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Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 135, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 6-17

Published by: The Society of Biblical Literature

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/jbl.1351.2016.1352>

Accessed: 15-06-2018 12:53 UTC

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On Scholarship and Related Animals: A Personal View from and for the Here and Now

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This address sets out my personal experience as a bible student and scholar in the last four decades. I begin with an extended case study of biblical passages about and around Jezebel, revisiting her story in biblical text and interpretation, with the aim of achieving some generalized understanding of the process of Hebrew bible scholarship as practiced today by the diverse and diversified members of our guild, those strange “animals” of my title. After giving a chronological overview of selected Jezebel interpretations, I move to my own assessment, then from reading criticism into metacriticism. I attempt to glean from this journey insights into the development of bible criticism mainly through feminist scholarship, and leading into scholarship and the role of SBL in the contemporary world of media and the ramifications of the “Big Tent” approach.

Prelude

Shalom and good evening. This is a great honor and pleasure, standing here in front of you: and I mean “standing” in the biblical sense of serving those seated. So thank you, all of you, for the chance to do so as the 2015 president of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Heartfelt thanks to John Strong, Missouri State University, who at a dinner with his charming family in Haifa in July 2015 made a chance remark that set me on the trajectory of this address; to Philip Davies, of Sheffield, who advised me, “Pick whatever topic you choose for the address, but make it personal”; and to Norma Franklin, Jennie Ebeling, and Gale Yee, for introducing me to the Jezreel digs, so close to the Kibbutz of the same name where I was once, so long ago, a member.

What I'd like to talk about this evening is my personal experience as a bible student and scholar in the last four decades. I will begin with an extended case study of biblical passages about and around *Jezebel*. Then, after revisiting her story in biblical text and interpretation, I will continue with some generalized insights into the process of Hebrew bible scholarship as practiced today by the diverse and diversified members of our guild, those strange "animals" of my title: moving, in short, from criticism into metacriticism. This journey will be nonobjective and highly personalized—please be forewarned.

Why Jezebel?

Why choose Jezebel? Oh, this is personal. In the Hebrew bible she is a bad bad woman, right? Initially this was enough to pique my curiosity since, as you and I may admit, what makes woman figures good or bad in biblical literature doesn't always correspond to contemporary notions of positive/negative femaleness; and yet the bible is used, misused, and abused to show women their place. Even now. So I wanted to find out for myself what made her so bad in the vision of the authors who imagined her character and also to understand what makes you, me, a Jezebel of sorts. Even now.

So my second or third refereed article after receiving the PhD was about Jezebel, in Hebrew, nearly thirty-five years ago.¹ I remember being fascinated by "her" literary figure. There seemed to be paradoxes in her description in 1 and 2 Kings.² There she is portrayed as evil (especially in her treatment of Yhwh prophets, Elijah, and Naboth) but also as politically, personally, and religiously powerful: a disgrace but also a royal by birth and behavior. If read in the context of ancient Near Eastern texts about royal females and between the lines of the biblical texts, she seems a queen in her husband's lifetime and a co-regent with her sons after Ahab's death. This position was developed in my book of 1985, *The Israelite Woman*³ and elsewhere.

Older Interpretations of Jezebel

Most scholarly interpretations that I consulted at the time took up Jezebel's negative assessment in the biblical text unproblematically: it was simply repeated. Historical questions, of narrated time and narration time, were the main issues discussed. Some years later, the different accounts of 1 Kgs 21 and 2 Kgs 9 were highlighted and the composition date moved to the Persian period, first by

¹ A. Brenner, "Jezebel" (in Hebrew), *Shnaton* 5/6 (1981–1982): 27–39.

² 1 Kgs 16:31; 18:4, 13, 19; 19:1–2; 21; 2 Kgs 9.

³ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, BibSem 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); reprinted by Bloomsbury, 2014, under Brenner-Idan.

