**Jezebel was a Killer and Prostitute, but She had Her Good Side**

The reigning icon of womanly evil. By [Michael Satchell](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/michael_satchell)Jan. 25, 2008 | 1:00 p.m. EST+ More

No two biblical figures are more synonymous with evil than Judas and Jezebel. For more than 2,000 years, they have evolved as such enduring symbols of male treachery and female depravity that it's highly unlikely any Christian children have ever been baptized in their names. The story of Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, is well known. Not so Jezebel's. Across the centuries, in prose, poetry, movies, sermons, and song, this ninth-century B.C. pagan queen of Israel has come to epitomize the wicked woman. Yet the events of her life, as told in 1 and 2 Kings, are probably unfamiliar to all but devoted readers of the Bible.

What is the significance of Jezebel?

With its intrigue, sex, cruelty, and murder, Jezebel's story is a rich stew of the historical events, allegorical interpretation, and metaphorical license that make many of the Old Testament's biographical dramas such fascinating reading. At the climax of her long struggle to bring pagan worship to the kingdom of Israel, where the Hebrew God, Yahweh, is the only deity, Queen Jezebel pays a terrible price. Thrown from a high window, her unattended body is devoured by dogs, fulfilling the prediction of Elijah, Yahweh's prophet and Jezebel's nemesis.

To modern feminist authors, Jezebel is one of the most intriguing women in the Scriptures, a bloodstained yet strong-willed, politically astute, and courageous woman. A Phoenician princess who worships Baal, the pagan god of fertility, Jezebel marries King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel. She persuades him to tolerate her alien faith, then becomes entwined in the vicious religious conflict that ends in her death. "She became a convenient scapegoat for misogynistic biblical writers who tagged her as the primary force behind Israel's apostasy," believes University of New Mexico biblical scholar Janet Howe Gaines, author of Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel Through the Ages. "[She] has been denounced as a murderer, prostitute, and enemy of God.... Yet there is much to admire in this ancient queen."

What do some modern feminists admire about Jezebel?

After her marriage to King Ahab, Jezebel emerges as the power behind the throne. Their union represents a political alliance, bringing advantages to both nations. It is also an opportunity for Jezebel to foster the spread of her Baal religion with its many gods, ritual sex, and temple prostitutes. She hates the monotheistic Hebrew religion, and when she becomes queen, Israelites have already begun worshiping alien idols. Under his wife's malevolent influence, King Ahab protects and encourages pagan rituals, prompting Yahweh to inflict a three-year drought in a land where people are spurning him. Seizing the initiative, Jezebel imports 450 priests of Baal from her native Phoenicia and has many of Yahweh's prophets murdered.

Vocabulary in Context: Apostate:

To Jews, Baal worship was the worst sin against God, akin to today's Christians' embracing Satan. Some interpreters see Jezebel as commendably faithful to her pagan religion, but the Kings writers portray her as a dangerous apostate. To settle the question of who is supreme—Yahweh or Baal—the prophet Elijah devises a contest on Mount Carmel. Whichever deity can set afire and destroy a sacrificial bull by divine intervention will be acknowledged as the true God.

What is the cultural message of this contest’s results?

For an entire day, Jezebel's 450 prophets "performed a hopping dance about the altar," at times mutilating themselves with lances and swords. Nothing happens. Then it is Elijah's turn to pray, and the response is immediate. "Fire from the Lord descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth. When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: 'The Lord alone is God.'"

What is the cultural message behind Elijah’s actions?

Victorious but far from magnanimous, Elijah then slaughters the pagan prophets—revenge for Jezebel's murder of Yahweh's followers—and the Hebrew God rewards him by ending Israel's drought. The die is now cast between the triumphant prophet and the humiliated queen. After her followers are killed, she sends a venomous message to Elijah threatening his destruction, prompting him to flee to safety.

Characterization:

Ahab:

Jezebel:

The drama switches to the royal palace, where Jezebel's husband covets a vineyard owned by Naboth that he wants for a garden. Naboth's refusal to sell his family inheritance sends Ahab into a funk. Jezebel asserts her dominance. "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel," she says scornfully. "I will get the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you."

How she succeeds reinforces the eternal image of Jezebel as a scheming, murderous vixen. Forging the king's signature, she sends letters to townspeople falsely accusing Naboth of blaspheming God. When Naboth is publicly confronted, Jezebel urges the crowd: "Then take him out, and stone him to death." Naboth dies, and his property reverts to the royal family.

