



## JEZEBEL

The untold story of the Bible's Harlot Queen

by Lesley Hazleton

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Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Doubleday (October 16, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0385516142

ISBN-13: 978-0385516143

### Elijah, from third chapter

Word of the prophet's arrival had spread like wildfire through the city. The reception chamber was packed, and you could sense the tension in the mass of subdued voices. Many doubtless reveled in the anticipation of confrontation. The very fact of Elijah's appearance was a guarantee of drama; the prospect of two great authorities -- royal and divine -- in direct confrontation was just too good to be missed. Others, more sophisticated, quailed. If Elijah appeared out of the blue like this, it could bode nothing good.

Yet the moment she laid eyes on the man, Jezebel's first impulse was to break out into mocking laughter. This was the great Israelite prophet whose name she'd heard spoken with such fear and trembling? All she saw was an emaciated wreck of a man whose clothes -- if clothes they could even be called -- were mere pelts, still ripe with the blood of the animals they'd come from. His long matted hair was tangled with filth, his beard a mass of knots, his teeth stained brown by the carobs she'd heard he lived off -- honey and locusts, they'd say in

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centuries to come, not realizing that carobs were the fruit of the honey-locust tree.

She took in the gnarled fingers clenched around a coarse wooden staff; the long jagged fingernails curled and yellowed with neglect; the eyes burning with fever, or perhaps fervor -- they were after all much the same thing. What kind of man would do this to himself? A delusional man, surely. A creature to be sorry for, to turn gently away with scraps from the table. A pitiable creature, teased by young boys and stoned by adolescent bullies.

She didn't laugh, of course. She had far too much self-control to give in to such an impulse. But she gathered the silk folds of her robe close about her with a slight shudder, as though the prophet's very presence could contaminate her. He didn't belong here, in her court, her domain. He was an intrusion, an apparition from a world that was the antithesis of hers. And she could see in his eyes that he knew it. That this was precisely why he was here.

Not even the king's guards had dared deny him entry into the main reception hall of the Samarian palace. If there was an element of derision in the way they looked at him, there was also awe. They may have wanted to snicker at his looks and his garb, at his uncouth speech and unkempt hair, but it seemed there was a power in him that they dared not challenge. He had the aura of a man appointed by the divine, one who heard the voice of their god and transmitted it to them. And his wretched appearance worked only to strengthen this charismatic aura. His primitive clothing was the sign of holiness not in the sense

of modesty and humility -- no barefoot Franciscan, this -- but as a deliberate and calculated slap in the face of all human authority and custom.

Jezebel took her cue from her husband, who sat stoic and blank-faced beside her. There was no way to deny Elijah access, she could see that. Not even as popular a king as Ahab could close out this fearsome a prophet. The court priests could be appointed and fired; they were courtiers first and foremost, their livelihoods dependent on telling those in power what they wanted to hear. They had been tamed. But Elijah was downright feral.

There was no such thing as compromise for him. No recognition of any authority other than Yahweh. He was the *Navi* -- literally, one who is called. Called, that is, to defend the divine law. And this calling made him untouchable by human law, as he made quite plain. He'd walked on in to the reception chamber with the stride of a man half his age, as though he were the true king of this palace and Ahab a mere imposter. Now he stood unbending before the throne -- not so much as a nod of the head, let alone a deep bow or full prostration in the royal presence. It almost seemed that he expected the king to bow to him.

That unyielding back, that stiff neck permitting not so much as a nod of deference, that fierce unblinking stare out of reddened dust-rimmed eyes -- though Jezebel was loathe to admit it, this prophet unnerved her. So if her first impulse had been laughter, her second was fury. How dare he! How dare he bring the stink of the wild into this small haven of civilization? How dare he present himself at court filthy and unkempt? How dare he flaunt his disrespect?

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And then those fierce eyes focused on her, and she saw not just the hatred in them -- that, she'd expected -- but a delight in that hatred, in the blood-pumping, energizing urgency of it. And this took her off guard. What had she ever done to him, she thought, to attract such intense animosity? What strange kind of world did he inhabit in which he was brought to life by this hate-fueled zeal? What stark and cruel land had he come from?

\* \* \*

The image of Elijah is indeed that of a stark man from a cruel land. Yet compared to the west bank of the Jordan Valley, his native Gilead on the east bank of the river is the image of fertility.

In only fifteen miles, the land rises sharply from the River Jordan at five hundred feet below sea level to pine-forested hills three thousand feet above. After that, it gives way to the great desert steppes that run five hundred miles east into Mesopotamia. But for these first few miles, it is a rare haven of greenness, home to vineyards and olive groves and fig orchards. Rivers rush white-watered through deep chasms. Peer over the edge and you can see the lush tangle of reeds hundreds of feet below, and hear the water roaring through as though it were cutting the gorge deeper even as you stand there. Come here as I did across the Jordan, and you can't help thinking how absurd it is that there be so much conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over the dry and barren west bank of the river, when these lush hills are just a few miles away on the east bank. The air itself seems fresh and fragrant compared to the perennial dust of the other side. But first impressions are not always the best.

