

**Interview with Lesley Hazleton, by Marsha Pincus, for  
selection of 'Jezebel' as 2008 book-club choice of AROHO  
(A Room of Her Own) Foundation**

**Marsha Pincus:** Lesley, I've just completed *Jezebel* and it was an exhilarating read! So much was happening in the narrative, on so many different levels. There is simultaneously a sense of history and a sense of immediacy. I was struck by the opening scene in the introduction in which a man you describe as suffering from the "Jerusalem syndrome" chases you down, yelling, "Jezebel, Jezebel, fornicating under the walls of God's holy city." It's as if the past and the present had been conflated. Does it feel like that often in Israel today?

**Lesley Hazleton:** God, yes! In the whole of the Middle East. In a sense, there *is* no history in the Middle East, that most history-soaked of areas, because all of history is so present.

**Marsha:** So this sense of the presentness of the past is what Jonathan Raban has called your "non-fiction magical realism." What do you think of that description of your work? Does it feel right to you?

**Lesley:** I love that phrase! Who wouldn't if it were said about her work? And yes it does feel right. There's a kind of alchemy of time just waiting to be tapped into when you've lived in Jerusalem (I lived there 13 years, from '66 to '79). Past and present conflate and intermingle in weird and wonderful ways. You can sit on the threshold of a house that was built three thousand years ago. Or a kid can offer you a two thousand year old coin he's just dug out of a hillside. Or a madman can accost you as you walk peaceably along Mount Zion, screaming that you're Jezebel...

**Marsha:** For me, as a reader, nowhere is that more evident than in the terrifying scene where you and your guide are attacked by a pack of feral wolf-dogs. Were you thinking about Jezebel and her unfortunate death at that moment?

**Lesley:** Ah, yes, those dogs. When it happened -- and it did happen just as I wrote it -- my first thought (once I'd stopped shaking and could actually think again) was 'Oh no, that was just too perfect -- I'll never be able to put that in the book, because nobody will believe me.' And then, to my surprise, it did work in the book after all. But yes, right after it happened, the association between those feral wolf dogs and the dogs that ate Jezebel was immediate.

**Marsha:** Almost like a warning from Elijah himself!

**Lesley:** Like a warning from Elijah? No, I didn't take it that way. But he was so fierce and zealous and territorial, those wolf-dogs seemed entirely in place on the hill where he was born. And no, if the next question is 'Did I feel like I was Jezebel?' The answer is

no -- I think you need to be able to identify with your subject, but not to that extent.

**Marsha:** This makes me wonder about the different voices that you used in this book -- You were writing in your own personal voice, and you were also writing in a more traditional non-fiction voice. Were you writing in Jezebel's voice as well?

**Lesley:** In her voice? Almost. I mean, large parts are written from Jezebel's point of view, which strictly speaking means they're fictional, since Jezebel is not around to tell me her point of view any longer. But I think of them as non-fiction -- as a re-creation of her point of view (and part of that is of course her voice). That is, they are the result of intensive historical research, and of applying what the new historians call 'the historical imagination' -- re-creating what happened. As I see it, none of this is made up. It *is* re-created, yes. Imagined, yes. But made up out of my own imagination? No.

**Marsha:** So is this how your work differs from Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*? It's possible that some people just seeing the cover might think it's the same kind of book.

**Lesley:** Oh God, that certainly wasn't the intention. I enjoyed *The Red Tent*, but I think my publishers' description of *Jezebel* as equal parts Elaine Pagels and Antonia Fraser is closer to the mark. In fact the book I was thinking of when writing was my previous one, *Mary*. I was focused on re-creating a real woman, on uncovering the real woman behind the legend. As I see it, I was writing biography -- i.e. history -- and if some of the technique was fictional, that was purely in order to bridge that gap of almost 3,000 years, to bring the reader into the mind, the place, the time.

I think I wrote somewhere in *Jezebel* that we tend to view what we quaintly call 'antiquity' as though through a telescope the wrong way round, making everything smaller instead of larger. I wanted to counter that. I wanted to get through to the fact that people then were just as intelligent and sophisticated and complex as we are now. Sometimes, I suspect, more so.