Alexander Rofé and then by others,⁴ and the stories were connected with the Ezra-Nehemiah polemic against foreign women. Beyond this, mainstream/malestream interpreters almost fully collaborated with the biblical text. Ahab is a sinner? Sure, the deuteronomistic editorial frame states this (1 Kgs 16:29–33), and never mind extrabiblical evidence to the contrary and 1 Kgs 20 and 22, where Ahab is simply heroic. These latter chapters were declared “another source” and not given much weight. Beyond “history,” the interpreters were more interested in Naboth’s refusal to sell his land than in anything else. They explained his refusal approvingly—although Naboth in fact just says, obliquely, “By God, I can’t give you my paternal heritage” (21:3) and not, in spite of the usual translation, something like “God forbid that I give you my ancestral inheritance” (NJPS, NRSV, NJKV, NIV, WEB [World English Bible], and many others).⁵ Such an understanding represents serious scholarly collaboration with the text: a mammoth edifice of ethical and theological assumptions is constructed against Ahab and Jezebel and in favor of the “poor” landowner, in apparent agreement with the biblical narrator. This interpretive edifice, built on a laconic answer that might impudently mean, “by Jove, why *should* I give my ancestral heritage to you?” is quickly taken to signify that Ahab’s request—initially not confiscation—for the vineyard is wrong; Naboth’s response is appropriate; and Jezebel, well, she is not only a political assassin by proxy but also Yhwh’s enemy. By comparison, indeed, Ahab is better than she is. Weak but not as corrupt. Apart from establishing that, not many scholars were interested in Jezebel beyond repeating the verdict: an evil, sexualized foreign woman, a harlot (see 2 Kgs 9).

The Change in Perceiving Jezebel

But things change, even if they remain similar. The dual trajectory of historical criticism, in the sense of chronology-and-location inquiry and textual-compositional inquiry, has slowly lost its exclusive lofty position, as did considerations of theology. Since the late 1980s there has been a new-style interest in the story and in the figure of Jezebel, ushered in mainly by feminist critics. This

⁴Alexander Rofé, “Naboth’s Vineyard: The Story’s Origin and Its Purpose” (in Hebrew), *Mishpatim* 14 (1985): 521–26 (articulated further in Hebrew in *Beit Miqra*’ 33 [1988]: 432–46). English translation, “The Vineyard of Naboth: The Origin and Message of the Story,” *VT* 38 (1988): 89–104.

⁵The Hebrew idiom can be translated and usually is “far be it” (from me, etc.). When it appears as חלילה + /ל/ + /ב/ + יהוה it is mostly translated as “God forbid.” I wonder whether this translation is justified in this story, or whether this is another case of justifying Naboth’s narrated attitude. An etymology of חלילה from a root חלל, in its *piel* formation, “to commit sacrilege, profanity,” is far from certain linguistically; it also assumes knowledge by Naboth, or Ahab, of divine parcelling of land to the paterfamilias. Ahab may at first have assumed, therefore, that his rejected offer was fair. Other biblical occurrences of חלילה are in Gen 44:7, 17; Josh 22:29; 24:16; 1 Sam 2:30; 12:23; 14:45; 20:2, 9; 22:15; 24:7; 26:11; 2 Sam 20:20; 23:17; 1 Kgs 21:3; Job 27:3; 1 Chr 11:19.

is not surprising, since one of the first moves in feminist criticism was to redress the biblical gender imbalance/bias by rereading women's stories. So now we actually possess a healthy package of Jezebel studies that also regenerate the understanding of the pericope as a whole and especially of 1 Kgs 21. This package, a sample of which will be described here, may serve as well as many other case studies to illustrate, at least partly, how biblical scholarship has changed in the last decades, and how it has remained the same, and in how much it is becoming the same again.⁶

