

It's not about Jezebel

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Jezebel has become a cultural symbol for treachery, seduction, immorality and idolatry. A Google search for her name brings up four million hits—more than twice the hits for “Ahab.” Why so much focus on Jezebel?

At the end of the [story of Naboth](#), Elijah proclaims that Jezebel will be eaten by dogs—a particularly humiliating death. But this fate is not unique to Jezebel: Elijah says that it will happen to “anyone belonging to Ahab.” Jezebel plays an active role in attempting to satisfy her husband’s greed, but the story is primarily about Ahab—even the nature of Jezebel’s death is determined by her connection to Ahab.

The story of Naboth should be read in the context of [the story immediately prior](#) to it, in which Ahab purportedly grants mercy to Ben-hadad, whom he has defeated in battle. The two passages are connected by the text’s noting that in both cases Ahab went home “resentful and sullen.” This is the cue that these stories have something in common. But what?

On the surface they seem almost contradictory. Ahab is condemned by God (through a prophet) for sparing a man’s life (Ben-hadad); he is then condemned by God (through a different prophet) for taking a man’s life (Naboth). No wonder we have a PR problem about following an irrational and wrathful God.

But I do not follow an irrational and wrathful God. I follow a God who is merciful, yet just—a God who cares about the consequences of human evil and sometimes lets us suffer the brunt of our ill-conceived schemes. I know that when I have only found a wrathful and irrational God in the biblical story, then I have not yet found God—I have not yet found the gem that scripture offers.

One is man spared, another killed. But what do these stories have in common? What about the motivations underlying the sparing and the killing? Ben-hadad approaches Ahab because he's heard that “the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings.”

Ahab grants mercy to Ben-hadad, so why would God condemn Ahab for that?

But is it really mercy that motivates Ahab, or something else? Ben-hadad bargains with Ahab for economic and political gain, offering to return towns to Ahab's control and grant him the right to set up bazaars in Damascus. Ahab responds, "I will let you go on those terms." This is not mercy; it is political negotiation for personal gain. God does not like it, and Ahab goes home "resentful and sullen" at God's judgment.

In the story of Naboth, Ahab wants Naboth's vineyard, but the vineyard is Naboth's ancestral inheritance. "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance," Naboth says, using the language of oath-making. He refuses to go against God for Ahab's personal gain, and Ahab again goes home "resentful and sullen."

Enter Jezebel, who arranges for Naboth's death in Ahab's name and by Ahab's authority. When Ahab goes to claim the vineyard, Elijah challenges him: "Have you killed, and also taken possession?" In essence it is Ahab, not Jezebel, who kills Naboth.

The consequences for Ahab's actions are the same as those that came to the earlier kings Jeroboam and Baasha for having made other gods for themselves and their people. This raises a classic theological question: what is the nature of the gods we are tempted to worship? Are they called Personal Gain? Political Power? Economic Security? Here's a related question: what are the consequences of devotion to these gods?