

JEZEBEL AND THE WIDOW OF SAREPTA

Gildas Hamel

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper about the role given to Jezebel and the widow of Sarepta in the tales of Elijah starts with the recognition that salvation in this story reflects the overwhelming and daily concerns of a grain-based agricultural society.

The cycle of stories concerning Elijah is paradigmatic of a radical view that sets the prophets of Israel as standing apart from royal institutions or even opposed to them.¹ Claims to direct communication from the divinity by someone not directly connected to palatial authorities are given pride of place. The emergence of non-royal healers and seers was actually a fairly widespread and ancient phenomenon in the Near East,² but it is given a new role in the book of Kings.

The stories about Elijah and Elisha, I take it, do not quite amount to a biography, yet have elements of that genre and have become part of compositions that are meant to serve a larger purpose. Their structural unity,

¹Elijah and Elisha are archetypal figures, rivals of the kings: C. GROTTANELLI, *Kings & prophets. Monarchic power, inspired leadership, & sacred text in biblical narrative* (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130. They question kingship and relativize it. Could these stories have been written under the monarchy, or even at a period when it was still possible to think of its return? Strangely, as Grottanelli remarks, “Thus in many ways Elijah is the typical prophet, and yet he is the least historical.”

²R. R. WILSON, *Prophecy and society in ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Fortress Press, 1980), xii, 322 p, especially p. 119 and 123–24, regarding the social functions of diviners and “oracular speakers” in the Mesopotamia. Diviners were generally validated, trained and integrated by royal courts, but only oracular speakers who supported the royal policies could be tolerated by the royal court. Others, probably most, were at the periphery of the circles of power. GROTTANELLI, *Kings & prophets*, 3.

as convincingly argued by recent writers,³ is striking and an understanding of this unity is bound to help more with the proper evaluation of the socio-historical elements in the story than an all too rushed and risky history of its composition.⁴

They are to be replaced within the Deuteronomist presentation of history. Northern Ephraimite traditions about earlier prophecy of the 9th and 8th c. have been incorporated by the Deuteronomist writer(s), but not without major editing.⁵ I am impressed for instance by the arguments that present the Deuteronomist History as having been perhaps “an initial edition supporting Josiah’s reforms” but especially being “a full-scale work refocusing royalist efforts in the wake of the exilic disaster (Jehoiakin’s circle) and during the period immediately thereafter.”⁶

In Elijah’s name, his actions like refusal of idolatry and punishment of idolaters, his visions at the Horeb, the Deuteronomist writer(s) sees a champion of the law, a reformer, a worthy successor of Moses, however subordinate, not a “seer” or “hearer.”⁷

³Most forcefully and uniquely by T. L. BRODIE, *The crucial bridge. The Elijah-Elisha narrative as an interpretive synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a literary model for the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), xi, note 7.

⁴T. COLLINS, *The mantle of Elijah: the redaction criticism of the prophetic books* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 126: Dt 17–18, though belonging to a later stage of production of the book, pre-dates Joshua-Kings and influences the stories regarding Ahab.

⁵Contra WILSON, *Prophecy and society in ancient Israel*, 192. See also C. F. BURNEY, *Notes on the Hebrew text of the books of Kings, with an introduction and appendix* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1903), 207–9, quoted by Wilson. See M. COGAN, *1 Kings. A new translation with introduction and commentary*, vol. 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 88–100, on the composition of the book of Kings. My considerations or hunches regarding the dating of traditions in the Deuteronomistic History follow J. David Pleins in his *Social visions*, pp. 26–27. He sees the Deuteronomist Law code (Dt 12–26) as originating in the Judean royal court, either in Hezekiah’s time (715–687) or more likely under Josiah (640–609).

⁶Pleins, *Social visions*, 26. He also suggests that there was a priestly redaction of some of the DH materials. He goes further, p. 27, and sees a) J as a postexilic product, built upon DH, with the promise of the land motif echoing throughout; b) E as a genuine, distinctive source, absorbing epic traditions from early Israel that can be paralleled with those of Ugarit, and materials “severely refracted in light of postexilic debates about religious praxis, communal values, and equitable social structures;” c) He places P as “thoroughly at home in the age of the postexilic priestly commonwealth,” also incorporating a social vision, but with the Holiness Code perhaps emanating from a narrower group. Note the agreements with Collins: COLLINS, *The mantle of Elijah*, 125–55.

⁷*Ibid.*, 128.