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"Go up unto Gilead, and take balm," Jeremiah would write, only to taunt his listeners: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" He knew the answer, of course. There is indeed no balm in Gilead, not in his time and not today either. Wherever I asked in the markets, nobody had even heard of Gilead -- that's the ancient biblical name, so it doesn't appear on modern Jordanian maps -- and the only balm I could find was Indian tiger balm.

I was there in May, when a strong but soothing breeze rises out of the west just as the late afternoon heat begins to wear on you, and lasts into the evening. Natural air-conditioning, you think appreciatively. But this early summer comfort is deceptive, people told me. Imagine it here in winter, they said, when that refreshing breeze becomes a relentless biting wind, funneled up through the gorges with bitter cold and even snow for weeks at a time, until it feels like the whole land is howling at you. Come back then, they said, and you'll see how harsh it can be. But the harshness was already waiting for me when I set out to find the place where Elijah was born.

I was lucky to have a guide. De'eb was born and raised in Gilead, an amiable and generous man whose name -- "wolf" in Arabic -- seemed quite incongruous. When he heard that I was going to Tel Mar Elias -- the *tel* of Master Elijah -- he laughed at the very idea that I might be able to find it myself, and insisted on coming with me. He was right; signposts are all but nonexistent on Jordan's back roads, and if I'd found the place at all, it would only have been after hours of misdirection. And even then, as often happens in the Middle East, I'd have been in the wrong place.

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Tel Mar Elias is on one of the highest hills in Gilead, and the view west over the Jordan Valley and into Palestine and Israel is stunning. The whole of the hilltop is covered with the remains of a large Byzantine church, and many of the mosaic floors are still intact, so that you look down to find fourteen-hundred-year-old pictures of grape arbors and wine goblets beneath your feet. On the western side, a magnificent oak overhangs the entrance to a deep well, its shade a perfect place to sit and reflect that this site has both the peace and the grandeur that seem appropriate to a place where a great prophet was born and raised. It's easy to see why the Byzantines declared that this was Elijah's birthplace and chose to build their church here and not on the lower hill of Listib just a few hundred yards to the west.

You would never notice Listib unless you knew to look for it, and even then the eye wants to skip over it, to rest on the wheat fields and orchards and gorges surrounding it, not on this ungainly blot on the landscape. A small mound criss-crossed with dirt tracks that today is home to a half-dozen mud-brick hovels, it turns out to be the leading candidate for the honor of being Elijah's actual birthplace.

So when De'eb and I got back to my rental car at Tel Mar Elias, I took the narrow asphalt lane leading towards Listib. I didn't think to check with my passenger. To come so far and not stand on the place where Elijah was born was inconceivable to me. But not to De'eb. So far as he was concerned, the view from the Byzantine ruins was as close as anyone would ever want to get.

"No way," he said with alarm when he realized where we were heading. "There are dogs there, and I'm afraid of dogs."

It seemed absurd that a man named for a wolf should be afraid of dogs, but De'eb was deadly serious. We negotiated. "Okay, but I'm not setting foot outside this car," he said, and on that understanding, I turned onto a dirt track and started up the hill. Which is when the dogs appeared.

They seemed to come out of nowhere, five or six of them -- in the panic of the moment there wasn't really time to count. Some were pure white, others mottled, and it was immediately clear that they were built and they moved like wolves, not mere dogs. They were wild wolf-dogs, that is, and clearly more wolf than dog.

They blocked the track, snarling ferociously, wild-eyed and jittery. It needed no imagination to see those teeth ripping an arm from your body and coming back for more. Then without warning we were surrounded by them. They launched themselves at the car -- at the wheels, onto the hood, at the windows, which I managed to get closed just in time. They yelped as they bounced off the sheet metal and then hurled themselves back into the one-sided fray, claws searching for purchase. In front of me, open jaws spattered drool on the windshield. To one side, fangs loomed inches from my eyes. To the other, De'eb was bent double, his head buried in his hands.

I looked for someone to call off the attack, but there didn't seem to be a single person around. No washing hanging out to dry, no chickens or donkeys or any of the other signs of human habitation. So far as I could tell, the mud-brick hovels were abandoned, and the wolf-dogs owned the hill.

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The car's metal casing suddenly seemed very fragile. With no room to turn on the narrow track, I finally regained my senses and backed down from the fray and off that hill as fast as I dared while I still had air in the tires. The wolf-dogs kept up the attack as far as the asphalt, then ranged themselves in a row at the threshold of the dirt track, barring it. They were snarling and panting but no longer attacking, their pose that of zealous guardians who had successfully defended their territory.

De'eb just stared at me, eyes wide open with fear, shaking his head. I only started shaking as I drove away, when I realized I no longer had any doubt that this was where Elijah was born.