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CHAPTER 8

WHEN ESTHER AND JEZEBEL WRITE A Feminist Biblical Theology of Authority

*Cameron B. R. Howard**

As a child growing up in the Presbyterian church, I learned that the answer to the question “Who wrote the Bible?” is “Holy men, who were taught by the Holy Ghost.”¹ That answer echoes two assumptions many readers bring to their study of the Hebrew Bible. For readers from numerous faith traditions, including my own, the Bible is authoritative because it is thought to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Its precepts wield power because they are, in some fashion, divine. At the same time, most readers assume that men—that is, not just human beings in general, but, particularly, *male* human beings—wrote the Bible. There are a few biblical texts for which female authorship seems a distinct possibility, since they represent a female voice. Much of the poetry in the Song of Songs, for instance, is written in the first-person speech of the female lover. Psalm 131:2c, “my soul is like the weaned child that is with me,” also implies a female speaker and therefore possibly a female author. Even so, these glimpses of female authorship are rare and fleeting, and it is difficult to determine with any certainty which if any biblical texts were written by women.

Without recourse to women’s authorial voices *behind* the text, readers are left to listen for women’s authorial voices *within* the text. Do any female

* It is a great joy to present this essay in honor of my teacher Carol Newsom, who, when asked by strangers about her occupation, will sometimes reply, “I teach reading and writing.”

characters in the Hebrew Bible possess scribal authority? In other words, do women in the Bible write? The answer is that only twice does the Hebrew Bible depict women writing: Jezebel writes letters in Ahab's name in order to entrap Naboth (1 Kgs 21:8-9), and Esther writes to establish the festival of Purim (Esth 9:29). Both of these women writers are queens, holding a rare but powerful position of public leadership. Thus, the "scribal" authority held by Jezebel and Esther coincides with their royal authority.

The fact that the women who write are monarchs is consistent with other biblical portraits of leadership. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, leaders write. Moses and Joshua write down the law (Exod 24:4; Deut 31:9; Josh 8:32). Prophets—including Samuel (1 Sam 10:25), Isaiah (Isa 8:1; 30:8), Jeremiah (Jer 30:2; 36:4), and Ezekiel (Ezek 24:2; 37:16)—write or are commanded to write for the sake of symbolism, record keeping, and the investiture of authority. Kings from David (2 Sam 11:14) to Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11) exercise the power of their office through writing. Even God is a writer, sending a finger over the tablets of the covenant and keeping records in the book of the living (Exod 31:18; Ps 139:16). The written word carries authority within the Bible, and men with authority do the writing. But does anything change when women do the writing?

My study of women's leadership and authority in the Hebrew Bible begins at the point of connection between these two characters: Esther and Jezebel are *women writers*. This essay will explore what they write, how they write, and the authority of their texts. Esther and Jezebel are also *queens*, holding the highest public position of authority available to women in biblical times. Their royal position gives them access to writing, even expectations for it, and their texts are themselves reflections of that royal authority. Esther and Jezebel share other characteristics, too. Neither woman is the primary ruler; instead, each acquires her power and position by marrying the monarch. Both women are foreigners in their royal contexts: Jezebel is the daughter of a Phoenician king and married to Ahab, king of Israel, while Esther is a Jewish woman living in Diaspora who marries the Persian king Ahasuerus. Both are outsiders in their environments.

Despite their many shared characteristics, Jezebel and Esther have dramatically different reputations both within the Bible and throughout Jewish and Christian tradition. In *Kings*, a book that blames foreign women and their foreign gods for facilitating the collapse of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Jezebel is the ultimate villain. She eagerly uses her royal power for apostasy and exploitation. Esther, on the other hand, heroically saves

the people of Israel from annihilation in a foreign land. She is portrayed as charming yet humble, reluctant yet courageous. These divergences, coupled with the many points of overlap between the two characters, may inspire ideas that Esther and Jezebel are "foils" for each other, in either intent or effect.² However, I hope to draw attention away from the biblical narratives' evaluations of their moral character and toward their participation in the acts of reading and writing. Given their many overlapping circumstances, do Esther and Jezebel write the same kinds of texts in the same ways? What can these two characters tell us together about women's leadership and the power of the written word? Can their writing in any way provide a model for feminist theology today?

