup> Jezebel directed her resources as patroness of Baal worship in Israel; and Ahab appears to have been content to leave the administration of religious affairs under the queen’s control.<sup>9</sup>

Jezebel, not Ahab, is also responsible for killing off the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:4). In 1 Kgs 19, she turns her wrath toward Elijah. After four indirect references to the queen by the writer (1 Kgs 16:31; 18:3, 13, 19), Jezebel makes a dramatic first appearance in the narrative by issuing a death threat sealed by an oath to her gods that causes Elijah to flee for his life (19:1–9).<sup>10</sup> Elijah’s response of fear and flight is not the cowardly response of a depressed prophet but a realistic recognition that Jezebel has the clout and personality to carry out her threat.<sup>11</sup> Just as Obadiah must hide the prophets of Yahweh in a “cave” (מְעָרָה) because of Jezebel (18:4), Elijah must also flee to the “cave” (מְעָרָה) of Horeb (19:9).<sup>12</sup>

Elijah’s relationship to Ahab is much different from his relationship to Jezebel. Ahab and Elijah have four face-to-face encounters in Kings. In 1 Kgs 17:1, Elijah announces the coming drought to Ahab, with no recorded response from the king. Ahab and Elijah meet each other twice in 1 Kgs 18. In the third year of the drought, Ahab angrily greets Elijah as “the troubler of Israel” (18:16), but Elijah shows no fear of the king and directly counters that Ahab and his family are the real troublemakers for Israel (18:18–19). Ahab even compliantly obeys Elijah’s directive to gather the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel (18:19–20). When Elijah puts to death the prophets of Baal, Ahab takes no action to prevent the slaughter and has no response or reaction following the massacre.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Elijah instructs Ahab to eat and drink because rain is coming, and Ahab again complies with the prophet’s instruc-

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Asherah at the palace contrasts to the feeding of the prophets of Yahweh on bread and water in a cave (18:4) and Elijah being fed by ravens at the brook of Cherith (1 Kgs 17:2–6). See D. Appler, “From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative,” *Semeia* 86 (1999): 58.

8. A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Biblical Seminar 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 26.

9. *Ibid.*

10. R. L. Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17–19,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 341.

11. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 26.

12. Tribble, “Exegesis for Storytellers,” 6.

13. In contrast, Jezebel does not appear at Carmel, but a reference to her killing the prophets in 18:19 and her threat against Elijah in 19:1–2 immediately precedes and follows the events on Carmel in 18:20–45. This framing highlights the contrast between Ahab’s passivity and Jezebel’s aggressiveness.

tions (18:40–46). While Ahab is the ruler of Israel, this king takes on the demeanor of a servant in the presence of Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh.

A similar dynamic emerges in the final meeting between Ahab and Elijah following the Naboth incident in 1 Kgs 21. Ahab greets Elijah as “my enemy” (21:20a), while Elijah delivers a scathing indictment and warns that God will destroy the family of Ahab (21:20b–24). Ahab responds to Elijah’s message of judgment with humility and repentance, leading to Yahweh’s concession that the full judgment on Ahab’s house will not fall until after the king is dead (21:27–28).

In all of these encounters, Ahab’s response to the prophet Elijah reflects a conflicted ambivalence.<sup>14</sup> Elijah’s words of judgment and opposition to the royal agenda anger Ahab, but he maintains a measure of fear and respect for the prophetic office and message. Ahab refuses to persecute the prophet, obeys his directives, and takes the prophetic announcement of judgment very seriously. The result is that Ahab appears in the narrative as weak and indecisive. Holt compares the character of Ahab in Kings to that of Zedekiah, the final king of Judah, who repeatedly seeks counsel from Jeremiah but lacks the courage and resolve to carry through on the prophet’s directives as the Babylonians are threatening to destroy Jerusalem (cf. Jer 37–38).<sup>15</sup>

The characterization of Jezebel in Kings is exactly the opposite. There is never a face-to-face encounter between Jezebel and Elijah (or any other prophetic figure), because such a meeting would have been too volatile. Jezebel indirectly hears from Ahab what Elijah has done to the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (19:1). Elijah delivers the personal oracle concerning the judgment and death of Jezebel to Ahab rather than to the queen herself (21:23–24). The wickedness of this woman is such that even a figure as forceful as Elijah dares not to show his face in her presence. In effect, these literary characterizations of Ahab and Jezebel reduce Ahab, the ruler, to a passive spectator in the conflict between Elijah and Jezebel. Ultimately, the conflict between Elijah and Jezebel on the human level reflects the conflict between Yahweh and Baal on the divine level.<sup>16</sup>

Jezebel is clearly the initiator and instigator of the murder of Naboth in 1 Kgs 21. While Ahab sulks, Jezebel plots and schemes. Jezebel initiates the legal proceedings that lead to the death of Naboth and Ahab’s seizure of Naboth’s vineyard. Appler comments concerning this episode: “The narrator . . . underscores how emasculated Ahab is to allow his wife to reverse roles with him in order to secure for him Naboth’s vineyard.”<sup>17</sup>

14. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 25.

15. Holt, “Urged on by His Wife,” 95–96.

16. *Ibid.*, 7.

17. Appler, “From Queen to Cuisine,” 60.

The text brings out this role reversal between Ahab and Jezebel in several key ways. In attempting to secure the vineyard in 21:2–6, Ahab makes a fair offer for the vineyard, recognizes the strength of Naboth's legal claim to the land,<sup>18</sup> and refuses to exert undue royal pressure on Naboth to relinquish the property.<sup>19</sup> Ahab is angry and sullen because he realizes that he has no pretext, even as king, for seizing the land. On the other hand, Jezebel has no such qualms and will do whatever is necessary to carry out the king's desires. Jezebel chides Ahab's limited conception of royal power and authority.<sup>20</sup> The wicked queen asks her husband, "Is this how you act as king over Israel?" (21:7). Brueggemann notes that Jezebel's rhetorical question is "both a reprimand and an invitation."<sup>21</sup> It is a reprimand to Ahab for not acting as a king should act and an invitation to him to exercise the full extent of his royal authority and to seize the land by force.<sup>22</sup> Jezebel then promises to secure the vineyard for Ahab (with the emphatic **וְאֵלֶיךָ** stressing her ability to accomplish what Ahab could not)<sup>23</sup> and commands the king to "get up (**קַמ**) and eat" (21:7). In this royal family, the queen commands and the king obeys.<sup>24</sup>

18. Cf. Lev 25:33. Land in Israel was a family "inheritance" and was not to be permanently sold to someone outside the family.

19. This fairness and equanimity on the part of Ahab seems to be somewhat for literary effect in providing a foil and contrast to Jezebel. In light of the extensive building projects accomplished by the Omride dynasty as a whole, it is obvious that Ahab carried out an aggressive policy of royal seizure and acquisition of land. The biblical text (cf. 1 Kgs 16:32; 21:1; 22:39) and the archaeological evidence attest to Ahab's numerous building projects. For the archaeological evidence, see D. N. Pienaar, "The Role of Fortified Cities in the Northern Kingdom during the Reign of the Omride Dynasty," *JNSL* 9 (1981):

151–58; and E. Stern, "The Many Masters of Dor—Part Two: How Bad Was Ahab?" *BAR* (March/April, 1993): 24–28. The excesses of royal confiscation under Ahab are further illustrated in 1 Kgs 21 by the fact that Ahab wishes to turn Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden, which seems to be an inappropriate and wasteful use of good land (contrast Deut 6:10–11 and Deut 8:8 and 11:10). See R. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 141. Appler further notes that vegetables are of little worth in terms of food value in the Hebrew Bible (Prov 15:17) and that a vegetable garden would have required large amounts of water at a time when Israel was facing catastrophic drought ("From Queen to Cuisine," 61).