Jezebel has come a long way. Already in 1994 her formal positions as reigning queen alongside her husband and as queen mother, were argued for.⁷ In the same year, in her presidential address to the SBL, Phyllis Tribble elevated Jezebel by comparing her to Elijah. Tribble understood Jezebel and Elijah as mirror images of each other in religious zeal and behavior, the one accorded praise by the deuteronomistic writer, the other derision.⁸ In 1998, Susan Ackerman too argued for queenly status for Jezebel, among other biblical female figures depicted similarly.⁹ In *Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel through the Ages* (1999),¹⁰ Janet Howe Gaines continued and expanded the trend: she sketches the negative portrait of Jezebel in the bible, then traces the same tendency in visual art and literature through the ages, finally coming back to offering another reading for the biblical account. In an article reprinted online under the title "How Bad Was Jezebel," she concludes:

Yet there is much to admire in this ancient queen. In a kinder analysis, Jezebel emerges as a fiery and determined person, with an intensity matched only by Elijah's. She is true to her native religion and customs. She is even more loyal to her husband. Throughout her reign, she boldly exercises what power she has. And in the end, having lived her life on her own terms, Jezebel faces certain death with dignity.¹¹

⁶For comprehensive bibliographies on Jezebel, and especially in the framework of 1 Kgs 21, see the bibliographies in Patrick T. Cronauer, *The Stories about Naboth the Jezreelite: A Source, Composition, and Redaction Investigation of 1 Kings 21 and Passages in 2 Kings 9*, LHBOTS 424 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); and D. Pruijn, *Geschichten und Geschichte: Isabel als literarische und historische Gestalt*, OBO 222 (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

⁷Tina Pippin, "Jezebel Re-Vamped," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 196–206; and, in the same volume, Zafrira ben Barak, "The Status and Right of the G^abīrā," 170–85.

⁸Phyllis Tribble, "Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers," *JBL* 114 (1995): 3–19.

⁹Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday 1998), 117, 147, 161, and passim; basically ch. 3, "On Queen Mothers," 128–80.

¹⁰Janet Howe Gaines, *Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel through the Ages* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999).

¹¹Janet Howe Gaines, "How Bad Was Jezebel?" *Bible History Daily* (June 2010), reprinted in *BRev* October 2000 and June 2013, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/2013>.

Fair enough. Although the word “yet” begins the author’s conclusion, which somewhat whitewashes Jezebel, the fact remains: most of the article is about the men in Jezebel’s life—Ahab and Elijah—not about the Jezebel figure.

Patricia Dutcher-Walls titled her 2004 book *Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen*, and writes explicitly about the need to reassess Jezebel’s negative evaluation in the biblical text.¹² Judith McKinlay, in *Reframing Her* (2004), devotes two chapters to Jezebel, reassessing separately her figure and her fate in 1 Kings and in 2 Kings.¹³ In *The Jezebel Letters* (2005), Eleanor Ferris Beach gives Jezebel an autobiographical voice in royal and private correspondence.¹⁴ In the provocatively titled *Jezebel: The Untold Story of the Bible’s Harlot Queen* (2007), Lesley Hazleton continues the trend of rehabilitating Jezebel as a queen and the epitome of tolerance and law observance, pitted against the prophet Elijah and his exclusive zeal.¹⁵

Moving on to hot-off-the-press articles, a recent issue of the Israeli scholarly periodical *Beit Miqra’* (60 [2015]), published in Hebrew, is titled *The Affair of Naboth’s Vineyard: 1 Kings 21*.¹⁶ Three of the contributors (Yairah Amit, Moshe Garsiel, and Yosef Fleishman) are more interested in literary analysis and in Naboth than in Jezebel. Talia Sutskover is interested in space. For these writers, 1 Kgs 21 is mainly the story of Naboth, not of Jezebel or of Naboth and Jezebel or of Jezebel and Naboth. Yael Shemesh, who does put Jezebel in the center of her essay, nevertheless pleads squarely against the “feminist” trend of whitewashing Jezebel of her biblical sins. This issue of *Beit Miqra’* opens with an article entitled “An Ancient Winery in Jezreel,” by Norma Franklin, Jennie Ebeling, and Philippe Guillaume, which again has not much to do with Jezebel but is about vineyards and wineries from the archaeological viewpoint and about ancient Jezreel, now being excavated (to which I will return later). Franklin, who is the codirector (with Ebeling) of the current Jezreel dig, actually connects the dig’s finds to Jezebel in her 2008 article, “Jezreel before and after Jezebel.”¹⁷ On the whole, this adds a new dimension to the study of the pericope.