I propose that the stories of Jezebel's and Esther's writing demonstrate, each in its own way, that the power of the reader trumps the authority of the writer. In contexts in which the written word tries to claim absolute authority, that authority is persistently destabilized by the presence of the reader, who has the power to interpret, to refrain from acting, or to act in ways not necessarily envisioned by the text itself. Rather than being fixed in a limiting, even oppressive, past, biblical authority continues to be reinterpreted and reshaped into a liberating future.

Literacy and Royal Authority

It is no mere coincidence that the two biblical women writers are also both queens. Literacy was not a widespread, democratized phenomenon in the ancient Near East. In fact, the content of the Hebrew Bible reflects an oral culture as much as it reflects a literate one. Such an assertion may seem counterintuitive, given the continuing importance of the Bible as a sacred text. Yet the world depicted in many parts of the Hebrew Bible is one in which writing and reading are specialized activities for particular circumstances rather than common features of everyday life. Writing might be used for symbolic activity, as when the prophet Ezekiel writes the names Judah and Joseph on two sticks and joins them together to symbolize the unity of the southern and northern kingdoms (Ezek 37:15-28). At Num 5:11-31, writing is used in a ritual to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman accused of adultery. The priest writes curses and washes the writing in the "water of bitterness," which the woman then drinks. The writing imbues the water with magical properties that reveal guilt or innocence.³ In these examples, the mysterious power of writing outweighs its practical application.

Even in biblical texts that may regard writing as common bureaucracy more than ethereal mystery, orality remains a prominent feature of their context. The Hebrew verb for reading, *qr'*, also means to call, announce, or shout, pointing to the oral underpinnings of the act of reading. Rather than understanding reading as a silent and solitary act, the verb implies a designated reader reading a text aloud to an assembled group. This is precisely the kind of reading Neh 8:3 describes as Ezra reads the law of Moses to the assembled community: "He read [*qr'*] from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law." Even if basic literacy were relatively widespread by the postexilic era (a contested notion to be sure), the production of texts was so tedious and expensive that few households would have actually owned scrolls of any sort. The paucity of copies drove the need for oral performance; for a text to be widely received, it would need to be read aloud publicly.

The written record has long been a feature of effective government. In cultures where writing is sparse overall, texts may nonetheless proliferate in service of a bureaucracy. If any sector of society can be said to be thoroughly "literate," government can. The more potent a ruling power of the ancient Near East became, and the more complex its economic systems became, the more it turned to writing for record keeping, correspondence, and other administrative functions. Written texts might also be used for propagandistic purposes, such as memorializing—and publicizing—a king's victories in battle via stelae or other inscriptions. The beginning of the book of Ezra shows Cyrus, king of Persia, issuing an edict allowing the exiled Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple there. Ezra 1:1 specifies that the edict of Cyrus is both written down and announced orally: "[H]e sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared." Here the pairing of the written text with its oral pronouncement is made explicit, and the two forms of communication work together to convey the official word throughout Persia's territories.

Both Esther's and Jezebel's texts belong to this public, administrative realm. Their writings are extensions of their royal authority. Their instructions carry weight not simply because they are written down but because monarchic authority stands behind them. The women have access to the materials for writing and to the scribal class for assistance. In fact, it is unclear whether kings and queens would have been literate themselves or

whether any mention of a monarch writing must assume the monarch's dictation but a scribe's hand. Inasmuch as literacy was the domain of society's elites, then there is every reason to believe that kings and queens would have been educated to read and write, even if they often availed themselves of the service of scribes.⁴ It is also likely that many if not most "regular" Israelites, including and perhaps especially women, would not have been literate beyond the ability to sign their names and recognize basic words. Therefore it is precisely Jezebel and Esther's roles as public figures that enable them to write. They write in a world that is still dominated by orality but that knows of textuality, particularly textuality and literacy as the purview of society's powerful elite.

