

although both are slightly later than the Old Testament ones. These refer to two wives/mothers/regents of Assyrian kings, Semiramis and Niokris.⁴ In these as in the biblical cases, at the end of the emergency period the right of government returned to the king-son, who had meanwhile matured, or to the next male heir of the royal line. Then the 'Lady' ceases to be the regent. She retains her title but is subject to the new king's authority, be he her son or somebody else. The possibility of such a formal or semi-formal arrangement explains how Asa could deprive his mother of both title and special privileges when he came of age; since, once established, he possessed the supreme royal authority, he used his power to overrule her and put an end to the religious practices he objected to. Apparently, once the new king attained legal maturity and political support, his mother's role was over: she stepped back into the relatively powerless position of queen mother. Her status was no longer anchored in political necessity or fixed custom, and she was once more—like any other person in the realm—answerable to the king. Her opinions concerning affairs of state could now either be taken into account or ignored, according to the king's goodwill. Perhaps Jezebel, who was familiar with this arrangement, attempted to retain the title and secure an advisory capacity for herself from Jehu (2 Kings 9). Had Jehu granted her that, his new rule would have achieved a semblance of legal support from the previous dynasty. Nonetheless, Jehu refused to do that and, indeed, got rid of her; Jezebel's political power was such that, in order to establish his own government, he had to dispose of her first. Her murder does not make sense unless we recognize that, in addition to her strong personality, she had a very real power base in her capacity as regent.

b. *Jezebel* (1 Kings 16–2 Kings 10)

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 Ahab (and, as contended above, regent after his and his sons' death). Even Athaliah, who managed to rule Judah as sole monarch for years after the death of her husband and son, is not described as queen during her husband's lifetime. Jezebel's deeds during Ahab's reign show that she actually participated in the business of government with her husband's consent—not that the Bible stoops to calling her 'queen'. Since she is such an exception to the general rule, the

question must be asked: What were the sources of her power? It is possible, of course, to relate her extraordinary status to her husband's fondness for her—or perhaps to his weakness of character. Or is the answer more complicated?

Jezebel⁵ is described as a foreign princess from Tyre who habitually gets what she is after. She never suffers moral inhibitions or pangs of conscience: this is emphasized by later Jewish sources as well.⁶ She worships the Canaanite god Baal. Hence, she is a bitter and active adversary of Israel's true God, his believers and prophets. The main source of her authority is her husband Ahab, a weak if not altogether negative figure. It is implied that she is aggressive and resourceful, full of political initiative and vigour. And yet, when Jehu buries her after her infamous demise he justifies the burial by referring to her foreign royal origin, not to her position within the Israelite royal house (2 Kings 9.34). Finally, Elijah's curse to her husband (1 Kings 21.24) affects *her* manner of death (2 Kings 10.35), not Ahab's. Nevertheless, it is understood that the curse has been fulfilled, for Jezebel, in death as well as in life, is considered an appendix of her husband's. However, some details of this picture do not fit in: Jezebel is much more than an interfering, amoral wife of a monarch. When she threatens Elijah (1 Kings 19.2), after the latter proves on Mt Carmel that his God and not Baal is the only true god of rain and source of cosmic fertility (1 Kings 18), Elijah runs away at once. Apparently he believes that Jezebel has the ability to carry out her threat. Moreover, she has earlier persecuted God's prophets, perhaps even caused Elijah's first flight (1 Kings 17.2–7). The narrator, who comes from prophetic circles, describes Ahab's attitude towards Yahweh and Yahweh's prophets as much more moderate than his wife's (1 Kings 18.17ff). For instance, Ahab's meeting with Elijah is far from friendly, but not extremely hostile. Jezebel uses the royal seal when she plans the legal murder of Naboth: nowhere is it stated that the seal was given to her for that purpose only (1 Kings 21.8), or that by using it she exceeded the authority invested in her. The sole Old Testament parallel of awarding such a privilege to a king's wife is that of Esther (Esther 8.7). The latter belongs to a foreign court where, according to the Bible, queenship or the entrusting of royal responsibilities to women is more common than inside Israelite society. Nevertheless, it seems that Jezebel enjoyed an exceptional position within this same society, although biblical writers are loath to admit it.