**Marsha:** I was most fascinated by the passages in the book where you talked about language and the ways in which meanings of words were changed in translation. It helped, I am sure that you are fluent in Hebrew. What surprised you the most in your close reading of biblical texts?

**Lesley:** The grittiness of them! I mean, the curses! God, but those people knew how to curse. Today, when we seem to be limited to repeated applications of the same four-letter word, our cursing is incredibly impoverished. In the Bible, when they curse, they go at it -- street language, to the gut -- in fact, to the groin. Thus that thing about "I will cut down every one that pisses against the wall." That goes straight to what you use to piss against a wall with -- if you happen to be male, of course. And that hurts.

**Marsha:** And all of that word play!

**Lesley:** Isn't it glorious? We forget that what we call the Bible was once a living thing. That it was told, not read. That it was the product of an oral society -- from one person's

lips to another's ears, and on that way. So things *had* to be vivid. They had to be memorable. They had to entertain. This whole thing we have now that the Bible is to instruct is so damn dull by comparison. Some of the time, the King James is magnificent -- sometimes even more poetic than the original. But other times, you can practically hear William Tyndale saying to himself "You can't say that -- this is the Bible, for God's sake!" and so softening his translation, using euphemisms, etc.

**Marsha:** You call your book *Jezebel: The Untold Story of the Bible's Harlot Queen*. Why do you think her story has not been told in this way before?

**Lesley:** The truth is, I don't know. I detest the idea of claiming exceptionality, but it could be that I happen to possess just the right combination of attributes to write this book: a woman who cannot conceive of *not* being a feminist; a non-practicing Jew who defines herself as a gnostic agnostic; a former Israeli now living in the misty Pacific Northwest. With both Mary and Jez (yes, I call her Jez for short), delving into their stories, trying to find out who they really were, was a way for me to get back to the Middle East, a particularly satisfying way intellectually -- because that's a connection that you can never shake, no matter how hard you try. And I did try, hard. For years. And then with relief, I came back to it through this kind of biography.

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**Marsha:** Did you actually return to the Middle East while you were writing the books?

**Lesley:** Oh yes. I mean, what a perfect way to do it -- for me, at least. To be back there but not to be involved, as I was when I was a reporter there, in the day-to-day politics, which only seem to get worse and worse. But of course I *was* involved. So inevitably, perhaps, I played on the echoes, on the resonance between then and now -- the political resonance, the strange feeling that *plus ça change....* Which takes us back to that first question, of past and present.

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**Marsha:** And the clash between Jezebel and Elijah which you characterize as the "the founding template for the clash between pluralism and tolerance on the one hand and fundamentalist fanaticism on the other." Did you make that connection early in the process of the research and the writing?

**Lesley:** Yes, I think I did. At first, I just wanted to know who Jezebel was. But when I read the original story as told in Kings, the connection kind of sprang out at me. I had no idea of the fierceness of Elijah -- or the amazing manipulations of his successor, Elisha -- until I went back to the original story. And then I kept thinking, 'How come nobody points this out? How come nobody reacts to this? How come all this is just sort of elided, overlooked? Exactly how did Jez become the bad guy and Elijah the good one? Basically, 'how come nobody counted the bodies in this story before?'

**Marsha:** Yes, it was extremely violent. The most shocking thing for me was the depiction of Elijah. I always thought of Elijah as the friendly prophet who drinks the wine left in the center of the table at the Passover seder.

**Lesley:** That's because Elijah in afterlife is almost the complete opposite of Elijah as he was. The legend overtakes the record. The same happened to Jez, of course, but in the opposite direction. Elijah the caring, the protecting, the solace, the guardian, only came into being with rabbinical Judaism, a millenium after he lived.

**Marsha:** Elijah isn't a very sympathetic person in this narrative. While Jezebel is seen as powerful and complex, Elijah is depicted as capable only of binary, 'either-or' kind of thinking.

**Lesley:** He strikes me truly as the prototype of the fire and brimstone prophet, as the forerunner of the radical fundamentalist -- a man so passionate, so zealous, that the humanity is drained out of him.