Vocabulary in Context: Nefarious:

Jezebel's nefarious plot succeeds, but the inexorable denouement swiftly follows. Yahweh summons his prophet Elijah and instructs him to tell King Ahab that he will be punished. "Say to him: 'Would you murder and take possession? In the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, the dogs will lap up your blood, too.' " Elijah dutifully relates Yahweh's prophecy to the king but predicts that Jezebel—not her husband—will be torn apart and eaten by dogs.

Why might the worse punishment be for Jezebel and not Ahab?

And so she was, at the hand of Jehu, a military commander anointed by another prophet, Elisha, to become the new king of Israel. Ahab and one of his sons have now died, and Jehu is ordered by Elisha to destroy the rest of the royal family. On a battlefield, he confronts the couple's son Joram. "Is all well, Jehu?" asks Joram. "How can all be well as long as your mother, Jezebel, carries on her countless harlotries and sorceries?" Jehu replies. With that, he shoots an arrow through Joram's heart.

Aware no doubt that her fate is sealed, Jezebel calmly and courageously prepares herself for the inevitable. As a blood-soaked Jehu gallops to Jezreel, she paints her eyes with kohl, dresses her hair, and awaits his arrival in an upper window of the palace. When he arrives, Jehu orders her eunuchs to toss her out, and in graphic detail, the Old Testament authors describe the end: "They threw her down, and her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled her. Then [Jehu] went inside and ate and drank." Sated, he orders: "Attend to that cursed woman and bury her, for she was a king's daughter." It's too late. "And they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands." Elijah's prophecy was fulfilled. "The dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel...and the carcass of Jezebel shall be like dung on the ground...so that none will be able to say: 'This was Jezebel.'"

What is the cultural message behind the biblical fate of Jezebel?

What can we infer about Jezebel from her final preparations?

Why does Jehu feel the need to bury Jezebel?

Why would Jehu kill the couple’s son Joram?

There are other biblical bad girls, such as Potiphar's temptress wife and Samson's treacherous Delilah. Jezebel's reputation, however, elevates her notoriety beyond that of other women in the Scriptures. But how much is true? Old Testament stories originating in the mists of time may be rooted in reality, but they evolved into metaphor and parable with each retelling.

In what way did the story of Jezebel become a teaching tool for the Hebrews?

Gaines believes the motives of the 1 and 2 Kings writers—as with all Old and New Testament authors—must be evaluated when considering the veracity of their accounts. The pagan Jezebel, she notes, is crowned queen of Israel at a time of spreading Hebrew apostasy. She conveniently provided an opportunity to teach a moral lesson on the evils of spurning monotheism and worshiping multiple idols, and the writers exaggerate her transgressions accordingly.

Biblical Allegory: Why might biblical writers connect adultery with false worship?

Despite the harlot references, there is no scriptural evidence that Jezebel was a prostitute or an unfaithful wife, yet the taint of immorality has branded her a whore for more than 2,000 years. One explanation is biblical allegory. The Old Testament authors often equated worship of false gods and foreign deities with wanton sexuality.

"Every biblical word condemns her," Gaines says. "Jezebel is an outspoken woman in a time when females have little status and few rights; a foreigner in a xenophobic land; an idol worshiper in a place with a Yahweh-based, state-sponsored religion; a murderer and a meddler in political affairs in a nation of strong patriarchs; a traitor in a country where no ruler is above the law; and a whore in the territory where the Ten Commandments originate."

How did Jezebel fail to meet cultural expectations for women in her time?

This biblical character assassination—if that's what it is —succeeded only too well. Jezebel reappears as a New Testament prophet in Revelation 2:20, encouraging servants to fornicate and eat the animals that had been sacrificed to the gods. She has come down through the ages as the primary symbol of wanton, shameless womanhood. She has been limned by playwright William Shakespeare and poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, by 16th-century religious reformer John Knox and novelist James Joyce. Frankie Laine had an international hit single Jezebel in the 1950s, and Boyz II Men sing about her today.

What has Jezebel come to represent today in biblical allusions to her?

In 1938, Bette Davis won an Academy Award for best actress playing the title role in the steamy melodrama Jezebel set in the 1850s. Jezebel characters have appeared in such television shows as I Love Lucy, Little House on the Prairie, and The Muppet Show. And her name was invoked during the investigation into President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. From Lady Macbeth to Lizzie Borden, among history's most famous female villains, fictional or real, the pagan queen of Kings 1 and 2 still rules as the most wicked and enduring of them all.