GENERAL CONTEXT: THE PROPHETS ON HISTORY

The post-exilic redactors of these Israelite and Judaeen prophetic traditions are concerned to reveal certain hidden aspects of their history. They find themselves in developed agricultural societies that are in a competition between ever-expanding and ever-extended political systems, and tend towards large, oppressive kingdoms and empires in which injustice goes hand in hand with polytheism. They vituperate the polytheism associated with their neighbors because:

1. The worshipping of any gods could not be detached from claims on the land on which they “dwelled,” as goes the expression found for instance on the Moabite stone:

As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years (lit., days), for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son followed him and he also said, “I will humble Moab.” In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished for ever! (Now) Omri had occupied the land of Medeba, and (Israel) had dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son (Ahab), forty years; but *Chemosh dwelt there in my time*.⁸

So, the worshipping of foreign gods was potentially the acceptance of the extension of land rights, and subjection of tenants and sharecroppers to masters who were “closer” in terms of cult and culture to those gods.

2. Writ large, polytheism or baalism then goes hand in hand with the injustice that is required by the extension of the monarchy and the powers of the aristocracy, when they contract marriage, alliances or covenants, and at the same times adopt the neighbors’ gods. In ancient societies, it was impossible to ensure access to more land without all at once: accumulate more grain / food for one’s budding army, officers, scribal and co-opted priestly class; develop the constructions that were both military formidable and luxurious (hence attractive to potential covenants whose alliances were sealed by marriages); and develop the local cults and temples (including local priesthoods and prophetic schools) that “channelled” the climatic and other conditions that were considered necessary to the success of the local agriculture but also played a role in identifying the volume of crops available locally for tithing and taxation. The accumulation of silos and constructions couldn’t come

⁸My emphasis. Translation by W. F. ALBRIGHT, “Palestinian inscriptions,” in *Ancient Near Eastern texts relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. PRITCHARD (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

but at the expense of a peasantry that thought it needed some defense against its neighbors but found itself quickly indebted and in the end without protection against bigger predators.

3. The great civilized empires of Assyria and Babylonia (and Persia, which is spared by our texts for understandable reasons) have multiple gods that can't be but false, since each of these civilizations in turn loses to the next, and therefore to the next council of gods. The name itself of these gods, called *ba'als* or masters, at least in the Phoenician and Aramaean neighborhood of northern Israel, has social significance. The prophets, particularly Hosea, take them to be a symptom of the real mastery exerted by kings and rich men over a subject population.
4. Perhaps, the main spring of the prophetic inspiration, as re-written by the Deuteronomist artist, is the anguished certainty that history is marching on towards goals or ends that are beyond human intentions, or that are greater than human intentions can be. What is striking is that the Israelite and Judaeen prophets appear in little areas in the process of being swallowed by a succession of great empires. An empire is the overtaking and controlling of local "destinies," the attempt to bring a greater and more external or remote control over local weaknesses, such as a paramount desire of security, acts of selfishness and local control presented as "local salvations". King Ahab, one imagines, would have presented himself as a "savior" of his people. But is it possible to do without empire and to abstract oneself from its presuppositions, by taking refuge for instance in the desert? Do the prophetic texts propose salvation, I mean even salvation from empire? Or do they propose to go beyond empire, to do without it, but at a "spiritualized," personal level (i.e. a sort of refuge inside oneself)?

What role does Jezebel's character play in all of this? I propose that she is the representation of the monstrosity that imperial reach, or any kingdom extending its reach, leads to in terms of concrete injustice that is supported by, or wrapped in, ba'alism and other cults.

QUEEN JEZEBEL AND THE WIDOW

The context of the Elijah story is the long reign—22 years— of Ahab, son of Omri, king in Samaria and Yizreel. Both capitals or main cities of the kingdom of Israel are in or near the valley of Yizreel, a very fertile valley. Ahab is portrayed as one of the worst kings of the northern dynasties, in a Deuteronomistic view of history that permeates the whole book.

Ahab's wrong-doing is summarized by his marriage to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess. If her name means "not exalted," or "lowly," it looks like a homophonic play on a slightly different name that may have been on the contrary a grand theophoric that hoped to cast some of the grandeur of the divine, exalted, being on the child of a princely family. Her status, compared with that of the widow, derives from being both a daughter of a famous "name," Ethbaal, a Phoenician king of the Sidonians, and perhaps therefore a priestess of the goddess Astarte (according to Josephus, *AJ* 8.13.2), and the wife of Ahab.⁹ She comes from the hearland of the Baal cult, whose power extended south, close to the Carmel and to Yizreel. As the story of Naboth's vineyard indicates, land grab and/or control is an important theme of the criticism woven through the story of Elijah. The yahwistic criticism of baalism shapes the debate as being a self-defense against land- and power-usurpation by foreigners (we see her using the king's seal for her letters), and defines this as an impossibility for any post-exilic royalist agenda.