20. It appears that Ahab and Jezebel are acting on the basis of two different models of kingship in this story—the Israelite covenantal/theocratic model that influences Ahab at some level and the Phoenician autocratic/absolutist model that influences Jezebel. For further discussion of these two models, see J. A. Todd, "The Pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle," in *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (ed. R. B. Coote; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 3–11.

21. W. Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings* (Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2000), 259.

22. Ibid.

23. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 141–42.

24. One must be careful of reading too much into this narrative. Jezebel's assertiveness in this episode clearly reflects her political power. Jezebel's power is unique in that

In the scene detailing the murder of Naboth and the confiscation of the vineyard, Ahab is absent from the scene until Jezebel once again commands the king to “get up” (קָרַם) and possess the land (21:15).<sup>25</sup> With Ahab out of the way, Jezebel’s execution of her plan is swift, flawless, and unopposed. The repetition involved in the recording of the contents of Jezebel’s letter in 21:9 and the carrying out of her order in v. 11 effectively communicates the exact fulfillment of Jezebel’s plan and heightens Jezebel’s responsibility and culpability in this matter.<sup>26</sup> The succinctness of the text further suggests the swift execution of Jezebel’s murderous scheme. Jezebel acts with complete royal authority by signing and sealing the letter in the king’s name that serves as a

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a politicized queenship was a rare phenomenon in ancient Israel. Brenner comments, “Unlike any other king’s wife or mother in the Old Testament, Jezebel was a real queen, assistant, and partner in government to her husband” (*The Israelite Woman*, 20). See also N.-E. Andraesen, “The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society,” *CBQ* 45 (2001): 179–94. Andraesen notes that Jezebel was “the only known queen mother in Israel” (p. 180). At the same time, it appears that some writers have overestimated Jezebel’s status and power. Smith contends that Jezebel reigned over the land, “despite the fact that her husband was nominally the ruler,” and that the response of the elders of Jezreel to Jezebel’s orders in 1 Kgs 21:9–11 indicates that “they knew where the real power lay.” See C. Smith, “‘Queenship’ in Israel? The Cases of Bathsheba, Jezebel and Athaliah,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Day; JSOTSup 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 156. In the biblical text, Jezebel appears almost exclusively in connection with the prophet Elijah, and in the opposition to Yahwism and its prophets. Jezebel takes a more aggressive stance than Ahab. However, Jezebel’s influence over Ahab’s religious policy (or even her more assertive role in the Naboth incident) should not be read to indicate that Jezebel was the real power behind the throne during the reign of Ahab. In narratives outside the specific confines of the Elijah-Jezebel conflict, Ahab acts in a much more forceful and assertive manner (cf. 1 Kgs 20:21–22; 22:29–30). Additionally it must be recognized that the portrayal of Ahab as weak in the Hebrew Bible is more of a theological assessment of Ahab’s failure to stop Jezebel’s paganizing tendencies than a political evaluation of Ahab’s effectiveness as a ruler. Biblical statements (cf. 1 Kgs 20:34) and inscriptional evidence both confirm Ahab’s military skill and prowess. An Assyrian inscription of Shalmaneser III (858–824 b.c.e.) reflects that Ahab was a major partner in the western coalition that opposed the Assyrian army at Qarqar and halted the Assyrian western advance. For a translation of the inscription, see *ANET*, 278–79. W. Thiel comments concerning Ahab: “His skillful foreign policies, which provided Israel with strength, security, and prosperity, which safeguarded peace and the balance of power, and which finally contributed to the (temporary) containment of Assyrian expansion, well may be inferred from the few sources that yield reliable historical data” (“Ahab,” *ABD* 1:103). See also E. F. Campbell Jr., “A Land Divided,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. M. D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 288–94. It seems likely that the biblical writer downplayed Ahab’s military and political successes in order to highlight the condemnation of Ahab’s religious and theological failures.

25. Note Ahab’s compliance to the queen’s command: “Ahab ‘got up’ (קָרַם) and went down to take possession” (21:16).

26. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 142.



death warrant for one of her subjects (21:8–10), just as David did in sending a letter to Joab that sealed the fate of Uriah the Hittite (cf. 2 Sam 11:14–15).<sup>27</sup> Nelson notes that the death of Naboth in 21:13 is “encompassed” by the activity of Jezebel (cf. 21:11 and 14).<sup>28</sup>

Jezebel’s crime is particularly heinous in that her scheme involves a strategy of using the Torah to break the Torah. To counter Naboth’s Torah-based claim that he cannot surrender property that belongs to the family “inheritance” (cf. Lev 25:33), Jezebel instigates a legal charge that Naboth has violated the Torah by committing the capital offenses of blaspheming Yahweh and cursing the king (1 Kgs 21:13; cf. Exod 22:28; Lev 24:15–16). While meeting the Torah requirement that there must be two witnesses for a capital crime (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15), Jezebel violates the Torah by suborning perjury and presenting false testimony (cf. Exod 20:16; 23:1, 7; Deut 5:20).

In her execution of the plot against Naboth, Jezebel appears to be the human embodiment of the Canaanite goddess Anat, the sister/consort of Baal known for her bloodshed and violence.<sup>29</sup> Jezebel’s actions in the Naboth incident seem especially to parallel the actions of Anat in the Canaanite legend of Aqhat.<sup>30</sup> In this story, Danel, the king, sires an heir and presents his son, Aqhat, with a divine hunting bow made by the gods Kothar and Khasis. Anat covets the bow and offers Aqhat gold, silver, and ultimately, immortality in exchange for the bow. When Aqhat refuses her request and suggests that it is not fitting for a woman to possess such a weapon, Anat is insulted and enraged. Anat goes to the palace of El and denounces Aqhat with a slanderous accusation. Anat threatens El with violence if not allowed to punish Aqhat, and El consents to allow the goddess to do as she pleases. Anat directs her henchman, Yatpan, to murder Aqhat in his tent. The text is fragmentary at this point, but it appears that, after killing Aqhat, Yatpan loses

27. Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 259.

28. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 142.

29. See V. P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 438. Previous studies have recognized Anat imagery in the Deborah/Jael narratives in Judges 4–5. See S. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 56–72; P. C. Craigie, “Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5),” *ZAW* 90 (1978): 374–81; and S. G. Dempster, “Mythology and History in the Song of Deborah,” *WTJ* 41 (1978): 33–53. For a translation of the Aqhat legend, see S. B. Parker, “Aqhat,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 48–90.

30. The primary reason for the association of Jezebel and Anat is the close association between Baal and Anat in Canaanite mythology. In the Baal myth, Anat assists Baal in his rise to kingship, essentially what Jezebel is attempting to do for Baal in Israel. Ackerman (*Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 56) notes concerning the Baal myth: “It is almost as if Baal and Anat are reckoned as two sides of the same coin.”

the prized bow, dropping the bow into the sea so that it shatters into pieces. The death of Aqhat also brings about a drought that devastates the land for seven years. Finally, Pughat, the grieving sister of Aqhat, avenges her brother's death by killing Yatpan.