¹²Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen*, Interfaces (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), esp. xviii, on the negative assessment of Jezebel in the biblical text.

¹³Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus*, Bible in the Modern World 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004), 57–95.

¹⁴Eleanor Ferris Beach, *The Jezebel Letters: Religion and Politics in Ninth-Century Israel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

¹⁵Lesley Hazleton, *Jezebel: The Untold Story of the Bible’s Harlot Queen* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). This approach seems to owe much to Phyllis Tribble’s work while taking it one step further.

¹⁶The articles in this issue include the following: Norma Franklin, Jennie Ebeling, and Philippe Guillaume, “An Ancient Winery in Jezreel,” 9–18; Yairah Amit, “Design and Meaning in the Story of Naboth,” 19–36; Moshe Garsiel, “A Literary Analysis of the Sinners and Their Punishment,” 37–64; Talia Sutskover, “Space and Its Meaning in Naboth’s Story,” 65–91; Yosef Fleishman, “Ahab’s Request and Naboth’s Response,” 92–116; Yael Shemesh, “A Gendered View,” 117–40.

¹⁷See Norma Franklin, “Jezreel before and after Jezebel,” in *Israel in Transition: From Late*

The contributors to this *Beit Miqra'* issue, for the most part, do not find Jezebel to be an impressive character. Other scholars, however, view her as an important figure. Guillaume, one of the Jezreel archaeologists, redeems Jezebel's reputation on the basis of ancient Near Eastern land tenure laws, reading Naboth as the irregular practitioner and Jezebel as the original heroine of the story.¹⁸ In another essay, Guillaume further details the necessity for an Israelite king in Jezreel in the Neo-Assyrian era to control a vineyard and winery such as the one found in the dig. He notes changes to the original biblical story that were probably made in order to obscure this necessity.¹⁹ The opposite view, justifying Naboth's refusal to sell his land by a "theology of attachment"—hence condemning Jezebel by implication—is advanced by Stephen Russell (2014).²⁰ Like Guillaume, Anne Marie Kitz (2015) appeals to ancient Near Eastern documents, in her case from Mari and El Amarna, but her result upholds the anti-Jezebel stance of the biblical text. She concludes:

On the basis of the evidence adduced, this study concludes that 1 Kgs 21 records an incident of *karsī akālu* without using the expression, and suggests that Jezebel's acts are not the product of authorial imagination but reflect features of the ancient Near Eastern practice of denunciation.²¹

In a forthcoming article, Gilbert Okuro Ojwang takes up Naboth's biblical position as well, here in the context of contemporary Kenyan land laws.²² At the 2013 annual meeting of SBL, members of the Minoritized Criticism group addressed the issue of land claims from opposing angles, either with Naboth against Ahab/Jezebel or with Ahab/Jezebel against Naboth.²³

Siding with Naboth, or Elijah, is obviously siding with the biblical story as narrated in the MT and against Jezebel. In contrast, three recent pieces show an interest in rehabilitating Jezebel's reputation: Gale Yee's "Coveting the Vineyard: An Asian American Reading of 1 Kings 21," from an American-Chinese perspective,

Bronze II to Iron IIA (c. 1250–850 B.C.E.), ed. Lester L. Grabbe, 2 vols., LHBOTS 491, 521 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008–2010), 2:45–53.

¹⁸Philippe Guillaume, "Naboth's Vineyard," <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/naboths-vineyard-1-kgs-21.aspx>.