**Marsha:** And what of Ahab who offers a hand to his enemy instead of killing him after defeating him in battle?

**Lesley:** Yes, Ahab is quite extraordinary. The man Kings calls "the most evil of all the kings of Israel" is shown, right there in the Kings account, as what we would think of as wise and generous and magnanimous. And in fact the historical record bears this out. The Kingdom of Israel was at the height of its power not under David and Solomon, as received wisdom has it, but a century and a half later, under Ahab and Jezebel. The Kings account fudges that, which is what happens when your enemies get to write history.

**Marsha:** The Kings account was written 300 years after the death of Ahab and Jezebel. Are there accounts of their reign from the ninth century?

**Lesley:** There are no direct accounts, but we do know from the archeological record how highly respected Israel was during their reign, and how far it fell once they were killed and overthrown. And we know more about Jezebel indirectly, through the history of the Phoenicians -- she was a Phoenician princess, after all, before becoming queen of Israel -- and through her grand-niece, Dido, who founded Carthage.

**Marsha:** It is Elijah who labels Jezebel a harlot. Is her original infidelity to Yahweh? Does Elijah sexualize that infidelity or does that come later?

**Lesley:** Actually it's not him, but her assassin, Jehu, the man who orders her to be thrown down. And even then the accusation is indirect. The comment is addressed to her son, when Jehu says "What peace, with your mother's harlotries and sorceries?"

Certainly Elijah thought of her as a harlot, because the word harlot was used to mean an infidel -- anyone who 'prostitutes' themselves to 'false gods.' And Jez was the leading representative, the most visible representative, let's say, of those 'false gods,' who were tremendously popular in Israel at the time. And for many hundreds of years to come.

Elijah had his work cut out for him. His zealotry, his passion, his high dudgeon, his willingness to kill -- all these were the result of his absolute devotion to the one god, Yahweh. It's the absolutism that I wanted to get across. The absolute refusal to tolerate

anything but what he believed. The total conviction of righteousness. And of the evilness of those who disagree. All of which sounds very familiar today.

**Marsha:** Talk a bit about the 'woman in the window' plaques found in Samaria--- and your contention that the woman framed by the window is (using the other meaning of the word) literally framed. Is Jezebel unique in this regard as the only woman in the Bible who is 'framed' by the writers of the Bible as a harlot?

**Lesley:** Well, all of Jerusalem is called a harlot by later prophets. All of Israel, in fact. Which makes it crystal clear that they're using the word as a metaphor, not as a literal description. This is the trouble with reading the Bible literally -- it wasn't written that way. It was written by people with a very developed sense of metaphor, and heard by people with an equally developed sense of metaphor.

Our sense of metaphor has become so degraded that we actually need a linguist like George Lakoff to point out to us how it permeates our language and our thought. Nobody needed a Lakoff back then. Metaphor was second nature. It was part of the poetry of language and life. And religion.

Now, those woman at the window plaques... Jezebel faces her assassin on her balcony, framed by the window behind her. And this was clearly intended to reflect the image, very popular at the time, of the goddess Astarte. It was a direct reference, and the people who heard the story knew it. It wasn't just the overthrow of Jezebel -- and how oddly literal that overthrow was, with her being thrown down by her eunuchs -- it was intended to be the overthrow of Astarte, and with Astarte, of all 'false gods.'

**Marsha:** In the chapter called 'Babylon' there is a brilliant passage about the way the text was substituted for the land after Israel and Judea fell. You contend, "By writing, an uprooted people gained not just a past but also a future."

**Lesley:** Aha. Yes, most of what we now call the Bible was written in exile, in Babylon. The people who wrote it were uprooted from the land. And Yahweh was very much a national god, a god of that particular land. That's why that general goes to Damascus with a donkey-load of soil from Israel, so that he can worship Yahweh on his (Yahweh's) own soil. Yahweh was a territorial god. And in the absence of the territory, what then happens? The territory is gone. Imagine the existential dilemma. The despair. If the territory is gone, the land is gone, and then what of Yahweh? Has he deserted his people? Was he, after all, just another false god?