Esther

Esther as Monarch

Esther's rise to power begins with the dismissal of another queen. When Vashti refuses to appear before the drunken king and his subjects on the seventh day of his latest banquet, the king's advisers become concerned that every wife in Persia, upon hearing of the incident, will likewise despise her husband. Memucan, one such adviser, suggests, "If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position [*malkhut*] to another who is better than she" (Esth 1:19). This scene makes it clear that the position of queen in Persia is not a legislative one. The king, easily suggestible though he may be, has power over the queen, including the power to make laws that Vashti must follow. Even so, the king's power is immediately tenuous; although her refusal comes with significant consequences, Vashti does not obey. The king's response, closely shepherded by his coterie of advisers, is to codify his power over women into an irrevocable decree, to write a text that might remove any distance between his words and women's actions. As Mieke Bal describes, "The first decree, banning Vashti, was meant to fix forever the obedience of wives, hence, male power over women in private and public. In its excessive ambition and fearful defensiveness . . . this intention cannot but fail, and the rest of the story will stage that failure. The submission of women cannot be fixed by writing, the story tells us."⁵ Esther's own defiance of the king's law (5:1-2; cf. 4:11) will further demonstrate the futility of the king's actions.

Vashti, like Esther after her, has the title of queen and its accompanying royal status: a profoundly elevated position within the kingdom. In her foundational literary study of the book, Sandra Beth Berg names kingship as a “dominant motif” in Esther and traces that motif through the book. She notes that the use of *malkhut* (adj. “royal” or noun “royalty”) is not restricted to the person or possessions of King Ahasuerus but at various times indicates the royal power of either another king, Vashti, or Esther.⁶ When the king summons Vashti to his banquet, he wants her to wear her “royal crown” (*keter malkhut*). When he later chooses Esther as Vashti’s replacement, “he set the royal crown [*keter malkhut*] on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (2:17). Thus, the crown symbolizes the transfer of status from Vashti to Esther.⁷

Even so, it is only later in the story, when Esther dares to approach the king uninvited, that she embraces her royal authority and acts upon it. Esther 5:1a reads, “And so it happened on the third day that *Esther put on royalty* and stood in the inner court of the palace of the king, opposite the king’s dwelling” (author’s trans.). If this appearance before the king is to parallel Vashti’s nonappearance in chapter 1, then Esther should put on her *keter malkhut*, not simply her *malkhut*, which becomes the abstract idea of “royalty” without any other concrete noun (like “crown”) for it to modify. Indeed, the verb “put on” (*tilbash*) requires a direct object associated with some sort of clothing or other adornment. One way to account for the apparent omission is to assume haplography here: somewhere in the ancient scribal enterprise of copying this text, a word dropped out. Yet this moment of adornment also marks a pivot point in the narrative, from a time when Esther receives her royal position from Ahasuerus (2:17) to a time when she actively utilizes that authority. When Mordecai challenges Esther to speak up for her people, he tells her, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity [*lamalkhut*] for just such a time as this” (4:14). As Berg remarks, “The repetition of *mlk* in Esth 5:1 directs our attention to the question of ‘kingship’—an issue raised by Mordecai in Esth 4:14, the last occurrence of *malkhut* prior to Esth 5:1. Esther’s assumption of her *malkhut* thereby constitutes a suitable response to Mordecai’s challenge.”⁸ This is indeed Esther’s time. Notably, the narrative itself refers to Esther by the title “Queen Esther” (*’ester hammalkah*) only after 5:1. Her initial unannounced entrance into the king’s inner court marks her embrace of her agency and her authority. At this moment Esther asserts the power afforded her by her royal position, and the narrative affirms her.⁹

