



JEZEBEL

The untold story of the Bible's Harlot Queen

by Lesley Hazleton

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Jezebel, from first chapter:

She is not conventionally beautiful. She is, rather, utterly striking. The long, aquiline nose, the heavy, shaped eyebrows, the proud, almost disdainful set to her mouth, all speak of a young woman born to wield authority, used to being obeyed. Except by sleep.

She wakes in the night with her throat parched and dust in her nostrils. It's been just a few hours since her attendants sprinkled the floor with citron-scented water to freshen the air, but the relief hasn't lasted. The heavy tapestries on the walls hold the heat, and now it seems to close in on her. She needs to get out into the open air. Perhaps there she can breathe free.

The truth is she has not slept through the night since she arrived in this landlocked kingdom, though it would be beneath her to complain of it. She was born a princess royal, after all, the leading daughter of the first great maritime empire in the world, and everything about her declares her status. The regal carriage of long neck and straight spine, the head held high so that she seems

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tall even by modern standards, the fluid motion as she rises and drapes a deep purple robe over her shoulders -- she is every inch the aristocrat.

This is Jezebel at age fifteen, newly arrived in Samaria for her wedding to Ahab, the king of Israel. The week-long celebration of her marriage is nearing its end. In the morning, she will be crowned queen, and she and Ahab will become husband and wife. She is not sure if this is something she wants or dreads.

A peacock's cry, that's what woke her. She hears it again, the long mournful high-pitched sound echoing through the stone courtyards, as though the creature had to pay for being so beautiful to look at by being so discomforting to listen to.

She steps carefully, barefoot. If she is quiet, she can have this time to herself, and be alone for the first time since she left Tyre. The maidservants lying on the floor at the foot of her bed stir, but don't wake. The sleeping eunuchs outside the doors guard a chamber empty of royalty as she heads for the stairs to the tower of the western gate. In the light of the full moon, perhaps she can catch a glimpse of the sea.

She can never let anyone know how much she misses that great expanse of water. Her lungs long for the rhythmic breath of it, her ears for the sounds of seabirds wheeling above it. Tyre was an island city, surrounded by water, and only now, in its absence, does she realize how the sea has cradled her life.

There are sea people and there are hill people, she thinks, and she is a sea person marooned in a country of hill people. Even the way they speak reflects the harshness of the hills -- the Phoenician and the Israelite languages so close, essentially different dialects of the same tongue, yet so different to the ear.

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Where the Phoenician is soft and sibilant, like lapping water, the Israelite Hebrew carries the harshness of stone and dust. It is the dialect of a warrior people.

She took water for granted in Tyre. It splashed in fountains in the palace courtyards and the temple forecourts; idled mirror-like in ornamental pools planted with lotus, the flower of the great goddess Astarte; was poured gracefully from silver jugs into glass goblets filled with fresh mint. The sweetest water to drink, soft and refreshing. Yes, she thinks, even the water was gentle.

Here in Samaria, it tastes hard, like the stone it comes out of. Here, nobody can take water for granted. They live in constant fear of its absence, in terror of drought and the starvation that accompanies it. How not, when their god Yahweh seems to use it as a weapon, threatening to withhold it? He is so like and yet so unlike Phoenicia's Baal Shamem, the Lord of the Skies. Both gods ride the storm-clouds. Both carry lightning bolts in their chariots. Both speak in thunder. They could be brothers, even twins. But no, this Yahweh of Israel turns his back on all the other gods and rules alone in this land -- the one and only Israelite god. Jezebel thinks it all very strange. Surely the more gods you acknowledge, the safer you are in the world they rule? How could there ever be too many gods? But she is willing to respect the Israelites' choice. When you believe in many gods, you respect those of other people, even if they only have one. It has never occurred to her before that the tolerance might not be mutual.

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Only sixty-five miles separate Samaria from Tyre, as the crow flies. But humans are not crows, not now and not then. Culture shock is too mild a term

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for what Jezebel must have experienced on arrival in this hilltop city. So far as she was concerned, she was in the boondocks. In one stroke, she had been cut off from the most sophisticated culture of her time, never to return. But no-one who had laid eyes on Tyre, let alone lived there, could ever forget it.