The Baal prophets eat at Jezebel's table (1 Kings 18.19), not Ahab's—and we cannot suspect either the narrator or the editor of wanting to cleanse the king's reputation by assigning the sin of paganism to his wife alone. Thus we can assume that Jezebel had her own court, and sufficient economic means to maintain it. The queenly manner she adopts on her last encounter with Jehu (2 Kings 9.30-31) shows that, at least in her own mind, her position is legitimate. Jehu in fact admits her royal status, although he attributes it to her origins (2 Kings 9.34). So, if Jezebel is such an awful character, why is she so powerful? And if she is powerful, a queen in reality if not in title, what are the sources of her political, legal and religious authority?

Before we approach these questions we must glance at the complex literary history of the narratives in which Jezebel and Ahab feature, so that we can understand the nature of these narratives. The Jezebel-Ahab stories are set within the Elijah-Elisha cycle (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 9, with its sequel in 2 Kings 10). The central figures of the cycle are obviously those of the two great prophets. Other persons, including personages of the royal family, are mentioned only inasmuch as their actions are related to Elijah or Elisha. The authors are not interested in Jezebel or Ahab for their own sake, but in the way their activities and character illuminate those of the prophets. The literary composition itself, whose bulk can be attributed to prophetic circles (judging by the point of view inherent in them), is nevertheless not homogeneous. It contains miracles and legends alongside reports of Elijah's and Elisha's political involvement.⁷ To these prophetic tales and reports an editorial framework of a Deuteronomistic nature has been attached. A characteristic feature of this editorial framework is the recurrent negative evaluation (within the Books of Kings) of Northern kings and their official cult of the Golden Calves, which is regarded as the chief reason for the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC.⁸ Ahab himself is bitterly accused of these practices, together with other idolatrous activities—the worship of Baal and his consort Asherah (1 Kings 16.29-34). Both the prophetic sources and editorial framework treat Ahab with distaste; however, there are hints in the former that Ahab was not altogether without merit. For instance, he is described as deeply regretting Naboth's murder (1 Kings 21.27). In addition to these two distinct sources of information there is, within the text, a third one—official or semi-official documentation (mainly chs. 20 and 22) about Ahab, his royal

house and activities. The stories of the last type are balanced and even sympathetic towards Ahab; their judgment of him is much more realistic and positive than that of the other two sources.

The prophetic narratives establish the opinion—which the editorial passages re-inforce—that one of Ahab's greatest sins was his subordination to Jezebel's views and beliefs (1 Kings 16.31-34; 21.25). Although, especially according to the third source, he did perform his administrative and military roles adequately, he is presented as unable or unwilling to curb his wife's criminal deeds. Thus the message of the biblical story is clear: he is the direct cause for the fall of his dynasty. Does this portrait of Ahab make sense? Should we conclude that Ahab was a spineless lover who, like Samson, let his love override all other considerations until it led him to his doom? Had our story been a folk tale, this kind of reasoning would have been acceptable; unfortunately, this is hardly the case. The composite narrative does contain elements of folklore, especially in the miracle reports, but this is only one element of the total composition. Besides, if Ahab were so weak, his weakness—like Samson's—would be all-encompassing. In fact, he did not let Jezebel interfere in all matters of state. Her activities were limited to internal affairs; international and military matters were outside her sphere of influence. It seems, therefore, that we must look elsewhere for the appropriate answer, and ask: What were Jezebel's power bases as queen during her husband's lifetime, and later as regent?

Jezebel was a foreign princess by birth, the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon and Tyre (1 Kings 16.31). Josephus writes that this same Ethbaal was priest to the great goddess Ashtoreth (named as a typical Sidonian-Phoenician goddess in 1 Kings 11.5), and that he usurped the throne from a family whose sons were linked to the cult of the same goddess too.⁹ The practice of appointing a chief male priest for a goddess's temple, and a chief priestess for a god's temple, is known already in Mesopotamia of the third millennium BC. This custom is highly suitable for fertility cults, for a basic requirement of such a cult is the assurance of continuous fertility on earth and in society, which is symbolized by a dramatization of divine marriage. The dramatized fertility principle was enacted as an annually recurrent sexual union between a local king and the Great Goddess (whatever her local name might be); a king-substitute and the Goddess; a hierodule of either sex and a commoner; or a priest and priestess, direct representatives of the gods they serve. Within such a