This is the territory where Elijah will be sent to be helped by, and in turn help the social opposite of a queen, namely the poor, famished, unnamed widow from Sarepta, a place situated between Tyre and Sidon in the heartland of Phoenicia. She lives in radical poverty as head of a household (1 Kgs 17.17) and the hunger brought about by the drought in the story would disproportionately affect a widow like her, and her children, because she is already in a precarious position, without any access to land (except eventually through her son?). Being a widow means that, even though she may still have a family, she can't easily return to or rely on her father's presumably meager resources, since she would be seen as a burden by her kins. A new marriage would solve her problem, but who would marry a poor widow with a child?¹⁰ She is a burden to everyone and kept therefore on the margins of society. Baalism and its promises or guarantees of fertility would be considerably weakened in her case, or at least become an open question.

⁹G. A. YEE, "Jezebel," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3 (1992): 848–49, who relies on A. BRENNER, *The Israelite woman* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1985). See also C. L. SOW, "Book of Kings," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G. A. BUTTRICK (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 12–13, and P. R. ACKROYD, "Goddesses, women and Jezebel," in *Images of women in antiquity*, ed. A. CAMERON and A. KUERT (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 245–59.

¹⁰The book of Ruth gives a much fuller description of the fate of widows, young and old, and what solution—salvation—is considered ideal. The younger widow Ruth's situation in that story is complicated by her insisting on following her mother in law Naomi to Bethlehem and taking labor and sexual risks that turn out to be unexpectedly recognized. The dead husband and two children, however, remain the link allowing access to land and the transformation of Ruth as an ancestor.

Yet, the promise made by Elijah in 1 Kgs 17.14 that the jar of flour and the jug of olive oil will not fail until the divinity gives rain is not peculiar to this widow but is the fundamental concern of this peasantry, namely the need to store sufficient resources for more than one year at least, in order to overcome the annual variations in yield and avoid being forced to borrow from richer neighbors. The worry is magnified by the widow's situation (called immediately afterwards *ba'alat habayt*, in 1 Kgs 17.17).

A question that may not be altogether futile is that of the ethnic origin of the widow of Sarepta. A positive reason (a false positive perhaps) for this choice by the story-teller is that it shows that reputation and wealth are no guarantee of survival in the end. Neither rich Phoenicia's proximity to the sea and fairly ready access to food supplies through arrangements with surrounding Mediterranean ports, nor what it thought to be its protection by its gods and goddesses, whose high priest was Jezebel's father, could save it from calamity. There may have been a negative reason. However marginal Elijah could be portrayed by the Deuteronomist History, we touch perhaps here to one of the limits of the liminality that characterizes him. He could be seen receiving food from ravens—a sworn enemy of grain-based agriculture and source of impurity—and co-habiting with a foreign widow, but less likely with an Israelite widow. It would have stretched the moral and ethnic-defining capacities of the story-teller to have Elijah live with an Israelite widow.

On the contrary, Jezebel was king Ahab's wife, one of his many wives, one presumes, unless he is an exception. In an agricultural society in which secure access to land was a paramount consideration, marriage had to be used to open the possibility of, if not secure, one's chances to have access to better or more land and increase the power of one's kin group. Polygamy made sense to those who could afford it, since it maximized these chances. An exogamic marriage to a foreign princess, therefore, looked like a reasonable extension of this effort to secure land for one's group, though it is highly problematic.

The narrative possibility for such a foreign princess to abandon her god(s) and take up her husband's cult exists, but Jezebel is here cast, on the contrary, as the typical example of an exogamic relationship in which the "foreign" element overpowers the local god. The view of the writer (presented as inspired in Elijah) is that it is not enough for Ahab to be partial to Yahweh, as the naming of his sons Ahaziah and Yehoram shows. The story-teller thinks that Ahab's tolerance for competing cults is inimical to the historical interests of Israel (and even more Judaea) properly understood. To be tolerant is to marry into the interests of the enemies of Yahweh who are undissociably enemies of the social and economic interests of the people of Israel.