Haman's actions toward Esther likewise underscore her authority; though he has an otherwise unrivaled position in the kingdom, he recognizes her superior rank. The king has situated Haman over all his other advisors and instructed all to bow to Haman (3:1-2). When Haman hatches his plot to destroy the Jews, the king also hands over his signet ring, a concrete symbol of the power of the royal office. Haman has the power to write on behalf of the king and thus to enact policies, including his own call for the murder of the Jews. Yet he continues to yearn desperately for royal affirmation. He boasts to his wife and friends, "Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king" (5:12). He counts Esther's invitation among the symbols of his favored status, which also include riches, sons, and promotions by the king (5:11). When Esther reveals Haman's plot and character to the king at her second banquet, Haman pleads for his life from Esther, not Ahasuerus, imagining that petitioning the furious king would be fruitless (7:7). Whether Esther ultimately has the power to stop Haman's execution is unclear from the text, as she does not appear to try. Even so, Haman certainly perceives her authority as on par with that of the king, and his interactions with her emphasize her royal position.

Esther as Writer

The developing portraits of royal authority as seen in the book's primary characters subtly comment on the authority of written texts. References to writing and written texts proliferate in the book of Esther as in few other biblical books, beginning with the story's first dramatic scene. Vashti's expulsion from her position coincides with the first mention of a royal order from the king, to be "written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered" (Esth 1:19). Writing codifies and reifies a royal command into an immutable law. When Haman wishes to insure the destruction of the Jews, he asks, "Let it be written to destroy them . . ." (3:9, author's trans.). After a law is crafted, it is sent with haste throughout the kingdom. When Ahasuerus institutes a new law in reaction to Vashti's insubordination, he sends "letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house" (Esth 1:22).¹⁰ Notification of the law is distributed throughout the reaches of the empire by letters sent in the language of every region; writing thus allows for wide distribution of royal mandates, even if they are publicized orally when they arrive at their

destinations. The same wide-reaching, multilingual publication also characterizes Haman's edict (3:12). Similarly, when Mordecai issues the counteredict allowing the Jews of Susa to defend themselves against the attacks instigated by Haman, the text advises, "A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies" (8:13). Most of the texts described in the book of Esther, including the one Esther writes (9:29), fall into this category of public imperial edict: a text widely distributed with implications for the entire kingdom.

The book of Esther also repeatedly emphasizes the immutability of Persian law. Writing has a long-standing reputation, including within the Bible itself, as a means of securing permanence for a law, an idea, a prophecy, or a story.¹¹ With that sense of permanence comes authority: a perception that once an idea is written down, it becomes less contestable, less subject to either shifting memories or changing wills. In Esther, the act of writing a rule into the law books renders it unalterable. Marking the law as "irrevocable" seeks to collapse the distance between the text and its enactment; it is an attempt to shut down the act of interpretation. The textuality of Persia, so says the story, sees the king's power, the written text, and the law's implementation as all coequal, instantaneous, and secure: the ultimate manifestation of authorial intent.¹²

Yet Esther herself has already begun to destabilize royal notions of irrevocable law. In what has come to be her signature line, Esther decides, "After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (4:16b). In this moment, Esther becomes a reader. She acknowledges that the king's power is not wholly embodied in the written law. She has the power either to capitulate to its ideas or to imagine something new—namely, that the king might not act in accordance with the law. We have seen above that Esther's decision to enter the king's court uninvited was an assertion of her monarchic power; as she entered the king's palace, she "put on royalty." Even as she avails herself of her power—both her official royal power and that preternatural power that charms eunuchs and kings alike—she destabilizes that power. If the king's law can be disobeyed, her laws can be, too. At the moment of the greatest embrace of royal power is also the greatest disavowal of it.

After Haman is hanged (7:10), the narrative describes the transfer of power from Haman to Esther and Mordecai: "On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and

Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. Then the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. So Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman" (8:1-2). At the center of the power transfer is the king's signet ring, in which royal authority and written authority converge. The power that once belonged to Haman now belongs to Mordecai and Esther. In the book of Esther's depiction of the Persian Empire, that power is the power to write. But Esther's own defiance has demonstrated the tenuousness of that power.