The elements of the coveting of a divinely bestowed gift, the refusal of the innocent party to relinquish the gift, the false accusation, and the taking of the desired object through murder provide rather striking parallels to the Jezebel-Naboth story in 1 Kgs 21. Ackerman has described Anat as "a fighter who serves up bellicosity with passion."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Walls portrays Anat as "inherently headstrong, impatient, and demanding in her desires."<sup>32</sup> Anat is an expression of "the female independent of male control," and this goddess "threatens the lives of males and the social structure which underlies social continuity."<sup>33</sup> The Anat parallelism in 1 Kgs 21 heightens both the ruthlessness of Jezebel's actions toward Naboth and the danger of the gender/role reversal that transpires between the characters of Ahab and Jezebel. Appler comments that "it is Jezebel, not Ahab, who shows kingship over Israel in this moment, and it is Jezebel who obtains the vineyard when Ahab's tactics have failed. Jezebel and Ahab switch roles as Jezebel takes on the role of king. Jezebel's unjust kingship quickly causes chaos in Israel."<sup>34</sup>

The polemic could also stress the foolishness and futility of Jezebel's actions in stealing the vineyard of Naboth: Jezebel and Ahab will not be able to keep the vineyard any more than Anat was able to keep the bow of Aqhat. While Anat was able to cower and manipulate El into allowing her to carry out her murderous intentions, Jezebel will not be able to intimidate and manipulate Yahweh, the God of Israel. Just as Anat's murder of Aqhat results in terrible drought, Ahab and Jezebel's promotion of Baal worship has had the same effect in Israel.

### *Herodias's Evil Vendetta*

Like Jezebel, Herodias serves as an initiator and instigator of evil in Mark's narrative. The author not only agrees with Matthew and Luke in blaming Herodias for the imprisonment of John the Baptist (6:17// Matt 14:3// Luke 3:19) but further highlights the fact that Herodias held a grudge against John and sought to kill him.<sup>35</sup> Even more striking

31. Ibid., 60.

32. N. H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (SBLDS 135; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 185.

33. Ibid., 205.

34. Appler, "From Queen to Cuisine," 62.

35. Matthew mentions that Herod, not Herodias, wanted to kill the Baptizer (14:5). Luke remains silent on the issue.

in the Markan account is the fact that it is Antipas who denies Herodias's desire for John's blood, while in the Matthean account it is the fear of the crowd that restrains Antipas from executing the Baptizer (also see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.116–19). Herod's respectful awe for John as a righteous and holy man serves as the only controlling force against Herodias's grudge.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Mark's lexical choice of συντηρέω seems to imply that Herod's incarceration of John the Baptist was for protection from Herodias. However, just like Jezebel in the Hebrew Scriptures, Herodias schemes and waits for the opportune time to act (6:21).<sup>37</sup> As the scene unfolds, the reader is told that Herod grudgingly takes the prophet's life, a remorse reminiscent of Ahab in 1 Kgs 21:27.<sup>38</sup> Herodias's control over her husband can also be observed in her interaction with her daughter (vv. 24, 28).<sup>39</sup> Depending on which reading is selected, the author may be stressing Herodias's plotting: "it was the daughter of that very Herodias who came in . . ." (v. 19).<sup>40</sup> Mark clearly indicates that Herodias's manipulative behavior has an adverse affect upon the family and that she is the ultimate reason for John's death. The author differs from Matthew, who places the blame on Antipas, and Luke, who portrays Antipas as the sly fox (13:32) and a mocker at Jesus' trial (23:7–12). Instead, in Mark's Gospel, Herod Antipas appears as a rather innocent bystander against the backdrop of a manipulative wife.

One can also observe Mark's portrayal of Herodias as an instigator of trouble in Josephus's writings. On two different occasions the reader learns of Herodias's yielding power, contrary to the social norms of the first century C.E. First, the Jewish historian records that the Hasmo-

36. Based upon which textual reading one selects in Mark 6:20, Herod Antipas could appear to seek John on a regular basis for counsel.

37. The same word, "opportune," εὐκαιρος, occurs in 14:11 to depict Judas's desire to betray Jesus. The word also appears in 2 Macc 14:29 of an opportune time to oppose the king and in 2 Macc 15:20 of an army ready for battle. Bach writes, "Herodias/Salomé becomes an eroticized iconic Judas, who presents the storyteller with the added dimension of sexual betrayal to the legend" ("Calling the Shots," 111).

38. The word "grieve," περίλυπος, occurs in 1 Esd 8:71–72, where the prophet demonstrates his mourning over the people's iniquity by tearing his garments. While περίλυπος does not occur in 1 Kgs 21, Ahab does convey the same response upon hearing Elijah's words.

39. The textual variant in Mark 6:22 creates a problem in the identification of the daughter. Strong external attestation (e.g.,  $\aleph$  B D) and the more difficult reading support Antipas as the father of the child. However, one could argue for carelessness on the part of the scribe, who altered an intrusive αὐτῆς (cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 254, 258). The context of Mark (6:24, 28); the parallel verse in Matt 14:6; Josephus's record of Herodias's having a daughter named Salome (*Ant.* 18.136–37); and Justin Martyr's statement that Herodias was the mother of the child (*Dial.* 49:4) further support the insertion of the feminine possessive pronoun.

40. This last point is highlighted by France (*Gospel of Mark*, 258).

nean queen vehemently sought the disposal of Antipas's first wife, the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas IV (*Ant.* 18.110). Hoehner points out that Herodias "may have wanted to avoid the household troubles of her grandfather, Herod the Great, in which there were constant rivalries between his wives and between their various sons."<sup>41</sup> While this may be the case, Josephus clearly indicates that Herodias forcefully dictated the actions of her lover, Antipas.<sup>42</sup> A second way that Josephus presents Herodias as an instigator is through her jealousy for her husband over her wayward brother's (Agrippa's) recently acquired title.<sup>43</sup> She persistently sought to persuade Antipas to request for himself a greater title from the Emperor. Antipas attempts to oppose his wife but eventually concedes.<sup>44</sup> Through a series of events, this request results in the banishment of Herod and Herodias. Josephus writes, "And so God visited this punishment on Herodias for her envy of her brother and on Herod for listening to a woman's frivolous chatter" (*Ant.* 18.255).<sup>45</sup>

Contemporary thought with that of Mark's narrative and Josephus also condemns such behavior on the part of Herodias and Antipas. The first-century writing *Life of Adam and Eve* states, "And God said to me, 'Behold, you shall die, because you have disregarded the command of God, since you have listened rather to the voice of your wife, whom I gave into your power, that you might keep her in your will. But you listened to her and disregarded my words'" (26:2). Tacitus also speaks of the "ruinous political influence" women have upon their husbands (*Ann.* 6.39). Similar thought appears in later rabbinic

41. H. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980; reprint of SNTSMS 17; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 128. Hoehner also argues that Herodias, as a Hasmonian, would have great disdain for an Arab. However, the Herodian family often interacted with the Nabateans. For instance one of Herod the Great's bodyguards was a Nabatean (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.577; *Ant.* 17.56–57) and Antipas's grandmother, the mother of Herod the Great, was a Nabatean. R. Bauckham also notes that Herodian practice required a non-Jewish spouse to convert to Judaism (*Gospel Women* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 160).

