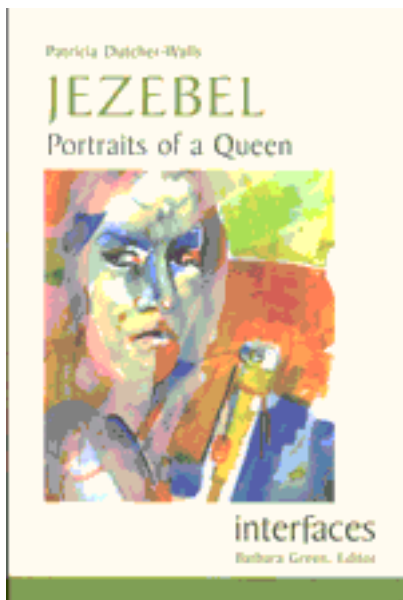


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Dutcher-Walls, Patricia

Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen

Interfaces

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004. Pp. xviii + 158. Paper. \$14.95. ISBN 081465150X.

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As the personification of evil, Queen Jezebel has always enjoyed special attention in Western culture and religion. For more than two thousand years she has been denounced as a wicked woman who was responsible for her husband's downfall. She has been regarded as a dangerous foreign influence in ancient Israelite society and has so been portrayed in literature, film, poetry, and even biblical commentary. In U.S.-American history, white slave-owning Christians projected the image of Jezebel onto African American women to justify the need for their enslavement, turning them into "jezebels" and living examples for the queen's evilness that needed to be shackled down. The negative stereotyping was seldom broken—though in rare instances, such as in the case of the writers of the 1895 *Woman's Bible*, it was. They portrayed Jezebel as "a brave, fearless, generous woman, so wholly devoted to her own husband that even wrong seemed justifiable to her, if she could thereby make him happy" (for these and other examples, see Tina Pippin, "Jezebel Re-Vamped," *Semeia* 69–70 (1995): 221–33). These differing interpretations—no matter how we may think about them today—are proof that Jezebel is one of the few biblical women who has been present in the Western mind, even though most of the time as a negative foil for religious goodness and only every so often as a case of female strength, courage, and independence from male economic domination.

None of this intriguing history of interpretation is, however, explored in Dutcher-Walls's study on the queen. Limited to the biblical narrative itself, the book aims to examine the ideologies of the ancient writers as recoverable in 1 Kgs 16 through 2 Kgs 9. The focus is historical, but not in the sense of assessing whether or not the described events about Jezebel actually happened. Dutcher-Walls does not reconstruct the "history" of the queen or her time because the author agrees that the biblical writers did not produce an "objective" report on Jezebel. Rather they offered an "*interpretive recounting of the past* in order to convey a set of assumptions and commitments and values" (xv). Dutcher-Walls emphasizes this point throughout her book so that no mistake can be made. For instance, she explains: "Our goal is to be able to read the story of Jezebel with an eye to how it convinces us about her character, actions and impact on ancient Israel, and the 'lessons' communicated by that persuasion" (15). Or again later she states: "We are not attempting to write a history of this queen. Rather, our goal will be to create a sociologically informed portrait of Jezebel in her social context" (99). And finally, "[The methods] will help us to appreciate the particular theological emphases of the storytellers as they shaped the story to make their own values and commitments clear" (137).

It is apparent, then, what Dutcher-Walls wants to accomplish: a methodologically sound understanding of the biblical writers' opinion about the queen, who probably once was a powerful leader in ancient Israel but about whom we know little by reading the biblical texts. To uncover the "interpretive recounting," Dutcher-Walls employs two methodologies: narrative criticism and sociological analysis. Since the volume is part of a series called Interfaces, which has the stated goal to "share" with undergraduate students "the scholarly passions" of their teachers (vi), Dutcher-Walls avoids scholarly jargon and excessive footnoting. She writes in an accessible style, though at times her writing is plagued by long-winded and tedious turns of phrase.