What is a fundamental consideration, I venture, is the "in-dwelling" of

gods, that is, their intimate connection with the land, the consecration they give to that land, and when expanded to other territories, the access they open to their own priestly/aristocratic and royal groups to consolidate their claims on these lands. In other words, what is projected in the tale as an intrusion of baalism from the outside was seen as a serious threat because of its implications for control of one's land. The foreign origin of this baalism may have been a projection by later writers who reflected upon previous tales of discontent as well as on the indigenous polytheism of Israel and Judah. So for instance the eight hundred fifty prophets of Baal and Asherah are said to be *'okhley shulhan 'izevel*, "eating at the table of Jezebel," in 1 Kgs 18.19. She doesn't feed them like the ravens, the widow, or the angel who support Elijah in need, or Ovadiah who also supports the Lord's prophets, but the prophets of Baal serve themselves and consume the "table" and by extension the kingdom.¹¹ It is tempting to think that the later—sixth or even fifth-century—demonization of a foreign royal wife, no matter what the original facts and even rumors were, that is coming from the ninth c. BCE, were a way to get at any foreign-induced transformation of one's already "purified" Yahwism, a necessity in a mosaic-like empire, and not any more simply for land-control reasons.¹²

This extension of ba'alism is presented as due to Jezebel's influence as a wife and foreign woman. The Elijah tale plays with the danger that any new wife (and therefore sister-in-law or daughter-in-law) represents, as a foreign woman, for the kin group. For illustration purposes, one has the book of Ruth which, while relying on the same pattern of fear or danger coming from the foreign wife or daughter in law, goes in the opposite direction. Israel was a patrilineal and patrilocal society in which the bride went to live in the groom's family. Once in the husband's family, the bride was an isolated "foreign" woman even if she was from the same village. She could therefore be perceived as a potential threat, particularly by the mother-in-law, whose essential interests lie with her husband and next to him her now married son. From the mother-in-law's point of view, and in Elijah's story from the

¹¹Compare the man of god of 1 Kgs 13.8 who refuses Jeroboam's invitation to eat and his promise of a gift.

¹²For an argument that the painting of Jezebel in darker colors would be the product of later (5th-4th c.) concerns that reframe an older version of the story, see A. ROFÉ, *Prophetic stories: the narratives about the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, their literary types and history* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988): 1 Kgs 21 is explained by Rofé as reflecting disputes and tensions in Nehemiah's period. This would be part of a pattern according to which women in the Deuteronomist History are presented as dangerous foreigners: J. D. PLEINS, "Territory and Temple," chap. 8 in *The social visions of the Hebrew Bible. A theological introduction* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 116-17.

writer's point of view, the daughter-in-law was a foreign woman who might draw the affections of the husband and his children (since sons were recipients of property) and possibly manipulate them to her own advantage, or at the very least be in competition with her as to the protection that women were forced to expect from the men in their family.

The story of Ruth is playing up these very common tensions to their fullest and making them questions for the audience by turning them upside down. As a Moabite, Ruth would be an extreme example of "foreignness" in a bride, but the story wants the audience to imagine (or wants to surprise the audience with) the exact reverse of what people would experience in their everyday lives, namely the tensions existing within all families and stemming from the intrusion of any bride, by definition "foreign" to the family. Ruth and Boaz eschew the normal calculations that people must or should make in order to survive. One should calculate one's proper interest or one's family's interest as finely as possible and act in consequence.¹³ In the story of Elijah, one has a wife who not only calculates but most aggressively pursues the king's economical advantage (and her own by the same token), as the episode of Naboth in 2 Kings indicates.

Before concluding, I'd like to make two notes. The first one is that Elijah's actions and words are presented as the inspired, transcendent, point of view of a *toshav*, a resident alien, who moves about, as pointed out by numerous commentators, with great speed and abruptness. He runs like the wind; his hiding or missions take him to the four cardinal points, beyond the limit of the kingdom; he doesn't die but disappears in Elisha's vision, leaving a mantle, granted, but nothing else that is politically usable (that is, no "remainders" or relics of an authoritative voice that kingship of priesthood could use). The logic is the same as in Moses' and Jesus' stories. This abruptness and ability to move, made more dramatic by the way the story interrupts the book of Kings, one could argue, is an image of the extreme mobility acquired, at least by Ezekiel's time (I'm thinking of chapter 10 in *Ezekiel*), by a divinity whose dwelling has become cosmically de-centered and was now in a very complicated relationship to a land and to a temple. The story of Elijah, then, would be one of many in the biblical corpus in which the divinity's dwelling or house