42. D. Daube points out that ἐκβάλω is used only where the husband proceeded with some vehemence or particular inconsiderateness (e.g., LXX Lev 21:14; 22:13; Num 30:10; and never used in the NT or Philo; *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* [London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1956; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997], 369–71).

43. Agrippa's wife, Cypros, requested assistance from Herodias for her husband's plight several years prior to Agrippa's appointment (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.148–50). Agrippa's subsequent ingratitude fosters further bitter feelings.

44. Even when Antipas first acquired a portion of his father's kingdom, he had to be encouraged by Salome and Irenaeus and accompanied by his mother and close friend before he acted (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.224–27).

45. Josephus depicts a similar picture of the ills of a nagging and domineering wife in his retelling of Mithridates and his wife (*Ant.* 18.361–62).

writings (e.g., *b. Meši'a* 59a; *b. Sanh.* 102b). Herodias's outspoken behavior and Herod's lack of decisiveness in his home and political position proves antithetical to social norms.

To emphasize the idea of Jezebel and Herodias as instigators of evil, both 1 Kings and Mark reduce Ahab and Antipas to weak and vacillating rulers, a portrayal all the more significant in light of the political power that these two kings actually wielded. The biblical text condemns both men for yielding to the wicked influence of their wives. Instead of taking proper leadership, Ahab and Antipas capitulate to the passion and dominance of their spouses.

### JEZEBEL AND HERODIAS: OVERTONES OF SEXUAL PERVERSION

#### *Jezebel: Queen as Prostitute*

Sexuality and seduction play an important role in the portrayal of Jezebel in the Hebrew Scriptures and the NT account of Herodias and her daughter partnering together to bring about the death of John the Baptist in Mark 6. While the term "Jezebel" today commonly denotes a sexually promiscuous woman, the Hebrew Bible never lists sexual immorality among Jezebel's many sins. Nevertheless, the death scene of Jezebel in 2 Kgs 9 is tinged with sexual overtones as Jezebel, the queen mother, is portrayed as a prostitute. The adulteress/prostitute, with various forms of the root *hnz*, is a common OT figure for spiritual infidelity or adultery (cf. Exod 34:15–16; Judg 2:17; Isa 1:24; Jer 3:1–3; Ezek 16, 23; Hos 1–3),<sup>46</sup> and the image of Jezebel as a prostitute serves here as a reminder of her spiritual infidelity toward Yahweh and her sexual prowess and feminine powers of seduction that lured her husband, Ahab, into doing evil in the first place.<sup>47</sup>

Before killing Joram, the king of Israel and son of Jezebel, Jehu makes reference to Jezebel's "whoredom and sorcery" (9:22), the com

46. See G. H. Hall, "זָבֵה," *NIDOTEE* 1:1122–25.

47. Later Second Temple literature also draws a connection between immorality and idolatry in reference to Jezebel. In the NT, Rev 2:20–22 depicts Ahab's wife as one who promotes false teaching, sexual immorality, and idolatry. G. Osborne writes, "Jezebel is seen as a satanic force (this is the only place in the book a person wields this terrible power) claiming the Spirit's authority (as a prophetess) but leading many of God's 'slaves' astray into heresy" (*Revelation* [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 158). Likewise, the early-second-century writing *2 Baruch* conveys a similar notion, stating, "And the seventh black waters you have seen; that is . . . and the curse of Jezebel, and the idolatry which Israel practiced at that time, and the withholding of rain . . ." (62:8). Finally, later rabbinic writings echo a comparable portrait of the Omride queen. In *b. Sanh.* 39b, Raba (d. 350 c.e.; cf. Str-B 6:118) proclaims that "Ahab was frigid by nature [passionless], so Jezebel painted pictures of two harlots on his chariot, that he might look upon them and become heated."

bination of the two terms demonstrating the spiritual nature of Jezebel's harlotry.<sup>48</sup> When Jehu approaches the palace in Jezreel, Jezebel paints her eyes and styles her hair (9:30), acts that seem to create the impression of preparation for lovemaking.<sup>49</sup>

Jezebel's motives in applying cosmetics and coiffing her hair can be interpreted in one of two ways. Parker and Barré<sup>50</sup> argue that Jezebel is attempting to seduce Jehu and to join his harem as a means of averting her fate of death.<sup>51</sup> Barré comments that Jezebel's actions in 9:30 dramatically illustrate Jehu's characterization of Jezebel as a harlot in 9:22.<sup>52</sup> However, in light of Jezebel's contemptuous comparison of Jehu to Zimri in 9:31, it seems more likely that Jezebel beautifies herself as a final act of defiance toward Jehu.<sup>53</sup> As Hobbs explains, "Jezebel's preparations to meet Jehu indicated that she wished to leave this life in

48. The nouns זְנוּנִים ("fornication") also appear together in קְסָמָה ("sorcery") also appear together in Nah 3:4 with reference to the pagan religious practices of the Assyrians.

49. See J. H. Gaines, *Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel through the Ages* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 78–81; and S. B. Parker, "Jezebel's Reception of Jehu," *MAARAV* 1 (1978): 68–69. For OT references to the use of the eyes in seduction, see Gen 39:7; Prov 6:24–26; Isa 3:16; for the painting of the eyes, see Jer 4:30; Ezek 23:40. Gaines explains that Jezebel paints her eyes with antimony, a black powder used "to darken the eyebrows and the area above and below the eyelids." This darkening of the eyes made the eyes appear larger and more beguiling. Gaines further notes that Nefertiti and Cleopatra appear in Egyptian art with painted eyes. For the fixing of the hair, Parker notes that the eyes and hair are the first two things mentioned by the lover concerning his beloved in Cant 4:1 and 6:5. Parker further provides evidence of the connection between arranging the hair and seduction in the ancient literatures of the eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia: (1) in the *Iliad*, Hera plots to seduce Zeus by combing her hair and arranging her curls; (2) in a Sumerian text, a priestess of Inanna prepares for ritual intercourse with Shu-Sin (king from Ur III dynasty) by coiffing her hair; and (3) in *The Tale of Two Brothers* from Egypt, the wife of Anubis dresses her hair and then attempts to seduce her brother-in-law, Bata. When rebuffed, Anubis charges that Bata had suggested they sleep together and specifically mentions that he had asked her to put on her braids.

50. Parker, "Jezebel's Reception of Jehu," 67–78; L. M. Barré, *The Rhetoric of Political Persuasion: The Narrative Artistry and Political Intentions of 2 Kings 9–11* (CBQMS 20; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1988), 76–78.

51. Compare Absalom's taking over of David's harem in 2 Sam 16:21–22.

52. Barré, *The Rhetoric of Political Persuasion*, 78.

53. Parker reads v. 31 as a compliment from Jezebel to Jehu by translating the noun as "strength/protection" ("Is all well, my strong one/protective one?") from \*zmr III rather than a reference to the figure Zimri ("Jezebel's Reception," 71–72).