Physically, the island city was simply stunning. Its name means "The Rock" -- *Tsor* in both Phoenician and Hebrew -- and the legend is that it was formed when two rocks were joined together by the roots of a sacred olive tree. But in this case, not even legend could match reality. It made such an impression not only because it was so magnificent that even its enemies sang its praises, but because it was so utterly improbable. There was nothing like it in the world of the time. There still is not.

From the mainland, Tyre seemed to float in the middle of the sea, a white city rising straight up out of the water with marble walls a hundred and fifty feet high - - the glass skyscrapers of its time -- and inside the walls, the ornate gilded roofs of the royal palace and great temples. The jewel of the Mediterranean, they called it: an island half a mile long and almost as wide, reached by a six-hundred-yard-long arched viaduct that looked as though it were riding the waves like a line of white dolphins.

People wrote in praise of Tyre throughout the known world, from the Greek historian Herodotus to the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, who detailed its grandeur all the better to savor its eventual fall. "Haughty Tyre," he called it, "swollen with pride," yet even he seemed to delight in its glittering ostentation. And its power.

The heart of the island city was the source of its wealth: two deep-water harbors hewn out of the rock and protected by fifty-foot-wide breakwaters in a feat of engineering that would be unparalleled for hundreds of years. One harbor faced north, the other south. Whichever way the wind was blowing, the square-sailed Phoenician trading ships could always make it safely into port. No waiting offshore for the wind to change, no danger of foundering on the rocky reefs -- Tyrian captains were so expert that they took their ships right into harbor with sails aloft. Their skill was as legendary as the island itself, their wealth so great that rumor had it their anchors were made of solid silver.

The city that rose up out of the sea, lived by the sea. The Phoenicians didn't just control the maritime trade routes of the Mediterranean; they created them. They were the first to chart the currents and gain speed by them; the first to navigate by the North Star so that they could sail by night; the first to use triangulation, taking readings off headlands and mountains to establish their exact position and progress. They ventured where no ships had ever dared set sail before, beyond the Mediterranean and into the open Atlantic through the narrow mouth of the Mediterranean known first as the Pillars of Melqart, then by the Greeks as the Pillars of Hercules, and in the end, placidly secularized, as the Strait of Gibraltar.

This is how a tiny island state with few natural resources makes its fortune and its name: it creates the first great maritime trading empire. It brings down cedars from the mountains to build huge round-hulled ships, and sends those ships out to trade. It picks up gold in Africa and works it into jewelry. Brings in raw silk and

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linens, and dyes them exquisite shades of red and purple. Buys rare spices and resins and sells them on. It bases its wealth on the principle of added value: import raw materials, export luxury goods. And it becomes a brilliant exception to the conquer-and-enslave policy of other empires of its time, conquering by trade instead of by force. A very modern kind of empire.

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Jezebel had left behind the most sophisticated civilization of her time, and Israel inevitably suffered by comparison. It cannot have been an easy transition. As proud and arrogant as the glittering city she came from, she may have been about to become queen, but with the sea only a distant shimmer in the light of the dying moon, she surely felt more like a hostage of politics.

Soon enough, her maidservants would bathe and perfume her with the musky scents of cassia and sandalwood. They'd part her hair into heavy braided tresses, then catch the tresses up in gold chains and loop them through a gem-studded diadem until her head was as dressed as her body. They'd paint her brows into high arches, rim her eyes heavily in kohl, whiten her face into a regal mask. Then they'd place her finest gold-embroidered robe over her shoulders; hang heavy gold loops in her ears; tighten a wide choker of gold and gems around her neck; slip on anklets and bracelets, toe rings and finger rings -- heavy, chunky jewelry that would weigh her down, and so force her to stand all the taller in defiance of gravity, raising her head high to appear weightless.

And if there was an anxious teenage girl behind the mask of make-up and finery, no-one would see it. If all she wanted was to flee this stark place and

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return to her element, the sea, that was something no-one would ever know. No matter how she may have wished she had never left Tyre, here in this landlocked kingdom was where the gods had determined she must be. What her father envisaged -- the two nations bonded, strengthening each other -- this would be her marriage. She would make it work.

She was young enough to imagine that everything was possible. That alliance could replace separatism. Pragmatism replace ideology. Trade replace bloodshed.