¹⁹Philippe Guillaume, "Naboth the Nabob: A View from Assyrian Jezreel," *UF* 46 (2015): 161–82.

²⁰Stephen C. Russell, "Ideologies of Attachment in the Story of Naboth's Vineyard," *BTB* 44 (2014): 29–39.

²¹Anne Marie Kitz, "Naboth's Vineyard after Mari and Amarna," *JBL* 134 (2015): 529–45, here 529.

²²Gilbert Okuro Ojwang, "Juridical Impotence in the Naboth Story in the Context of Kenya's New Land Laws," in a forthcoming volume on the historical books in the Texts@Contexts series, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Archie C. C. Lee (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016).

²³Thanks to Gale Yee, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando Segovia for the details about the session.

and Fernando Candido da Silva's "To Whom Do Jezebel's Remains Belong," from a Brazilian angle,²⁴ and Jennifer Koosed's "Death of Jezebel." Koosed concludes:

Consumed by animals, Jezebel becomes an animal; her dehumanization is complete. She is a foreign woman, a powerful queen, and a worshiper of deities other than Yahweh. She is ethnically and religiously different, transgresses proper gender roles, and is therefore a danger. The death and destruction of Jezebel eradicates the Other in order to protect and preserve the proper Israelite community.²⁵

My Personal Conclusion

My sentiments exactly. Jezebel is made animalistic by the text. If we concur with this image, if we explain it away, if we justify it on moral or theological grounds, if we claim to "empathize" with it, we become animals by contagion. This is also a good place to remind ourselves that for some reason Jehu accuses Jezebel of sorcery and much harlotry (2 Kgs 9:22). This new accusation is often explained away by Jezebel's religion, or her quasi-divine pose at the window, like an Asherah or another fertility goddess, or by her makeup. We would do well, however, to remember that independent women characters, those not attached to male protectors such as husbands or fathers, are often labeled "whore" in the Hebrew bible. Think about Rahab (Josh 2 and 6), or Jephthah's mother (Judg 11), or the two mothers who come to King Solomon for judgment concerning their babies (1 Kgs 3). Think about that, and be aware that this may be the biblical verdict on unattached powerful females; and it's your choice to merely understand the social assumptions underlying such a portrayal, or to go one step further and attempt to justify it in your reception of the story and of its history.

Traveling with Jezebel

Let me share with you what I've learned from traveling this road with Jezebel. While this voyage has not changed my own reading of her, it has spurred some meta-reflections.

I read chronologically, from older pieces to newer research. First and foremost was my realization of a change in style from academic writing several decades ago to the present. Academic writing has become more personal, less dry, and less pretentious. This trend is by no means universal but is gaining ground. Academic work is perhaps no longer evaluated mainly on the length and complexity of end-notes or footnotes. A welcome change, long overdue. May its practitioners prosper.

Now to the contents. Tangible interest in a counter-reading of Jezebel was and

²⁴The articles by Yee and Candido da Silva will appear in the forthcoming volume mentioned in n. 22 above.

²⁵Jennifer Koosed, "Death of Jezebel," <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/death-of-jezebel.aspx>.

is shown almost exclusively by openly feminist critics. This is clearly demonstrated from the mid-1980s onward by the confluence of the flourishing of feminist biblical criticism and Jezebel studies. Interest in biblical women's stories, with the goal of re-visioning them, has quickly moved from the matriarchs to less dominant or important figures. "Reading against the grain"²⁶ has served Jezebel and similar figures (such as Athaliah) well. This undertaking went beyond the anger of the first wave of feminist critics and the primary reassessment of women's place in law and society and was carried out almost exclusively by female critics and readers. Close reading of the MT took precedence over older methods of text criticism and dating. Such approaches are linked to the newly legitimized practice of literary theory, inasmuch as they are offshoots of the desire for female empowerment through bible study, a wish present in the field ever since Elizabeth Cady Stanton's and her co-editors' *The Woman's Bible* of the late nineteenth century. This strategy of combining (post)modern literary theories and feminist theories was later coupled with the increasingly accepted trends in bible research such as centralizing the marginalized and doing ideological criticism, including contextual and autobiographical approaches. Facilitating interpretation from the interpreter's place (thanks to Fernando Segovia, our previous SBL president, among others) enables postcolonial readings to be as valid at the very least as chronological readings (for some), and as a result enhances the bible's relevance for modern readers, for better and for worse, as equally a positive and a negative teacher.