Parker notes that this root appears in several Hebrew, Amorite, and Ugaritic personal names and points to a Hebrew noun זְמַרָה found in Gen 43:11; Exod 15:2; Ps 118:14; and Isa 12:2. However, the reference to the killing of Jezebel's own family in the same sentence makes this translation highly unlikely. Jezebel's reference to Zimri (cf. 1 Kgs 16:9–20) is an especially effective expression of the queen's absolute contempt for Jehu's military coup. Zimri, a military officer and chariot commander like Jehu, succeeded in putting the family of Baasha to death but reigned for only seven days before committing suicide. Jezebel is suggesting that Jehu will share the fate of Zimri.

style!”<sup>54</sup> Jezebel has put others to death and she remains callously indifferent to even her own imminent death. Gaines provides several reasons why it is unlikely that Jezebel is attempting to seduce Jehu in this final act of her life.<sup>55</sup> First, Jezebel at this time is approximately 50 years old and “well past her nubile prime.”<sup>56</sup> Second, even a woman as evil as Jezebel is highly unlikely to do such an immediate “fidelity flip-flop” and give her loyalty and allegiance to the murderer of her son and grandson.<sup>57</sup> Third, Jezebel is politically savvy enough to realize that there is no way that Jehu can afford to spare her life.<sup>58</sup> Gaines explains:

As long as the queen lives, she is a threat to the new dynasty that Jehu is establishing. He is unlikely to be attracted to her under these circumstances; but whether he is or not, the political benefit of her death far outweighs the advantage of keeping her alive. Jezebel, as long as she is alive, is definitely a person around whom loyalists to the House of Ahab could rally. After spending her entire life in palaces, Jezebel must understand this concept.<sup>59</sup>

A further indicator of the motif of the queen mother as prostitute is the fact that Jezebel peers out the window of the palace as Jehu approaches to take her life (9:30). A woman looking out a window is a common ancient Near Eastern image for a prostitute<sup>60</sup> and an image that appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures as well.<sup>61</sup> The portrayal of Jezebel

54. T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 118.

55. Gaines, *Music in the Old Bones*, 78–87.

56. *Ibid.*, 79.

57. *Ibid.*, 81. However, note the actions of Ahab’s (and Jezebel’s?) daughter Athaliah in putting to death her own grandchildren in her attempt to usurp the throne of Judah in 2 Kgs 11:1–3.

58. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

59. *Ibid.*, 82.

60. A well-known example is the ivory plaque of a woman at the window (ca. eighth-century B.C.E.) found at the Nabu Temple in Khorsabad. See *ANEP*, 131. For further discussion of this image and motif, see N. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

61. *Ibid.*, 23–41. Examples of this motif in the OT include: the Canaanite mother of Sisera looking through the lattice and wondering why her son has not returned from battle (Judg 5:28–30). This wicked foreigner exults in her son’s raping and pillaging, when in fact her son has been put to death by a woman. Jael, the woman who kills Sisera, stands at the opening of her tent and entices Sisera to his death in a sexually charged scene, in which Sisera falls dead “between the feet” of his female killer (Judg 4:15–21; 5:24–27). In Josh 2, Rahab the prostitute helps the Hebrew spies to escape through the window of her house on the wall of Jericho, with the imagery of prostitution perhaps stressing the extent of God’s grace shown to this Canaanite woman and her family in a city that has been devoted to destruction. Michal, the daughter of Saul and wife of David, has her involvement in the life of David framed by two incidents where she appears at the window. In the first episode, Michal lets David down through a window so that he can escape from Saul (1 Sam 19:12). In the second episode, Michal looks out the window as David dances before Yahweh at the bringing of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

as a prostitute in her death scene is a final commentary on the extent of Jezebel's wicked influence in Israel.<sup>62</sup> It also is a reminder that Jezebel's seductive influence that served her so well in carrying out her evil designs has no effect in preventing the final execution of Elijah's prophetic death sentence against her. Jezebel beautifies herself, but Jehu as the human instrument of divine justice applies his own beauty treatment to Jezebel.<sup>63</sup> Jezebel paints her eyes; Jehu has the palace walls painted with her blood. The queen, so concerned with her physical appearance in 9:30, becomes dog food and fertilizer in 9:36–37. Yahweh's justice ultimately prevails against the wicked queen.

### *Herodias: Adulteress and Schemer*

The pericope of John's beheading in Mark 6 also rings with tones of sexual perversion. The reader is first met with the unlawful marriage

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and despises David in her heart (2 Sam 6:16). The imagery stresses Michal's "transformation from power to powerlessness" (ibid., 35) and the inability of feminine wiles to prevent Michal from being treated as nothing more than a political pawn by both her father and her husband. The woman at the window motif is somewhat reversed in Prov 7:6–20, where the wise man observes through the lattice as the adulteress woman lures an unsuspecting simpleton to his death. Jezebel at the window in 2 Kgs 9 recalls the same luring, seductive influence that she has had on her husband and the nation of Israel as a whole.

62. The "woman at the window" imagery, with its sexual connotations, leads Ackerman to posit a connection between Jezebel and the Canaanite goddess Asherah in this context. While the connections between Jezebel and the goddess Anat seem more pervasive in the OT, this allusion to Asherah in the portrayal of Jezebel seems likely because: (1) Asherah's role as a fertility goddess corresponds to the sexual imagery associated with Jezebel in this passage; (2) Asherah's position in the Canaanite pantheon as wife of El corresponds to Jezebel's position as the queen mother in Israel; and (3) Jezebel appears to have actively supported the Asherah cult in Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 16:32–33; 18:19). Thus, this Jezebel-Asherah connection is part of the multi-layered polemic against Canaanite religion in the biblical portrayal of Jezebel. See Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 147–50, 160–62. See also P. R. Ackroyd, "Goddesses, Women, and Jezebel," in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 245–59. Concerning 2 Kgs 9, Ackroyd comments: "It is almost as if she [Jezebel] is being presented, and rejected, as the goddess herself" (p. 258). The death of Jezebel marks as well the death of the goddess whose worship Jezebel has promoted in life. For discussion of the issues related to the worship of Asherah in Israel, see J. M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and S. M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Approximately 40 references to the Asherah in the HB (cf. Deut 16:21; Judg 6:26; 2 Kgs 21:3; 23:4) along with inscriptional evidence from Kuntilet Arjūd and Khirbet el-Qôm suggest that Asherah worship did exist in some form in ancient Israel, though the exact significance of the *asherah* (e.g., whether the term refers to cultic objects or to a goddess/consort of Yahweh) in Israelite religion and culture is an extremely controversial issue.