religious framework, a priestly appointment for the king and an additional female member of the royal household can link the priesthood and the royal family and prove to be a strong cohesive element for governmental stability. The great Akkadian king Sargon (24th–23rd century BC) exploited this politically clever idea to the full. On the one hand, he claimed that in his youth he enjoyed the love of the goddess Ishar (represented by a priestess of hers?); considered himself a life-long protégé of the same goddess; and, perhaps, was born to a priestess. On the other hand, he strengthened his combined secular-religious rule by appointing his daughter Enheduanna as chief priestess to the moon god at the city of Ur, and to the heaven god at Uruk. From then on, the Mesopotamian custom of appointing one of the reigning king's daughters to the office of chief priestess continued—irrespective of dynastic changes—for hundreds of years.¹⁰

According to Herodotus, Tyre, the Phoenicians' chief city, was founded already at the beginning of the third millennium.¹¹ Even if we disregard this Tyrian tradition adopted by Herodotus as unfounded, there is no better evidence for the beginnings of the Phoenician city state: its origin is shrouded in myth. If the Tyrians did come from Mesopotamia, as is widely believed, they probably imported traditional social institutions into their new land. Thus, when they arrived at Tyre they carried with them the custom of appointing a daughter of the reigning king as high priestess for the chief local god, Baal Melgart,¹² who was later identified with the god Heracles. In the case of Jezebel's father Ethbaal this custom gave the royal family an unprecedented advantage: when the king is high priest of Ashoreth and his daughter is high priestess of Baal they can exercise, between the two of them, a political, economic, and religious monopoly over the whole realm. It follows that, if Jezebel was a Baal priestess from youth, her active fanaticism and special status at her husband's court are self-explanatory. This also explains why Jezebel alone—out of all the prominent foreign women in Israelite and Judaean courts—managed to achieve such an elevated position. Even Pharaoh's daughter, King Solomon's wife, does not come close to Jezebel in importance, influence or authority, although the political alliance she represents is of great significance. Hence, the legal basis for Jezebel's activities and queenly status may not simply have been her foreign royal origin—much made of in the biblical narratives—but rather her office as high priestess and patroness of the Baal cult. Furthermore,

a high priestess designate must be educated from birth to govern, for the office requires political expertise and the ability to cooperate with the secular branch of government. Such a woman could prove to be a natural active partner for any king. There was no reason to waste her talents by assigning to her, once married, the merely ornamental role of the king's spouse. And indeed, the Old Testament does not conceal Jezebel's political prowess and legal knowledge (cf. the story of Naboth, 1 Kings 21), although these are presented in a pejorative manner.

Since Baal worship was an important source of Jezebel's authority, her insight dictated the reinforcement of the cult which had enjoyed a popular appeal in Israel even before her time. Therefore she turned it into an official cult which effectively bound the populace to the feminine aspect of the monarchy, inasmuch as Ahab's royal authority was derived from the cult of Yahweh. Because such a doubly strong legitimization of the monarchy suited Ahab's interests, he had no reason for protest. Since he is represented as a liberally minded and realistic statesman—thus at least in the sources that are not directly hostile towards him—he let his wife administer internal affairs on her own. Rational political considerations of this type seem much more in keeping with his thinking than the Samson-like motif of masculine weakness for corrupt feminine wiles.

If we read the text carefully we find that Ahab's overall description is that of a religiously tolerant ruler. The two passages which directly accuse him of participating in—and not only authorizing—his wife's cults of Baal and his consort (1 Kings 16:31–33, 21:25–26) are editorial passages, Deuteronomistic in language and outlook (see above). Otherwise he is presented differently. For instance, no biblical text accuses him of persecuting Yahweh's prophets: he treats the prophets with tolerance (1 Kings 18:16, 20:29), listens to their words (21:27), consults with them before going to war, and keeps them in his court (1 Kings 22). The names of his sons contain the Israelite theophoric elements 'yahw', not 'baal'. His tolerance of both mutually exclusive religions has, apparently, one end in mind: to strengthen his reign from all possible aspects. If he supports the co-existence of his wife's cult together with his own he does that for pragmatic rather than religious considerations. Finally, it seems that he left the religious aspect of internal government to Jezebel, whose education and capabilities made her equal to the role. In a political climate of increasing military pressure from the Aramaeans and

Assyrians, he could do no better than to delegate some authority concerning internal state affairs to his queen-wife.