Here enters the source of a long-standing bind. In many ways it's easy to picture Naboth's imagined attachment to his ancestral land as "natural" and to empathize with it: it's easier for both haves and have-nots, each group from a different perspective. This has the advantage of collaborating with scriptures, a comfortable ethical stance for conservatives—and to be sure, this would imply a stance against Jezebel. At the same time, however, this would be an axis for contemplation for more radical postcolonial and ethnically minor readings, whose business it is as well to appropriate the text for their own agendas. It seems to me a sign of the times, and research tendencies, that the Israeli interpretations in *Beit Miqra'* tend to justify Naboth's stand as moored in custom or divinely inspired entitlement, while minoritized readings focus on the land question from other angles of loss and, yet again, entitlement. Clearly, if Naboth's refusal to sell his land is indeed anchored in pentateuchal laws as we have them, or his voice is that of a suppressed minority, then Jezebel's action is morally abhorrent, just as described. Otherwise, the opposite is the case: competing claims for land are in play here, when all players—including Naboth—may represent various ethnic and class interests, indigenous as well as others. This is so especially if ancient Near Eastern materials are adduced to

²⁶ It is wonderful to see that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose tireless practice of "reading against the grain" was and is so influential in feminist biblical criticism, now uses the expression in the title of her recent book *1 Peter: Reading against the Grain*, Phoenix Guides to the New Testament (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015).

illuminate the practices. In any event, the politically charged issue of land/territory ownership and control may overshadow feminist concerns in some interpretations.

Archaeology in the Guild, and the Gender Issue

This brings us to the issue of archaeology. Archaeology in the so-called biblical lands is always used to buttress or refute claims made in the bible. Archaeologists themselves are never free of personal ideology, in the same way that the biblical authors were not free of it. They inevitably dig with a bible in one hand and a proverbial shovel in the other, even if they claim not to.

A massive winery structure has recently been uncovered in Jezreel: it is impressive. (Thanks to Norma Franklin and Jennie Ebeling for inviting me to see it.) Is this Naboth's processing plant for his ancestral vineyard, mentioned in 1 Kgs 21? Who knows? It may or may not be, but at the very least, this find raises questions about the biblical text. There might have been a vineyard; if so, a winery nearby makes perfect sense. If so, the necessity for the king to take possession of it is strong: armies need food before wine and food needs to be grown on available land. If so, Naboth's refusal may be far from ideological—it might even be a shrewd or manipulative negotiation starter. If so, Jezebel's actions as narrated may be morally questionable but politically sound. If so, the apparent quotation of Ahab's words to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard so that I can make it into a *vegetable garden* because it's near my house" (my translation, 1 Kgs 21:2) may be understood as reflecting a need expressed by a king responsible for feeding his employees rather than as a childish royal whim.

So this dig, directed by two woman colleagues, may help us further grasp the situation that underlies the subtext of 1 Kgs 21, as in Guillaume's analysis. It may help us understand how an apparent conflict over land between local and foreign systems of governance stems from the realia of food/drink supply to a king's court or stronger still, his army. By implication, such an understanding emerging from archaeological finds would contribute to accepting Jezebel's motives, even if not to vindicating her methods.