The production of texts continues at a quick pace throughout the rest of Esther. Mordecai issues a counteredict to Haman's script (8:9-14) after Ahasuerus declares to him and to Esther, "You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked" (8:8). The irony is thick; Mordecai and Esther issue a new irrevocable order that, in effect, revokes the first order, thereby illustrating that neither text is in fact irrevocable. Royal, written power continues to be destabilized.

At Esther's request, Ahasuerus issues yet another decree, this one extending the power of the Jews to kill their enemies for another day and ordering the hanging of Haman's ten sons (9:13-15). Then Mordecai and Esther write documents that establish the festival of Purim. Despite the agency Esther has had in the production of many of the foregoing documents, it is only in the last few verses of the book that we encounter her writing directly: "And Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, wrote with all authority, along with Mordecai the Jew, to establish this second letter of Purim" (9:29, author's trans.). Unlike in the story of Jezebel, the letter Esther writes is not recounted here, but rather the fact and purpose of her having written. When, at Esth 9:32, the practices of Purim are described as having been written, the reader who has journeyed through the book of Esther recognizes their permanence and authority. Though they are not among the laws of the Medes and the Persians, the Purim regulations have nonetheless been irrevocably secured by having been written: "The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing" (9:32). Moreover, the weight of Esther's royal authority stands behind them; they should be implemented as much because of who she is as because of what they say. And yet, precisely because they are written, they become subject to interpretation; their power lies with their readers. The text, having been written, becomes at once authoritative and destabilized.

Jezebel

Jezebel's act of writing occurs within the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kgs 21. Like Esther, Jezebel writes from a position of royal authority. Unlike Esther, however, the biblical text never describes her with the title "queen," referring to her instead by name, by the appellation "his [Ahab's] wife," or with a nod to her royal Phoenician parentage. Despite the lack of overt recognition of her title in the text, Jezebel uses her monarchic power even more effectively than her husband Ahab does. When Ahab sulks over Naboth's refusal to sell or trade his vineyard, Jezebel asks Ahab, "Do you now exercise kingship over Israel?" (1 Kgs 21:7a, author's trans.).¹³ Her question challenges Ahab's exercise of monarchic control. Inherent in the question is an assumption that kings, by virtue of their title, may take whatever they wish and need not rely on law or custom to dictate their behavior.¹⁴ Samuel's warning that kings *take* (1 Sam 8:11-17) looms over this episode. By not taking Naboth's vineyard outright, Ahab fails to act like a king.¹⁵ When Jezebel orchestrates the seizure of Naboth's vineyard, she embraces the raw power afforded her by her royal position.

In order to deliver the vineyard to Ahab, Jezebel writes. "So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city" (1 Kgs 21:8). The seal of the king carries the requisite authority. In fact, if Jezebel were to give her directives orally rather than in writing, perhaps her authority would not be heeded. With Ahab's seal—that is, specifically with a written text—Jezebel's identity is concealed, but her own wishes are communicated. Jezebel must borrow Ahab's titular power, but she supplies all the necessary initiative.

The letters instruct the elders and nobles to find two witnesses to bring a charge of blasphemy and treason against Naboth and then immediately to stone him to death. If securing the false charge is meant to provide a ruse of "due process," it is a disguise easily unmasked. Deuteronomic law's requirement for two witnesses rather than one (Deut 19:15) is fulfilled, but the witnesses are "scoundrels" (lit. "sons of worthlessness"). Jezebel's letters imagine no discussion, no judicial inquiry, no interpretation of the accusation once it has been made: "[S]eat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death" (21:10). It is as if the accusatory utterance is self-executing.