At this point we must ask: Why, if Jezebel was a high priestess of Baal, do the biblical narratives ignore such an important piece of information? The answer to this question can only be guessed at. The claim that a woman can act in a priestly capacity—especially a foreign woman who worships a foreign god—was probably considered by those who wrote down our stories, and those who later edited them, as bizarre and ridiculous. Within the patriarchal structure of Israelite/Judean society this kind of appointment had no validity whatsoever. Since the narrators did not admit the validity of female priesthood they could not, perhaps would not, divulge information concerning its existence. At any rate, even though the stories were not constructed primarily to report historical information, they still contain hints which support our hypothesis.

Jezebel, Ahab's chief wife, had probably not only her own compound within the royal court but also an independent administrative organization. This organization was financed by her and answerable to the queen alone. She undoubtedly did as she pleased with her personal fortune, which was considerable. Otherwise, feeding and keeping four hundred and fifty Baal prophets and four hundred Asherah prophets (1 Kings 18.19) would have used up a sizeable part of her religious revenues. Even if the numbers are exaggerated or formulaic—later on we hear that Ahab too had four hundred prophets, albeit Yahweh prophets, in his court (1 Kings 22.6)—they convey the idea that the queen patronized the whole cult organization and controlled it. In her capacity as priestess and patroness she could administer the expenditure and income of Baal's central shrine in Samaria as well as temples at other localities. Regular sources of income such as tithes, vow-money, firstborn offerings, levies, voluntary contributions, and taxes made her into a person of considerable economic strength. She persecuted Yahweh's prophets almost to the point of total extermination (1 Kings 18.4, 13); it follows that she possessed the authority and means to carry out her wishes. Therefore Elijah himself escaped from her without delay (1 Kings 19.2-3). The prophet's fear, and the story of Naboth, prove that her influence encompassed both the political and religious spheres. Her extraordinary power was ultimately derived from her economic independence, while other factors (her origins, personality, office, and husband's esteem) contributed to its magnitude too.

It is Jezebel who initiated Naboth's legal murder. The man's refusal to hand over his ancestral land to the king offended her conception of monarchic rights, as these were exercised in her own homeland. The conflict here is between the Israelite idea of ancestral ownership—with the land conceived of as ultimately belonging to God—over against the Canaanite concept of the king as the feudal landlord of his realm. According to the biblical text Jezebel authorized her command to put Naboth to trial and execute him by using Ahab's name and personal seal (1 Kings 21.8). If indeed she used Ahab's name and authority, why does the report which states that the command has been performed come back to her, not directly to the king (vv. 14-15)? This makes sense only if we understand 'in Ahab's name' to mean 'with his consent'—not because she has let him know beforehand the details of her plan and obtained his permission, but because she usually acted as his representative-signatory for administrative and internal affairs. Nowhere is it said that Ahab handed over his royal seal on this particular occasion and for this specific purpose. Hence, it is likely that Jezebel sealed the letter containing Naboth's fate by using her own seal, which was the symbol of the permanent institutional responsibility Ahab delegated to her.

Prominent women did have their own seals. Seals that belonged to ladies of consequence have been found in Mesopotamia and Egypt. As for our queen, Avigad has found a seal inscribed *ḫzl*. He dates this seal, on palaeographic grounds, to the ninth or eighth century BC.¹³ If this is indeed queen Jezebel's seal, then our assumption becomes less tentative. It would follow that the sight of her seal, and the knowledge that it symbolized the authority the king invested in it, made any order of hers legally and officially binding.

What can be learnt about Jezebel's power and status from the curse which follows the Naboth story (1 Kings 21.21-24) and the sorry end of Ahab's dynasty (2 Kings 9-10)?

Elijah's curse concerns Ahab's family, but does not refer explicitly to the king himself (1 Kings 21.21). Neither does the shameful fate prophesied for Jezebel and the rest of the family (vv. 23-24) concern his own person. It seems that the curse, although delivered to Ahab in his capacity as responsible head of the royal house, was primarily directed at the queen and her sons. Ahab himself dies honourably in battle (1 Kings 22.34 onwards) and is buried in the family vault in Samaria (vv. 37-40). It is said that the dogs licked his blood; this, however, looks like an unnecessary attempt at harmonizing events