Having explored this possibility, one should note that unearthing the winery is but one of the preliminary and tentative results of the Jezreel expedition project. Unfortunately, not many archaeological projects in "biblical" territories are directed or codirected by women. Ebeling observes that fewer than 30 percent of projects are directed or codirected by qualified female archaeologists; she sets out the financial difficulties involved and is skeptical—together with others interviewed for her survey—about imminent change in this situation.²⁷

It has been argued here that female interest in female characters—Jezebel, in the present instance—advances our comprehension not only of female biblical

²⁷ Jennie Ebeling, "Where Are the Female Dig Directors in Israel?" *Bible and Interpretation* (May 2011), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/ebeling358011.shtml>.

figures but also of biblical texts that contain their stories or references to them. It is high time that we started thinking, and acting, not only about the female biblical figures we would like to reinterpret, or re-vision, but also about their female interpreters, in and beyond literary and cultural/literary praxis. In other words, the feminist project, or projects, has revolutionized biblical studies in recent decades, whether you like it or not. It has ushered in new approaches, new possibilities, new legitimations. Most of this work, although not all, has been done by women scholars. Let us recognize this not only in word but also in deed, by letting female scholars move forward, with responsibility, in their chosen fields. We shall then reap the rewards of extending power, responsibility, and interpretation beyond white male supremacy.

SBL and Social Media

These are tech times, media times. So even though Jezebel has been dragged through history and text reception as an icon of evil, she's recently been commemorated on the Internet as something else. The Jezebel.com blog/website/magazine, launched in 2008, defines itself as a feminist blog that mixes a salad of news, politics, fashion, sex, gossip, and many other topics that would appeal to female readers. The site's popularity and its huge readership may be attributed to its combination of seriousness and lightness, gravitas and fun, lowbrow and highbrow. I doubt whether many of its readers spare a thought for its biblical eponym or even make the connection with her. It gives me pleasure, however, that Jezebel the queen, princess, mother has been so morphed into a commercial mast of sorts for contemporary woman readers.

Jezebel.com has its Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, as is the order of the day. And this reminds me. Not too long ago a serious bible scholar wouldn't dream of having social media accounts: some still don't. But things have changed rapidly in the last decade: "subjective" lightness of manner is appreciated as it is being ushered in and "objective" pretense is being ushered out, even in our venerable and staid guild. Biblical scholars, lo and behold, are now allowed to display their nature as social animals, never mind their chronological age. Most colleagues I know do have a Facebook account at least. It's a matter of taste and temperament whether you want to post photos of food and children and private messages or whether you appreciate this platform as a fast and relatively safe space to exchange professional and academic information in an informal manner. I prefer the second option. And because of that I lament the fact that the SBL still doesn't have an official Facebook page. I hope this will be rectified in the very near future, since this is not only necessary in the present cultural climate but also wished for by many SBL members.

There is another reason to urge the SBL to have an official Facebook page. This past summer (2015) an unofficial Facebook group that affiliated itself with SBL was

closed down because someone—one hopes a troll—displayed pornographic contents on it. A new group page sprang forth immediately. It's not clear who the initiator was, and if "he" was real or fictive: an SBL member "he" was not. Some of you may remember, fondly or otherwise. The discussion threads quickly degenerated into baiting sessions and shaming matches between confessional and nonconfessional scholars, female and male scholars, evangelicals and others, and so on. Clearly good summer fun, all in the name of true scholarship of course: I wonder how people who participated in this carnival found the time. Eventually things got so out of hand that the group shut down and a new, closed, moderated, but still unofficial group called "Annual Meeting Hotel Lobby: An Unofficial SBL/AAR Member Group" was organized on its wreckage. This group now has nearly five hundred members but is relatively tame.²⁸