Kings presents the text of Jezebel's letters with a convention used to introduce reported speech: "She wrote in the letters, *saying*." The verb translated here as "saying" (*le'mor*) is often left untranslated since it functions almost like an opening quotation mark. Thus, what follows is meant to be the body of the letter: "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death" (1 Kgs 21:9-10). This is Jezebel's text; within the presentation of Jezebel's story in the Hebrew Bible, this is what Jezebel wrote.

To say that the book of Kings "preserves" the text of Jezebel's letter would be an overstatement. Preservation implies some sort of historical existence, and, barring the unlikely unearthing of some as yet unknown archaeological find, it is impossible to know what part of the story, if any has any grounding in historical fact. Regardless, the inclusion of the text of Jezebel's command produces the rhetorical effect of showing how tightly the implementation of the plan corresponds to its proposal: "The men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. Just as it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, they proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the assembly. The two scoundrels came in and sat opposite him; and the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, 'Naboth cursed God and the king.' So they took him outside the city, and stoned him to death" (1 Kgs 21:11-13). Their actions correspond word for word with Jezebel's commands in her letter. The text imagines no room for interpretation, no possibility of refusal, no debating the merits of the commands, no weighing their consequences; the men comply without hesitation. In the same way that the scoundrels' accusation is without an interpretive hearing, so too are Jezebel's letters imagined as self-actualizing. While a letter cannot physically kill Naboth without human agency, once it is written, it is as good as enacted; at least, that is what the text would have us believe. Jezebel's letter barely needs a reader at all.

And yet, Jezebel's letter *does* need a reader. No matter how much the text tries to present the death of Naboth as Jezebel's work alone, it could not have happened without the elders' and nobles' reading, interpreting, and acting. In the same way, the scoundrels' accusation must have been read and interpreted, even if Jezebel's letter makes no provision for it and the text of 1 Kings does not acknowledge it. John D. Caputo reminds us,

"The idea of a self-interpreting text makes no sense, since texts are texts only because they operate in the absence of their authors."¹⁶ When Jezebel writes the letters, she releases them from her creative grip and places them into the interpretive grip of their readers. The letters do nothing until they have been read. Compliance, refusal, and every interpretation in between become available; even this most seemingly determined of texts is ultimately indeterminate.

In her 1994 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Phyllis Tribble demonstrated how the interpretive act provides resistance to even the most seemingly intractable texts: in this case, the stories of Jezebel and Elijah in 1 Kgs 17–18.¹⁷ In the tightly crafted narrative, Jezebel and Elijah are antithetical characters in almost every way: "She is female and foreign; he, male and native. She comes from the coastlands; he, from the highlands. She thrives in a sea climate; he, in a desert climate. She belongs to husband and father; he, neither to wife nor father. She embodies royalty; he, prophecy. Both bear theophoric names that unite them in opposition: Jezebel the Baal worshiper and Elijah the YHWH worshiper."¹⁸ As these antitheses play out in the narrative, they deepen, all to further the polemical agenda of demonizing Jezebel. When Elijah is fed by the Sidonian widow, for example, that woman becomes a foil for Jezebel, since the widow is a Phoenician woman who will confess Elijah's God.¹⁹

Nevertheless, as Tribble's analysis shows, the same antithetical parallels that attempt to erase any positive characteristics of Jezebel's character also keep Jezebel ever present, a constant shadow behind and sometimes over Elijah. When Elijah draws attention to the hundreds of prophets who eat at Jezebel's table, he succeeds not only in expressing his disdain but also in illustrating her power: the number of prophets testifies to her "religious zeal"; their presence at her and not Ahab's table "suggests her economic independence as well as her abundant resources."²⁰ The story of Naboth's vineyard similarly undercuts the narrative's negative portrayal. At the same time Jezebel is antithesis of Elijah and epitome of monarchic ruthlessness, she is also an ideal wife à la Prov 31. Devoted to her husband, "she considers a field and possesses it; with the fruit of her hands she secures a vineyard" (31:16).²¹

The history of interpretation surrounding Jezebel has not looked upon her with favor. Most interpreters have affirmed, to a greater or lesser extent, the narrative's hatred of her.²² Yet Tribble's analysis shows that alternative readings are possible, even for this most reviled of characters and even in

a text as polemical as Kings. Like Jezebel herself, the Deuteronomistic authors try to set up one way to read these stories, but everything the narrative tries to communicate about her simultaneously communicates its undoing. The power of the reader persists.