63. Barré (*The Rhetoric of Political Persuasion*, 78) notes the contrast between Jezebel's beautifying her appearance and Jehu's abusive treatment of her corpse.



of Antipas and his niece, Herodias. Several issues concerning this “unholy” matrimony prove shocking. First, Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife was a violation of the Torah (Lev 18:16; 20:21).<sup>64</sup> Jewish law only allowed levirate marriage in the case of a childless widow. Not only was Herodias’s husband still living, but they also had a daughter named Salome. Antipas’s brother, Archelaus, was previously guilty of the same law and charged with incest for marrying Glaphyra, who had already borne children to Archelaus’s brother, Alexander (Josephus, *Ant.* 17:340–41; *J.W.* 2.116). Jewish disdain for these types of marriage violations was such that public discussion was not allowed (cf. *m. Hag.* 2.1). Second, both Herod Antipas and Herodias had left previous marriages to enter into this union.<sup>65</sup> Under Roman law, Herodias could initiate a divorce, but Jewish law forbade it (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.136).<sup>66</sup> And third, while marrying one’s niece was acceptable under Roman law and even practiced among some Jews,<sup>67</sup> the Qumran community condemned such relationships in their interpretation of Lev 18:13 (CD-A 5:7–10). In keeping with Mark’s emphasis upon Herodias rather than Herod, the reader is not surprised to find only Mark mentioning that Herod married Herodias (6:17) and twice referring to her as “his brother’s wife.” The Evangelist also focuses the reader’s attention on the immoral marriage by excluding details concerning other evil activities carried out by Antipas (cf. Luke 3:19). Josephus echoes Mark’s sentiments when he declares that Herodias had violated the traditions of the fathers (*Ant.* 18.136).<sup>68</sup>

64. Divorcing one’s wife was allowable in Second Temple Judaism (*b. Ketub.* 57b), and polygamy, while rejected by the Qumran community (e.g., CD-A 4:20–21; Mark 10:6–9//Matt 19:4–6), seems to be accepted as well (*b. Sukah* 27a; Josephus, *Life* 414–15; cf. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 137–39 n. 4; and J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* [trans. F. H. and C. H. Cave; London: SCM, 1969], 369–70).

65. Herodias was married to Herod Philip, the son of Mariamne II, the daughter of Simon, the high priest (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.19; 18.109, 136). Harold Hoehner provides six reasons for Herodias’s first husband to be Herod Philip and not Philip the tetrarch, the son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem: the Evangelists would have made notable historical errors; Josephus mentions that Herod had a daughter named Salome (*Ant.* 18.136); it was typical to have duplicated names within the Herodian family; based upon Agrippa I Herod, it is possible that Herodias’s first husband was properly called Herod Philip; the Evangelists would most likely have referred to him as Philip the tetrarch; and a name is only a means of identification (*Herod Antipas*, 135–36).

66. Cf. Deut 24:1; *m. Ned.* 11:12; Josephus, *Ant.* 15.259. L. Epstein writes, “The term for divorce is *Garesh* or *shalah* in Hebrew and *Tarek* in Aramaic. These terms go back to the original conception of ‘driving out,’ and such a term cannot be employed in connection with the wife’s initiative in the divorce proceedings” (*The Jewish Marriage Contract* [New York: Arno, 1973], 201 n. 24); and Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 362–72.

67. Abba married the daughter of his brother Rabban Gamaliel II (*b. Yeb.* 15a; for further discussion, see Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 365–66; and N. Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* [JSPSup 30; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998], 145–46).

68. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 369–70.

Not only do these newlyweds break Jewish laws and dismantle social norms, but Antipas and Herodias jeopardize the stability of the region by desiring to marry. Most likely, Herod Antipas's previous marriage to Aretas's daughter served as a token of peace. Hoehner provides several reasons for this. First, there was a longstanding hatred between the Arabs and Herods (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 15.349–53). Later, Aretas IV assisted Varus in subduing Jewish uprisings after the death of Herod the Great. Aretas took advantage of this event to plunder several Galilean villages (*Ant.* 18.109). Second, during the marriage between Antipas and Aretas's daughter there was peace between the two countries. Third, Augustus was known for favoring intermarriages among various rulers to establish peace (Suet. *Aug.* 48). A fourth reason to add to Hoehner's list is that the Herodian family also practiced intermarriages for political gain.<sup>69</sup> Eventually Aretas attacks and destroys Antipas's army, causing Tiberius to send Vitellius to apprehend the Nabatean king (cf. *Jos.*, *Ant.* 18.113–15). Interestingly, Josephus mentions twice that Herod's loss was a result of divine judgment over the execution of John the Baptist (*Ant.* 18.116, 119).

If the unholy matrimony provided the melody line of the immoral sexual tones ringing through this pericope, the banquet provides the harmony. First, birthday celebrations with great banquets were normally associated with pagan practices in ancient literature.<sup>70</sup> In addition, these birthday celebrations normally involved excessive drinking and were seen as a Greco-Roman custom rather than a Jewish one. Consequently, these festive events were banned by the Jews (cf. *m. 'Abod. Zar.* 1:3). Josephus writes, "Again the Law does not allow the birth of our children to be made occasions for festivity and an excuse for drinking to excess" (*Ag. Ap.* 204). The Markan account seems to imply that such activity as Antipas's repeated oath and remorse in v. 26 suggest a drunken loss of control.<sup>71</sup> Antipas himself possessed a reputation for extravagant parties (*Ant.* 18.102), and his brother, Archelaus, was known for his drunken brawls (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.29).

69. For example, Herod the Great's second marriage, to Mariamne, gave him direct ties with the Hasmonean family (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.300).

70. 2 Maccabees 6:7 refers to the Jews' being under bitter constraint to partake in sacrifices to Dionysus on Antiochus's birthday; and Josephus mentions Titus's execution of more than 2,500 Jews for the entertainment at his birthday party (*J.W.* 7.37, 39). Since Scripture only records Pharaoh (Gen 40:20–22) and Antipas hosting such events, both Origen and Jerome associated the celebration of one's birthday with wicked individuals. For further discussion, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 b.c.–a.d. 135)* (rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), 346–48 n. 26.

71. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 259. Several early Church Fathers associated degenerate moral behavior with this scene (cf. Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, 3.6.27; Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions* 10.21–27; Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.23).

Second, the dance of Herodias's daughter at this birthday party suggests anything but innocence.<sup>72</sup> While various dances did exist in the first century C.E., the Markan account seems to portray a popular entertainment dance called *pantomimus*. This solo dance reenacted a story, "often with dramatic and sensual movements and postures."<sup>73</sup> Extravagant gifts often were granted to entertainers. While undoubtedly such a dance would be foreign in most Jewish circles, the Herodians were much more heavily influenced by Roman culture.<sup>74</sup> Livy speaks of a similar situation concerning Gaius Flaminius, who had a prisoner killed at a banquet in order to demonstrate to his young male consort the spectacle of a beheading (39.42.8–39.43.5; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.57, 59, 64). And Tacitus provides numerous accounts of licentious behavior in first-century Rome (*Hist.* 5.5). Thus, a 12-to-14-year-old girl entertaining her stepfather and his guests proves far from shocking in a Roman society.<sup>75</sup> In addition, Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann point out that the public presence of women at a banquet "remains limited . . . or it is considered inappropriate and brings them the suspicion of sexual availability (above all at banquets)."<sup>76</sup> Even Antipas's offer—an offer that he, as a Roman client, could never grant—indicates a man overpowered by the desire for a woman.<sup>77</sup> Once again, the author appears to focus on Herodias via the close association of the daughter with her mother (Mark 6:22), the daughter seeking advice from her mother (6:24), the daughter presenting John's head to her mother (6:28), and the anonymity of the daughter.

The biblical portrayals of Jezebel and Herodias are overtly sexual in nature. In the Hebrew Bible, Jezebel is the queen/prostitute who leads Ahab and Israel into spiritual infidelity. In the NT, Herodias is the adulteress and schemer who uses her husband's lust and her daughter's sensuality to carry out her revenge on John the Baptist. Sexuality and seduction are important tools in helping these two scheming women to impose their will on others.