Who initiated and maintained the summer Facebook group, with its heated confessional/nonconfessional and gender controversies and rude insults? Who resorted to pseudonyms? Who wrote under their actual names? This is not clear: perhaps it was somebody's research experiment via fictitious operators, as some maintain; perhaps not. At any rate, this should be taken seriously as well as with humor. One of the aspects of this phenomenon, admittedly hilarious at times and such fun, was and remains the defining of biblical scholarship for today and the SBL's role in it. Yes, the SBL has a "Big Tent" approach: its membership includes females (not enough!) and males and in-between; many ethnic varieties; internationals, not only Americans; conservatives and liberals and in-between; confessionals of many hues and creeds; and nonreligious to areligious people. In an era that, finally and triumphantly, is beginning to acknowledge ideological varieties as legitimate constituents of bible interpretation, the "Big Tent" approach should be both essential and subject to renegotiation. Essential, since the recognition of variety is mandatory for the vitality of any viable social or professional institution; but also subject to renegotiation, since traces of privilege for confessional approaches should have no more space in the present research climate than other ideologically inspired approaches. Confessionalism is not an honor badge (and neither is secularism, for that matter, let's face it). As people, as scholars, let us maintain our differences if we must but not behave as a guild of hunting and hunted animals.

Finale

.שבעים פנים לתורה. Loosely translated, this Jewish dictum would mean, "the Torah has many faces." This is indeed true: possibilities of interpretation are many, although not unlimited. The bible neither "speaks" nor "says" anything. We, its

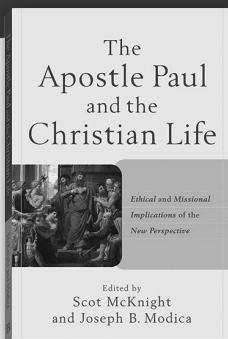
²⁸What I write here should not be understood as an objection in principle to affiliated, unofficial Facebook pages; together with blogs by SBL members, such pages evidence members' interest in the Society's activities and goals. My point is, of course, the praxis of behavior and ethical standards.

interpreters, do. The bible belongs to everybody and to nobody. It's time that we make space for secularized scholarship and stop privileging confessionalism of any creed as more scholarly, or more acceptable, or more correct because it's considered emic, not etic. On the other hand, the place for confessional scholars—and again, of any creed—should be negotiated inside the Society, not pushed outside it. This, as I see it, will be one of SBL's important tasks in the near future. Not a simple task by any means. In sum, the less we subscribe to prejudice and to notions of privilege, the better our work will become.

This comes to you from a born-Jewish feminist who is totally areligious or, if you wish, nonreligious, a self-styled secularist with only traces of Jewish tribalism and tradition. Yet I am an ardent Hebrew bible student. My historical and present and perhaps also future identity hangs on this collection of books which is part of my specific cultural heritage. The bible justifies little in my everyday life—not in the usual sense of “justify”—yet it matters greatly, even in practical ways. Trying to understand the bible as it was, although a thankless and impossible undertaking, matters as well. And the bible's reception history matters. Ultimately it matters because it's a foundational religious text, I dare say, not just because parts of it are great literature. Religion cannot be ignored; it's that enormous elephant standing there and sometimes moving in unforeseen ways. Consequently, that text—although it's not a sacred text to me—does impact my life, daily. If I ignore it, if I reject it as invalid, I do so at my peril. And against my culture and curiosity, of course. So what remains is to study it for past interpretations and to create new ones.

Yes, the bible matters. And what happened and happens to Jezebel the biblical figure, historical or otherwise, matters as well. Look where she led us! And thank you all for your patience.

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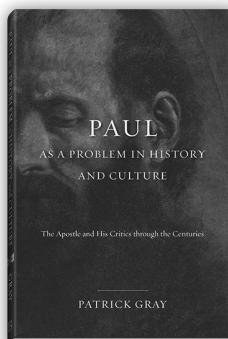
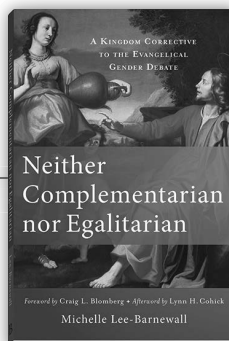
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