¹³Which is why Orpah goes home to her "mother's house" as Naomi encourages her to do. Or why the symmetrical male kin (closer to Elimelech than Boaz, as Orpah is closer than Ruth to Naomi as having married the elder son) refuses to take Ruth as a wife whose son would inherit Elimelech's share (small probably), and perhaps more (this male kin is considering the risks: he is older, will die probably much before Ruth, and the latter will have plenty of time to manipulate the family).

is potentially everywhere, and its voice can be heard in the most unexpected places, by resident aliens.¹⁴

A further note and question: Elijah's radical scepticism regarding the baals, expressed in the taunting of the baalist prophets of 1 Kings 18.27–29, is striking. I would assume that mockery of other ethnic gods has a long history, but perhaps there is a specific reason for the mockery in this case. Before empires engulfed many constituted states, each with its own

¹⁴We discover that Yahweh is on the march not only in Exodus, but also in the so-called "march in the South" passages (Clifford, pp. 114–16). According to Albright, these texts belong to Hebrew poetry's early stages. See his *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan*, ch. 1, regarding the dating technique he used. From the short discussion in Clifford, op. cit., a circular reasoning seems at work. In these texts (Dt 33.2; Ps 68.9; 68.18; Jd 5.5), Yahweh comes from Seir, the steppe of Edom, or the mountain country of Paran.

Yahweh resides in a tent, like El of Ugarit. Was the theme borrowed (or paralleled) by the Israelites in their desert period, as Clifford suggests, p. 130, or is it simply so widely spread in the area, over such a long period of time, that it is impossible to date the notion? One gets the impression that this language is adapted to many local situations, and the Yahweh cult is one variant of a widely shared common view. Yahweh dwells in his temple on Zion, as the Canaanite Ba'al does on Zaphon. A language of enthronement closely related to that found in Ugaritic documents is Exodus 15.16–18:

...
 Thou didst bring them, thou didst plant them
 In the mount of thy heritage,
 The dais of thy throne
 Which thou has made, Yahweh,
 The sanctuary, Yahweh,
 Which thy hands created.
 Yahweh will reign
 Forever and ever!

(Clifford, ET pp. 138–39). It is dated to the 12th or 11th c. BCE by Cross, acc. to notes 55–56 in Clifford, but on what basis? In the Song of the Sea of Ex 15, Yahweh is described in Baal language: a battle with the sea, the "mount of heritage," the fruit of the victory... See op. cit. p. 141. Psalm 48, for instance, clearly uses language that was also used of other divinised mountain dwellings (Clifford, p. 142–43). Not surprisingly, the language is concerned with agricultural fundamentals: weather, planting, inheritance and transmission of property, defense, building, and permanence. The "mount of thy heritage" could as well be the whole Judaeon mountain area known as *har ha-melekh* in later periods. Perhaps a frequency study could show in what period it is mostly used.

Texts from the intertestamental period show that Jerusalem has become the center of the world in a more geographic sense and less its mythological (more vertical) sense. Again, see the interesting remarks by R. Clifford in chapter iv of his *Cosmic mountain* ("The cosmic mountain in intertestamental literature"), pp. 182–89. The example given is of 1 Enoch 26.1–5, in which a "geographically accurate, nonmythic description of Jerusalem shows that 'middle of the earth' is not a point which joins heaven and earth." It is simply the middle of the earth in the west-to-east journey of Enoch.

cults, a prudent attitude regarding the gods of neighbors and enemies might have been the rational norm (this is only a suggestion). Perhaps, it is the practical and necessary tolerance shown by empires (certainly the Persian one) regarding foreign gods that exacerbated the need for provincialized national groups within that empire to dissociate themselves from their neighbors, in a general competition for recognition and better placement?

CONCLUSION

I conclude by noting the contrast between the radical situation of Elijah, who is rejected and survives on the margins of agricultural land (Jordan's area, the widow's house, the southern desert and Horeb), and the way in which his being, signified by his enigmatic, programmatic name,¹⁵ is presented as revealing the real origin of fertility and survival. The political discussion is internal to Judaeans and Israelites reflecting on the demise of the royal houses, and conveniently expressed by means of two foreign women coming from a rich part of a now immense, mosaic-like empire. Fertility, on this account, is not the product of calculations regarding the settled, land-based, and in-dwelling gods of baalism—the Achab and Jezebel side—but the gift of a mobile, quiescent divinity who is on the side of the displaced resident and even the widow, that is, those with less visibility in their society. The foreign widow represents not only the failure of *ba'alism* but also the hopes of writers for whom uncalculating hospitality, risk taking, and social justice are one with the recognition of a life-giving, quiescent divinity.

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