Conclusions

A close look at Esther and Jezebel as women writers does not lead us to an authoritative paradigm describing how women wrote in the ancient Near East, nor does it give us a clear prescription for how women biblical interpreters should write now. Esther and Jezebel write because they have monarchic authority. There is nothing inherently liberating in the fact that these two female biblical characters write; in fact, both women embrace their powerful roles in established imperial modes that perpetuate oppression. Their status as queens gives them the opportunity to write, the means to write, and even the reasons to write. Both queens write in imperatives, communicating the will of their offices to their subjects outside the palace gates. Their texts are neither narrative nor poetic nor revelatory. If we readers come to the Hebrew Bible looking for romantic accounts of women writing breathtaking fiction, poetry, or theology, we must be disappointed.

And yet, both Esther and Jezebel help us see that ancient women, those in the biblical text as well as those behind it, made the most of the power available to them. Though their authority may have been mediated by their husband-kings, "they handled pens and paper and seals; they imagined audiences; they were read."²³ Perhaps when we read the Bible, women—nameless, unnoticed, uncredited women—are *being read*, and we shall never know it. But if their work is lost to the passive voice, ours persists in the active voice: we *read*. Every time we read, we open the possibility that texts long used to silence and oppress can and will be used to liberate. When she chooses to approach the king uninvited, Esther, too, is a reader. She refuses to capitulate to the idea that a text can be read one way alone. The stories of Esther and Jezebel become not just stories about women writing but also stories about women—and men—reading. The act of writing may change the law, but readers as much as writers imbue the text with authority.

The power of the reader gives both hope and responsibility to contemporary readers of this ancient text. Bal writes, "For if reading is the only way to blow life into the dead letter of the text, and if, moreover, reading is a matter of historical importance, then Esther becomes a mirror for the contemporary critic. Like her, exposing the abuse of power, the danger

of writing, and the instability of subjectivity, the critic can escape neither the responsibility for her activity nor the encapsulation of that activity in historically diverse, subjectless writing."²⁴ The Bible is not automatically oppressive or liberating; it requires good readers—many readers, diverse readers—to manifest its multiple meanings.

In a world where the Bible itself continues to be used both to liberate and to oppress, the indeterminacy of the text is actually good news. As Timothy K. Beal describes, "Hope emerges here, on political grounds, in the affirmation not that history is ultimately determined, but that it can never be determined and is always open to subversion, precisely because it cannot contain and control otherness."²⁵ If we are to ask, "Who wrote the Bible?" we must also ask, "Who is reading the Bible?" The Holy Spirit blows through the reading of these Scriptures, not just the writing of them. In the persistence of that Spirit, there is hope.

For Further Reading

- Beach, Eleanor Ferris. *The Jezebel Letters: Religion and Politics in Ninth-Century Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- Beal, Timothy K. *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*. Biblical Limits. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Niditch, Susan. *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*. Library of Ancient Israel. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996.
- Schniedewind, William M. *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- 16 E.g., see Raghav Gaiha, “Does the Right to Food Matter?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 40 (2003): 4269–76. This article analyzes the right-to-food campaign in India.
- 17 Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics* (ed. Elizabeth M. Bounds et al.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 16.
- 18 Houston, *Justice*, 104–5.
- 19 Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Justice and Social Change,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 161.
- 20 Isasi-Díaz, “Justice and Social Change,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (ed. Russell and Clarkson), 161.
- 21 Naila Kabeer, “Empowerment, Citizenship and Gender Justice: A Contribution to Locally Grounded Theories of Change in Women’s Lives,” *Ethics and Social Welfare* 6, no. 3 (2012): 216–32.
- 22 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 788.
- 23 Kabeer, “Empowerment, Citizenship and Gender Justice,” 231.
- 24 Heschel, *Prophets*, 215.