Dutcher-Walls begins by outlining the goals and procedures of her study in an introductory chapter. She then continues with a chapter on the features of narrative criticism—an excellent and comprehensive summary on key aspects of the method ("Introduction to Narrative Analysis with a Focus on Rhetoric"), and two chapters on how this method applies to the Jezebel stories ("Narrative Analysis: Jezebel the Queen" and "Narrative Analysis: Jezebel the Queen Mother"). Next she turns to sociological analysis. In one chapter the author explains the characteristics of sociological analysis ("Introduction to Sociological Analysis"), and in another chapter she applies the method to the text ("Sociological Analysis: Jezebel the Queen and Queen Mother"). In a final chapter ("The Methods Interfaced: The Portraits of Jezebel") Dutcher-Walls summarizes the results of reading the Jezebel narratives with both methods and so aims to conform to the intent of the series, namely, to introduce to undergraduate students "the methodology-conscious moment" in biblical studies with questions "relevant in our era" (vii).

In the particular case of this Jezebel study, the interfaced discussion leads to a traditional and predictable characterization of the queen that confirms the long-standing and dominant history of interpretation. Dutcher-Walls writes:

Jezebel has functioned for the storytellers as the prime negative example of what NOT to do as a leader of God's people... they have used her portrait as the ideal vehicle for depicting the worst a member of God's people could be, and the worst a royal powerholder could do. For those who accept the theology the storytellers are promoting, Jezebel's gruesome death, predicted by the prophets, is only what she has long deserved for all her evil. And those who read her story are well warned to amend their ways and truly listen to the word of God the storytellers themselves offer through the writing of their tale. (152)

As it turns out, the methodological exploration of narrative criticism and sociological analysis simply reiterates negative stereotypes about Jezebel and identifies them as the views of biblical writers. The quest for intentional meaning joins androcentric ideology. Thus Dutcher-Walls's complex reading of the biblical tale repeats only what we thought we knew before reading the book: Queen Jezebel is an evil, power hungry, female leader in ancient Israel whose tale serves as a warning to any God-fearing Jew or Christian.

But this prompts a question: Is this predictable result compelling enough to make undergraduate students read the book?

This question is crucial because the series editor, Barbara Green, explains in the preface that *Interfaces* is "basically a curriculum adventure, a creative opportunity in teaching and learning, presented at this moment in the long story of how the Bible has been studied, interpreted, and appropriated" (v). Yet not even once does Dutcher-Walls touch on the interpretive history of Jezebel and only reiterates the expected that is presumably based on the perspectives of the biblical writers. Does Dutcher-Walls ignore the history of interpretation because her "scholarly passions" (vi) are confined to the views of the anonymous writers in ancient Israel, this time enhanced by narrative criticism and sociological analysis? If so, many undergraduate students anywhere do probably not feel enthusiastic about a book that firmly places the biblical text into the distant past, entirely removed from questions "relevant in our era" (vii).

Here, then, we have a book that misses an exciting pedagogical and scholarly opportunity to make a biblical character like Jezebel relevant to our time and place. Where is a discussion of gender stereotypes as they relate to Jezebel throughout the history of interpretation and in the biblical narrative? Where are references to Jezebel as an immigrant, a "foreigner," with tremendous class privileges and with considerable

religious zeal? Where is the recognition of the contextual nature of all exegetical work as a counterargument to the pervasively negative views on Jezebel? To students living at the cusp of the twenty-first century, an online exploration into the afterlife of Jezebel would also seem attractive. In fact, there are rich resources on the Web about Jezebel: ranging from analyses from both traditionalists and feminists, as well as examinations of the famous 1938 film starring Bette Davis—a film that may have had almost as much to etch the name “Jezebel” on public consciousness in mid-twentieth-century America as the biblical story. But nothing of the sort appears in the book. When the admirable and absolutely necessary task of creating textbooks for a nonspecialized student audience is tackled, as with this series, it is altogether surprising that the audience’s limited attention span for detailed exegetical descriptions is not considered. The long and repetitive explanations in Dutcher-Walls’s book would make many students moan (or groan); of that, I have no doubt or illusions.

In the end, then, the book is too protracted for too little biblical text to constitute a solid enough basis for lively class work and discussions. To assign to undergraduate students an entire book on a single biblical character, a book that focuses only on the biblical text and does not include an analysis of past and present appropriations of Jezebel, seems hard to justify. The situation is perhaps different for more advanced seminary students who might welcome a focused exploration on the Jezebel narratives, offered by a woman scholar with traditional Christian commitments (x). Yet those who value a hermeneutics of suspicion and a politically, culturally, and religiously progressive investigation of an intriguing biblical character will need to look elsewhere. This book is too obedient to the (constructed) views of biblical writers and does not provide sufficient guidance to those who do not accept (constructed) theologies of biblical storytellers, especially when the target is Jezebel.