72. Note that just as Herodias's daughter is involved in the beheading of John, Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab (and presumably of Jezebel), continues Jezebel's murderous ways by putting her own grandchildren to death in an attempt to seize the throne of Judah for herself (cf. 2 Kgs 11:1–3).

73. E. B. Johnston, "Dance, Dancer," *ISBE* 1:858 (856–58); also, cf. J. A. Glancy, "Unveiling Masculinity," *BibInt* 2 (Mar 1994): 39.

74. Antipas's building of the city of Tiberias on an ancient burial ground and Sepphoris-Auctocratoris testify to this fact; cf. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (trans. J. Bowden; London: XPress Reprints, 1996), 105.

75. For further discussion on the age of Salome at the time of John's beheading, see Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, 155–56.

76. *The Jesus Movement*, 371.

77. C. S. Keener makes this point in *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 400.

## JEZEBEL AND HERODIAS: THE SURPRISE ELEMENT IN THEIR CONFLICT WITH THE PROPHET

*Jezebel's Death: The Fulfillment of the Prophetic Word*

The narrative of Kings sharply contrasts the fate of the righteous prophet and the wicked queen. The prophet Elijah never dies but instead is miraculously transported into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1, 11).<sup>78</sup> The whirlwind and fiery chariot signify Yahweh's presence and intervention in Elijah's translation (cf. 2 Kgs 6:17). Yahweh, not Baal, is the true God of the storm, who uses the whirlwind to transport Elijah to the other side. Yahweh Sabaoth as the commander-in-chief of the armies of heaven dispatches his chariot to serve as the heavenly escort, as Elijah experiences the ultimate victory of no death.

A much different fate awaits Jezebel. The narrative of Jehu's bloody purge of the house of Ahab in 2 Kgs 9 recounts in rapid succession the death of Joram, the king of Israel (9:14–26); Ahaziah, the king of Judah (9:27–29); and Jezebel, the wicked queen mother (9:30–37). In the graphic account of Jezebel's demise, Brueggemann notes that “the narrator warms to the subject and leads the reader into every savored detail concerning the queen who we are to despise.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Elijah's upward ascent into heaven, Jehu approaches the palace of Jezebel giving the terse command, “Throw her down,” and the queen's attendants “throw her down” (9:33). Unlike the chariot and horses of fire that escort Elijah to heaven, the horses in the street trample Jezebel's body underfoot (9:33). The sons of the prophets who search for Elijah are unable to “find” (אָפֵּן) him because Elijah has gone up to heaven (2:16–18); the attendants who seek to recover the corpse of Jezebel are unable to “find” (אָפֵּן) her because the dogs have already eaten her body (9:35).

The contrasting fate of Elijah and Jezebel is also demonstrated in the differing effects of the words of death that the two figures proclaim against each other. Elijah and Jezebel engage in a life-and-death struggle between a “prophet who causes death” and a “queen who kills prophets.”<sup>80</sup> The narrator in 2 Kgs 9 frames the story of Jehu's purge with Elijah's prophetic announcement that “dogs will eat the body of Jezebel” (9:6–10, 36–37; cf. 1 Kgs 21:23) to demonstrate that the word of the prophet has executed the death sentence against Jezebel, even

78. See Sir 48:9; *Liv. Prop.* 21:5; *Apoc. El.* 7:6; and possibly, *4 Ezra* 6:26; 14:9. Rabbinic literature debates whether Elijah experienced a physical death. Even Josephus does not mention his heavenly transport (*Ant.* 9.28).

79. Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 387.

80. Tribble, “Exegesis for Storytellers,” 6.

though the prophet is no longer present.<sup>81</sup> Following the contest on Mount Carmel, Jezebel utters a death threat against Elijah as an oath to her gods, pronouncing a curse upon herself if Elijah is not dead by the next day (1 Kgs 19:1–2). After Jezebel’s death in 2 Kgs 9, Jehu refers to the queen as a “cursed woman” (9:34); Jezebel is cursed in part by her own ineffective oath against Elijah.

The imagery surrounding Jezebel’s death in 2 Kgs 9 again compares Jezebel to Anat, Baal’s sister/consort in the Canaanite literature. In the Baal cycle, Anat returns from battle with the hands and feet of her defeated foes attached to her belt (*CTU* 1.3.2.11–13). Unsated by bloodshed on the battleground, Anat transforms the furniture at her palace into soldiers and then wades into the blood and guts of the warriors that she slaughters (*CTU* 1.2.2.20–30). After Anat’s thirst for blood is sated, the blood is wiped from her palace, and the goddess washes her hands in the blood of her enemies (*CTU* 1.2.2.30–35).<sup>82</sup>

The anti-Baal polemic in the account of Jezebel’s death in 2 Kgs 9 seems clear. Jezebel is like the bloodthirsty Anat in her involvement in the deaths of Yahweh’s prophets (1 Kgs 18:4) and Naboth (1 Kgs 21:7–16) and her solemn vow to put Elijah to death (1 Kgs 19:2). In 2 Kgs 9, Jezebel represents the human embodiment of Anat, but this Anat-incarnate is powerless against her foe, who comes in the power of Yahweh to execute the prophet’s death sentence. When preparing for battle, Anat beautifies herself with henna and the scent of coriander and murex (*CTU* 1.2.2.2–3) and then once again applies murex before

81. While the original threat against Ahab in 1 Kgs 21:21–24 and his house is significantly modified (cf. 1 Kgs 21:23; 2 Kgs 9:10), the prophecy that dogs would eat the body of Jezebel is fulfilled exactly and precisely. The precise fulfillment of this prophecy against Jezebel highlights Jezebel’s culpability and the talionic nature of God’s judgment (i.e., her punishment fits the crime of 1 Kgs 21:19). The modification of the prophecy against Ahab is explained in two ways. First, prophecies were often contingent upon human response, and a response of repentance could result in the modification of a prophecy of judgment (cf. 1 Kgs 21:27–29; Jonah 3:4–10; Mic 3:9–12 with Jer 26:17–19). See R. L. Pratt, “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke* (ed. J. I. Packer and S. K. Soderlund; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–203. Second, prophecies often contained stereotypical language and imagery that did not require an exact and precise fulfillment in all details. For this aspect of the prophecy against Ahab, see D. B. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 143–44, 149. Sandy concludes that much of the language in the prophecy against Ahab is “translucent rather than transparent” (p. 144). Note the use of the image of dogs consuming corpses and entire houses being wiped out in reference to the house of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:10–11) and the house of Baasha (1 Kgs 16:3–4), prophecies that were also not fulfilled in a strictly literal manner.

82. Compare 1 Kgs 22:38 and the prostitutes bathing where Ahab’s bloody chariot is washed. Because of his association with Jezebel, Ahab also receives what Anat does to her enemies in the Baal cycle.

going to meet Baal after battle (*CTU* 1.2.3.1–2). Like Anat, Jezebel beautifies herself as Jehu approaches the palace (2 Kgs 9:30), but Jezebel will not share Anat’s positive fate.