with the text of the curse. The dynasty is hardly in danger at this point, for two sons of Ahab and Jezebel reign before the royal house ceases to exist. The narrator makes it clear that, unlike Jehu's killing of Ahab's sons by other wives (2 Kings 10), the killing of Jezebel and her reigning son Jehoram were expedient. The end of the officially recognized Baal cult in Israel could be achieved only when the queen, together with the king-son she educated in her spirit, were disposed of. In other words, Jehu could not establish the reform he initiated until he got rid of Jezebel. So, the Yahweh-Baal conflict is, in fact, not the story of Elijah versus Ahab or Jehu versus Jehoram, but of Jezebel versus Elijah and Jezebel versus Jehu. Only after the death of the princess/priestess/queen/queen-mother/regent, grand patroness of the Baal cult and prophets, can Jehu abolish the foreign worship (2 Kings 10.18ff.).

To conclude: Jezebel possessed a well-defined personal mandate: she was a partner in her husband's reign. From the outset, her status was derived partly from the king's delegation of governmental responsibilities to her, partly from her own personal authority. Some clues in the Old Testament text, together with supporting evidence from elsewhere, hint that her religio-political power was anchored in Phoenician custom and was re-affirmed by Ahab after they became married. The composite biblical narrative passes an entirely negative judgment on the foreign princess as an immoral usurper of power. The narrators were consistent in their attempts to minimize, even suppress, her important and well-established roles.¹⁴

c. Athaliah (2 Kings 11 = 2 Chronicles 22-23.15)

Athaliah came to Judah from the Northern kingdom. It is not clear whether she was Ahab's sister (2 Kings 8.26; 2 Chronicles 22.2) or his daughter, perhaps by Jezebel (2 Kings 8.18). It seems, though, that 'She was educated under the supervision of queen Jezebel and so influenced by that Tyrian princess. This makes plausible the character of Athaliah and her leanings to the Tyrian worship, which she witnessed daily in Samaria and later tried to introduce to Jerusalem.'¹⁵ Athaliah married Joram son of Jehoshaphat, the Judean king who was Ahab's ally. The marriage undoubtedly served to cement the political alliance between the twin states, and to enhance the cultural influence of the North in Judah.

We have no significant details about Athaliah's status and activities

during her husband's lifetime. Might we surmise that her position was no different from that of any other king's chief wife? The situation changes when her son Ahaziah comes to the throne, for then she becomes her son's counsellor (2 Chronicles 22.3). The biblical text is phrased thus: 'He (i.e. Ahaziah) too followed the practices of the house of Ahab, for his mother was his counsellor in wickedness'. Although the words are emotionally loaded—they convey the writer's hatred of the queen-mother—they are not very informative. Was Athaliah an unofficial adviser whose opinion carried weight with her son, or did she actually have executive powers? Was her position confirmed legally, or did it depend entirely on her son's good will? Had she carried the title *g^ebirā*, 'Lady', we might have understood the political meaning of her role better. As it is, we are faced with a problem: when her son died after a short reign of a single year, Athaliah became self-styled queen. She could not have achieved that position without enjoying some measure of political and military support. She therefore must have held a fairly strong position during her son's lifetime, a position which entailed not only the right to advise but also the ability to exercise royal authority.

When Ahaziah died, his 'house... had no one strong enough to rule' (2 Chronicles 22.9). Athaliah quickly stepped into the gap, perhaps—at least initially—as an acting regent for the royal house. The narrator strongly condemns her for this unprecedented behaviour. The text grimly states that she killed all scions of royal blood in order to sustain her rule (2 Kings 11.1; the parallel text in 2 Chronicles 22.10 is slightly different). The execution of relatives was not uncommon in the case of newly ordained monarchs who wanted to secure their rule, especially when circumstances were difficult, thus king Solomon kills his half-brother Adonijah (1 Kings 2.13-25). The narrator goes to great pains to justify the act. Joram, Athaliah's husband, killed 'all his brothers' when he became king (2 Chronicles 21.4; but this information does not appear in the parallel passage, 1 Kings 8). Athaliah's cruel actions were probably necessary, particularly because no direct adult male heir existed. Nevertheless, because she was a woman and a foreigner who presumed to occupy the Davidic throne, she does not receive the lenient treatment accorded to Solomon who, after all, had behaved similarly.

Still, Athaliah persevered for over six years, despite the objections of the religious establishment, and possibly the hostility of at least part of the political establishment. This suggests that she was clever