Beach, Eleanor Ferris

The Jezebel Letters: Religion and Politics in Ninth-Century Israel


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Many readers of the biblical text do not hold Jezebel in high esteem. The roots of this depreciating tradition can already be found in the narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It is evident that these narratives are biased by a Jerusalemite and mono-Yahwistic point of view. Jezebel is easily demonized as a symbol of Baalistic and northern wrongdoings. The real Jezebel is buried in history: on the basis of the available evidence we can only partially reconstruct her deeds and doings. Our understanding of her role in the geopolitical momentum of her days will remain restricted. There are, of course, scattered pieces of evidence, mostly circumstantial, from which it can be derived that she was queen in Samaria in a transit period of changing economic interests. The archaeological findings point one to the view that during the Omride dynasty northern Israel flourished as never before. The Hebrew Bible informs us that it was the prophets of YHWH who pointed at the dark sides of this economic expansion.

Eleanor Beach has written an intriguing book on Queen Jezebel. Her portrait stands somewhere between the fictional and the factual. She has integrated the well-known sources—Hebrew Bible, Mesha Stela, Tel Dan inscription, Assyrian royal inscriptions—and the results of archaeological investigations on the spread of the Phoenician civilization in Israel from north to south with “recently found inscriptions and letters” into a completely new image of Jezebel. In Beach’s view, Jezebel was a well-bred...
princess with a keen eye for economics and trade as the basis of human welfare. She was a religious person who stood opposite the obsolete views of the prophets. She believed that it was Baal-Shamen who by his anger punished the lands with a drought and later gave rain. She used her power to improve the quality of life for many Israelites. At the sexual level, she was not caught up in fornication and suffered mentally from the accusation that she was a whore.

The “recently found inscriptions and letters” referred to above are a set of letters from Jezebel to her father and brother in Tyre and to her daughter Athalya later in Jerusalem, as well as some sort of the memoirs of Jezebel written in her old days. By implication these “recently found inscriptions and letters” are fictional. They were not found in official archaeological excavations. Nevertheless, they contain various elements that could be original, such as a hint to the fact that Ahaziah did not fall from the window but was pushed from his bedroom.

In the end, a very sympathetic construction of the life and times of Jezebel is presented. The book is well written and contains various—sometimes hilarious—windows to the geopolitical situation in the ninth century B.C.E. as well as to present-day developments in the same area. The only problem with this book is that I am uncertain where to store it on my shelves. Under the H of history writing, a few inches away from Baruch Halpern’s *Davidic Demons*, or under the F of fiction, back to back with Stephan Heym’s *King David Report*?