Jezebel instead receives the treatment that Anat inflicts upon her enemies in the Baal myth. It is the blood of Jezebel (Anat) that is spattered on the palace wall (2 Kgs 9:33). It is the skull and hands of Jezebel (Anat) that remain as trophies for the victor (2 Kgs 9:35).<sup>83</sup> Appler comments that “Jezebel leaves behind the symbols of her Canaanite goddess.” The polemic serves to demonstrate that Jezebel has devoted her life to a lost cause and has entrusted her life to gods who are powerless to save her. Like Anat, Jezebel is Baal’s faithful female companion, but Baal has failed Jezebel in the same way that he failed the prophets at Carmel who lost their lives because of their misguided allegiance (cf. 1 Kgs 18:40).

*John the Baptist’s Death:  
Silencing of the Prophetic Word*

In light of the theological polemic behind the death of Jezebel in Kings, it is all the more surprising that Herodias succeeds in putting John the Baptist to death in Mark’s narrative. The narrative of John’s beheading reverses the story line of the Hebrew Bible in that it is now the word of the wicked queen that brings about the death of the prophet. Contrary to what many NT scholars think, the pericope was not an afterthought of the writer or an addition but an intricate part of the narrative.<sup>84</sup> The story is not meant to “fill a gap”<sup>85</sup> or demonstrate the “bequeathing of [the] spirit”<sup>86</sup> of John to Jesus but to shock the reader, who would naturally expect the story to end like the victorious account of Elijah over the Omride dynasty.<sup>87</sup> What the reader would

83. Note also the quotation of Elijah’s prophecy in 2 Kgs 9:37, that Jezebel’s body would lie like refuse on the ground in Jezreel. In the Baal myth, Anat kills Mot for putting Baal to death and grinds his body into dust that she sows in a field (*KTU* 1.6.2.26–35). Jezebel once again specifically experiences what is done to Anat’s enemies in the Canaanite literature.

84. Gundry, *Mark* 312–13; Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* 114; contra Kee, *Community*, 55; France, *Mark*, 255.

85. Believing that this is a time-filling device between the sending out of the twelve on their mission and their return, M. Hooker misses the point of the narrative (*The Gospel According to St. Mark* [London: Black, 1991], 158; cf. R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* [trans. J. Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968], 310–12).

86. C. E. Joynes, “A Question of Identity: ‘Who Do People Say that I Am?’—Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus in Mark’s Gospel,” in *Understanding, Studying and Reading: New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton* (ed. C. Rowland and C. H. T. Fletcher-Louis; JSNTSup 153; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 23.

87. In addition, Jewish law forbade an execution without a trial; and it only made provision for decapitation in the case of murder (*m. Sanh.* 9:1).

have expected to transpire does not. With the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth (6:1–6) and now the death of John (= Elijah), Mark signals to the reader that the unexpected quickly approaches.

There is eating and feasting in the death accounts of both Jezebel and John the Baptist. Herodias implements her plot against John the Baptist at Herod's banquet for his governmental officials and military officers (Mark 6:21–22). In 2 Kgs 9, Jehu goes into the palace to eat and drink after putting Jezebel to death (2 Kgs 9:34). The blood and gore surrounding Jezebel's death have no effect on Jehu's appetite, nor does the head of John dampen the festive spirit of Antipas and his guests. While Jehu eats and drinks in the palace, the dogs in the street below have their own feast with the corpse of Jezebel. In place of the skull of Jezebel, picked clean by ravenous dogs (2 Kgs 9:35–36), there is now the head of the righteous prophet on a platter (Mark 6:27–28).<sup>88</sup> Instead of the glorious ascension of the prophet (ἀνελήμφθη; 2 Kgs 2:11–12), we find the disgraceful burial of the prophet (ἔθηκον; Mark 6:29).

The concept of a suffering Elijah would have been foreign to the first-century Jew. From the beginning of Mark's narrative, the author employs language traditionally associated with Elijah in describing John the Baptist.<sup>89</sup> In the opening chapter, Mark links John with the prophet Elijah in following ways: (1) John's call for repentance reflects Elijah's demand on Mt. Carmel for the Israelites to acknowledge the true God (1 Kgs 18:21); (2) John's location of ministry, the Jordan region, entails the same Elijahic locale (cf. 1 Kgs 17:5; 19:4; 2 Kgs 2:1–22); and (3) Mark's lexical choice in describing John's apparel is almost identical to the description of Elijah (cf. LXX 4 Kgdms 1:8).<sup>90</sup>

This unexpected suffering of the Elijahic figure provides the backdrop for the suffering of the main character—Jesus. As noted by Perrin and Duling, John preaches (Mark 1:7) and is delivered up (1:14)—Jesus

88. Note that John the Baptist is accorded honor in his death that Jezebel does not receive in hers. John's disciples honor their master by burying the prophet's body (Mark 6:29), but Jezebel's body is consumed by dogs before Jehu gives the order to bury her remains (2 Kgs 9:34–35). The scatological disposal of Jezebel's body as fertilizer on the plot of land at Jezreel is fitting irony in that the Masoretic pointing of the name "Jezebel" renders a meaning of "Where is the dung?" For the curse of no burial in the Hebrew Scriptures, see Jer 22:18–19 and P. J. King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 125–28.

89. D. C. Allison Jr. asserts, "In the biblical tradition, however, assimilation, along with typology, which is extended assimilation (of characters and events), can convey much meaning. Aside from the obvious services of characterizing, praising, and blaming individuals, there is the effect generated by employing language traditionally associated with a holy figure or the sacred past" (*The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 13–14).

90. For further discussion, see Hoffeditz, *A Prophet, a Kingdom, and a Messiah*, 86–90.

also preaches (1:14) and is delivered up (9:31; 10:33).<sup>91</sup> John the Baptist's ultimate suffering provides the template for the life of Jesus. What is done to the "one like Elijah" will in turn be done to the Son of Man (cf. 9:11–13). This parallel between their sufferings is further witnessed in their deaths. Both figures are executed by the order of a reluctant ruler (Herod Antipas and Pilate); both are declared to be righteous by their executioners (6:20; 15:39); and both are buried by their disciples (6:29; 15:42–46). Schweizer goes so far as to say that "the destiny of Elijah as prophetic of the suffering of the Son of Man is far more important to Mark than the mere fact of his coming (in the person of the Baptist)."<sup>92</sup>

The account of John's beheading also dispels any glamorous notions concerning discipleship. John joins a long line of prophetic messengers who suffer persecution for declaring the word of the Lord (cf. Matt. 23:30–32; Acts 7:52; 1 Thess 2:15), and the disciples of Jesus who proclaim the gospel will also share in this persecution. The twelve's going out and their return (6:7–13, 30) bookend this pericope. The author highlights to his readers the reality that, just as the Messiah would suffer (6:4–6; 9:11–13; and 10:45) and the messianic forerunner (6:14–29), so also those who follow Jesus will undergo hardships (cf. 8:34–38).

### CONCLUSION

Just as the portrayal of Jezebel in the Hebrew Bible reflects the image of Anat, so also the depiction of Herodias in Mark's Gospel mirrors the image of Jezebel. These two royal women leave behind a legacy of evil through their domineering and manipulative personalities. Ultimately the connection between these wicked matriarchs serves to further Mark's Elijahic imagery and to strengthen ties between the messianic forerunner and the Messiah.

91. N. Perrin and D. C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (2nd ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1982), 238.

92. E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (trans. D. H. Madrig; London: SPCK, 1971), 183.