CHAPTER 8: HOWARD

- 1 This question and its answer are from “Catechism for Young Children,” written by Joseph Engels. It is based on the Westminster Shorter Catechism and has been promulgated and edited by Reformed churches since the nineteenth century. The answer itself draws on 2 Pet 1:21: “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (KJV).
- 2 See Helena Zlotnick, “From Jezebel to Esther: Fashioning Images of Queenship in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblica* 82 (2001): 477–95.
- 3 For more detailed treatments of the role of writing in these texts, see Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 82–83; and William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 27–29.
- 4 On literacy as a privilege of the elite, see Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 11; Atlanta: SBL, 2010).
- 5 Mieke Bal, “Lots of Writing,” *Semeia* 54 (1991): 77–102.
- 6 Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 44; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 59–72.
- 7 Berg, *Book of Esther*, 61.
- 8 Berg, *Book of Esther*, 70.
- 9 Esther’s receipt and subsequent embrace of her royal status provide her official, titular authority. Yet she also exercises an otherwise unexplained charm over the eunuch Hegai (2:9): an ephemeral, ineffable authority. Since the qualification for replacing Vashti as queen of Persia is to please the king overnight, Esther’s initial charms over

the king are more easily explained as sexual. At 5:2, the ephemeral authority seems to reemerge, but not without sexual innuendo, as Esther touches the king's "golden scepter that was in his hand." See also Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (Biblical Limits; London: Routledge, 1997), 76.

- 10 The Hebrew text adds one more phrase to this verse: "and speak according to the tongue of his people." The phrase does not appear in the Septuagint, and the NRSV relegates the phrase to a note, rather than including it in the body of the translation. Syntactically the phrase is attached to the content of the declaration, as if every man is also being told to speak in his own language. However, given the concern the book shows for communicating to the whole of the empire in ways all its subjects can understand, the phrase makes more sense either as dittography or as a gloss on the earlier phrases concerning the letters. The idea of "speaking" would introduce an oral component to the communication involved with the letters, but textuality remains the overwhelming emphasis.
- 11 Just two of many examples include the giving of the law at Sinai, when the law is famously written on two stone tablets, and at Exod 17:14, when God tells Moses regarding Amalek, "Write this as a reminder in a book."
- 12 On the issue of the infinite interpretability of texts, I am deeply informed by John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Studies in Continental Thought; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Caputo affirms that not only written texts but also speech—anything committed to language—is indeterminate, infinitely subject to interpretation.
- 13 Some translations, including the JPS Tanakh and the New King James Version, render this phrase as a declaration instead of a question. Regardless, Jezebel is incredulous about Ahab's refusal to use his royal authority to its fullest extent.
- 14 Deuteronomy's law of the king (Deut 17:14-20) also presumes the tendency of kings to take indiscriminately, as it specifically forbids the king to acquire many horses or wives.
- 15 One could also say that Ahab fails to act like a man, given the ways kingship and masculinity are intertwined throughout the Deuteronomistic History. See Cameron B. R. Howard, "1 and 2 Kings," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (3rd ed.; ed. Carol A. Newsom et al.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 164–83.
- 16 Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 206.
- 17 Phyllis Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 1 (1995): 3–19.
- 18 Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers," 5.
- 19 Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers," 5–6.
- 20 Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers," 7.
- 21 Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers," 12. The translation of Proverbs is Trible's.
- 22 For an overview of Jezebel in the history of interpretation, including exceptions to the demonizing of Jezebel, see Josey Bridges Snyder, "Jezebel and Her Interpreters," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (3rd ed.; ed. Newsom et al.), 180–83.
- 23 I am deeply grateful to Lauren Baird for this and many other insights that she offered in personal correspondence upon reading an earlier draft of this essay.
- 24 Bal, "Lots of Writing," 95.
- 25 Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 121.