Dutcher-Walls, Patricia

*Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen*

Interfaces


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*Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen* by Patricia Dutcher-Walls, is part of the Liturgical Press "Interfaces" series (ed. Barbara Green), a series described as “a curriculum adventure, a creative opportunity in teaching and learning, presented at this moment in the long story of how the bible has been studied, interpreted, and appropriated” (v).

True to the series’ objectives, Dutcher-Walls’s *Jezebel* delivers a well-structured example of how to apply narrative and sociological criticism to a biblical passage. After her opening remarks, Dutcher-Walls provides a useful introduction to narrative analysis with a focus on rhetoric (ch. 1). This introduction sets up the next two chapters, where she provides a scene-by-scene application of the methodology just explained (ch. 2: “Jezebel the Queen”; ch. 3: “Jezebel the Queen Mother”). Following this narrative analysis, Dutcher-Walls provides a second methodological introduction (ch. 4), this time to sociological criticism. Predictably, this is followed by the application of the methodology in chapter 5 (this time the focus of Jezebel as queen is combined with her role as queen mother). But Dutcher-Walls’s aim is to do more than simply introduce her readers to a description and application of two methodologies (although that in itself is a useful task). She is also interested in seeing “how the methods interact to gain useful interpretive perspectives” (x). Hence, chapter 6 (her last chapter) examines the interface of the two methodologies.
Instructors will find much that is useful in this book. Chapters 1 and 4 provide clear explanations of narrative and sociological criticism for beginning exegetes. Indeed, Dutcher-Walls’s introduction to narrative analysis (ch. 1) even provides helpful “checklists” for students containing questions they can ask of each narrative element under analysis (plot development, characterization, point of view, time, repetition) and for some rhetorical strategies as well (general techniques, techniques of association, techniques of dissociation). Moreover, her applications of these methodologies in chapters 2–3 and 5 allow students to see the methodologies at “work”—a good pedagogical move for students who are constantly looking for practical examples to aid in their understanding of the methodologies they are studying.

But beyond the explication of methodologies and their application, Dutcher-Walls provides students with something even more important: an appreciation of the cultural and religious location of both writer and reader of biblical texts. One of Dutcher-Walls’s primary goals in *Jezebel* is to “highlight and understand the worldview and theology of the ancient writers” (139). It is a worldview that is concerned with royalty and the social impact of elite behavior. It is a worldview that highlights the impact of prophets—even peripheral ones such as Elijah and Elisha—on those in power (far more, in all probability, than reality warrants). The portrait of Jezebel that emerges affirms a series of theological beliefs concerning “God and God’s nature” and “the relationship between God and humanity” (151). The resulting message that the writers intend to be “heard” this portrait is that Jezebel is a prime negative example of what NOT to do as a leader of God’s people. Jezebel understands nothing of the real power and sovereignty of God, refuses to perceive God’s authority over the people of Israel, ignores or persecutes the prophets of God, scorns all allegiance to God, and openly worships Baal. She uses her considerable power for her own ends and the enrichment and interests of the dynasty of her husband Ahab. She follows only her own standards of power, wealth, and arrogance. She things nothing of abusing her power to undermine justice and the responsibility of societal leaders for all social classes. She brutally destroys those who oppose her. (152)

According to Dutcher-Walls, the resulting portrait of Jezebel produced by the writers’ worldview is both a “legacy” and a “challenge” to contemporary readers (139). It is designed as a cautionary tale to warn readers to “amend their ways and truly listen to the word of God” offered by the storytellers (152). This is important because Dutcher-Walls herself finds the ancient storytellers to be “faithful witnesses to God’s action and compassion in the world, and we do well to listen to them” (x).
I liked this book. I liked its clarity for beginners and its possibilities for classroom use. What I remain uncomfortable with, however, is the niggling question of why Dutcher-Walls seems to ignore the role that gender (both hers and the storytellers who tell her story) plays in the construction of Jezebel’s character. On the one hand, Dutcher-Walls admits that Jezebel was “probably no better or worse than many of the royal powerholders of her day” (152). Nevertheless, she also admits that Jezebel became for the writers the “ideal vehicle for depicting the worst a member of God’s people could be” (152).

At the beginning of her book, Dutcher-Walls identifies herself as “a woman of the twenty-first century who tries to be faithful to God’s intentions for life.” And, although she “cannot approve of her [Jezebel’s] religion or her brutal and self-centered ways,” there remains a part of Dutcher-Walls that is impressed by Jezebel’s “self-assurance and her power in a world of powerful men” (x). Of course, it is precisely Dutcher-Walls’s own location as a twenty-first-century woman that allows her to be impressed with a Jezebel who exhibits traits valued by twenty-first-century women! One has to ask how ancient men of power (both the royal ones in the story and the storytellers spinning it) would have reacted to these same traits. Perhaps just a note (if not an explanation) of the usefulness of ideological criticism in understanding Jezebel’s portrait might be in order?