Then look at the extraordinary thing these writers accomplished -- they changed Yahweh. Yes, they changed God! Essentially, Yahweh *became* God at that point. No longer called Yahweh, even, but Elohim (literally, that's the plural of El, who was the great father god of the Phoenician pantheon). What they did in exile was create a universal god instead of merely a territorial one. They made the idea of God larger, expanded it, and at the same time, of necessity, abstracted it. Amazing. The past was tied to the land; but the future, with a universal god, could be anywhere. And so the text *had* to substitute for the land. As they wrote, in essence, they created a new form of religion, one in which the text was central.

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**Marsha:** And this text, among other things, made Jezebel the 'fall girl.'

**Lesley:** Yes. Basically, they were claiming a victory that in fact would take hundreds more years to achieve -- that of monotheism over polytheism. She was the embodiment of polytheism -- a.k.a. harlotry. It was supposed to have died with her, but of course it didn't, as is clear when you read the later prophets, who rail so much against worship of 'false gods' that you realize how incredibly popular they were. The other gods, I mean, not the prophets. Prophets are rarely popular at any time or in any place.

**Marsha:** So, of course, I need to ask a question about the relationship between Jezebel and Mary in your mind.

**Lesley:** Here you have two women, both reduced to mere ciphers in our minds. Both have been forced into the binary mode of good or evil, when in fact everything human -- everything that makes life interesting, complex, intriguing, vital -- takes place somewhere in between those two poles. So: one was stereotyped to one pole, the other to the opposite pole. But I felt the strong need, with both women, to look behind the image, behind the legend, and ask who they really were -- the flesh-and-blood Mary, deprived of her flesh and blood by virginity literalists, and equally, the mind and intellect of Jezebel, deprived of her personhood and turned into a sexpot of nothing *but* flesh and blood.

I sensed there had to be far more to both women, and set out to discover it. I know it may sound like heresy to some, to put Mary and Jezebel in the same boat, but I think they have indeed both been deprived of their humanity and complexity by legend and history and stereotype. And that if we can discover their real stories, we'll be far richer for that -- both as women and as human beings.

**Marsha:** It's as if you've created a new genre -- a sub-genre under the umbrella of creative non-fiction.

**Lesley:** You know, I was actually aware of that when I was working on *Mary*. That's why it took me so long - Four years for *Mary*, only two and a half for *Jezebel*, because by then I knew what I was doing. It's a new way of writing biography -- and one I had to think long and hard about. I had a few models. There's a wonderful book by Ann Wroe on Pontius Pilate, mixing fictional technique and reportorial and the personal. And there is, way earlier, an amazing book-length essay by Norman Mailer -- yes, Norman Mailer! -- on Marilyn Monroe. Called 'Marilyn,' it was written as text to go along with previously unpublished photos of her. In it, Mailer explores the whole notion of what he calls speculative biography, and of the need to wend your way through the massed accumulations of 'factoids' (he invented the word), where everyone has an interest, a claim, in seeing her this way or that.

We as a society have long had an interest in seeing Jez as the evil seductress. I now have an interest in seeing her as a powerful woman, as a force for good instead of evil. Who is 'right'? Nothing here is absolutely provable beyond any shadow of doubt. Neither is any story on the front page of your newspaper this morning. We all come to a subject with our desires, preconceptions, etc. Jez has been approached with a very clear

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set of these for three thousand years. It's way past time for somebody -- in the event, me -- to redress the outrageous imbalance, and present her in a very different light..

**Marsha:** And you've done it so beautifully and artfully! The book is a joy to read, filled with thrilling moments of insight and revelation. What's next? Or should I say, who's next?

**Lesley:** Thank you! What's next? Well, we've worked together at AROHO, so you know me, and you won't be at all surprised to hear that it's something even more difficult... What I'm working on now is the foundation story of the Shia/Sunni split -- a wonderful narrative, a multigenerational saga of Gabriel Garcia Marquez proportions (no surprise, since his inspiration was Middle Eastern literature -- *1001 Nights*). It's a narrative that seems to be all but unknown here in the west, but that's known to every Sunni in the Muslim world, and practically engraved on the heart of every Shia. In short, another story that, for me, simply begs to be told well, which means with passion, with compassion, and with insight.