**The Elijah Narratives: Polarity or Integration?**

**The Stark Contrast between Elijah and Jezebel**

The contrast between Elijah the prophet and Queen Jezebel is one of the starkest between biblical figures. According to Triebel, their very biographical details stand in stark contrast:

[quote originally in English][[1]](#footnote-1).

Gender, land of origin (including geography and climate), social status and even personal names all contribute to the framework of polar contrast between the figures. As noted by Triebel, the starkness of the contrast between these figures emerges from their very names. The name Elijah means ‘the Lord is God’, or ‘my God is the Lord.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This name is reflected in the narrative of mount Carmel. During that event, after the fire came down from heaven, the people cry out: “[*verse*]” (18:39). The name Jezebel is composed of the words *iy-zbl*. [[3]](#footnote-3) The component *zbl* is apparently the western-Semitic word *zabul*, common in Ugaritic writings and in Phoenician documents. It means ‘prince’ and serves, inter alia, as an honorific term[[4]](#footnote-4) for the god Baal.[[5]](#footnote-5) Her name expresses the inquiry: ’Where is the prince?’ This name, which attests to the worship of Baal, stands in direct contrast to the name Elijah, which attests to belief in the God of Israel. These two names represent the opposing beliefs of these two figures: One of them is a prophet who is zealous for the God of Israel and battles tenaciously and uncompromisingly against the worship of Baal and all forms of syncretism. By contrast, the other believes in the god Baal, and endeavors to spread its faith among the Israelites.[[6]](#footnote-6) This stark contrast, and the inevitable conflict alluded to by Elijah and Jezebel’s opposite names, materializes in the course of the story. Jezebel not only spreads the worship of Baal among the Israelites, she even persecutes those who believe in God and kills God’s prophets (I Kings 18:4,13). In response to Jezebel’s attempts to eliminate God’s prophets, Elijah slaughters all of Baal’s prophets after God’s revelation at Mount Carmel, not allowing any of them to escape (I Kings 18:40).[[7]](#footnote-7)

This all-out war between these faiths results in an all-out war between these figures. Jezebel reacts to Elijah’s killing of the Baal’s prophets by swearing that she would add Elijah to the Baal’s prophets who he had killed: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 19:2). Like Jezebel, Elijah swore in the name of the Lord, his God. However, a comparison of their oaths reveals a sharp contrast between them. Elijah swears for the first time in the beginning of the narrative that there would be no rain in the land other than by his decree: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 17:1). He takes an oath a second time when he swears to Obadiah that he will appear before Ahab: “[*verse*]” (I Kings 18:15). Elijah is central to all of these oaths, whether his or Jezebel’s. Elijah’s first oath asserts that he will determine when it will rain, Elijah’s second oath pledges that he will appear before Ahab that day and Jezebel’s oath states her intention to kill Elijah. However, this common denominator only sharpens the contrast between the oaths.

Despite the fact that Jezebel’s oath is not connected to Elijah’s oaths in terms of the flow of events in the narrative; it, nonetheless, stands in direct contrast to them. In his first oath, Elijah clarifies that the people’s lives are dependent on God (who provides rain). It is clear from the textual context that the impending drought is a punishment for the worship of Baal described in the previous verses. By contrast, Jezebel clarifies that Elijah’s life is in her hands, and she promises to kill him as punishment for killing the Baal’s prophets.[[8]](#footnote-8) She clarifies that life and death are not in the hands of God’s prophet; but, rather, in her hands. As a result of Jezebel’s oath that Elijah will die the next day, the prophet was forced to flee for his life (I Kings 19:3-18). This is contrary to Elijah’s second oath, which assured that Elijah would not disappear and that he would appear before King Ahab that day.

These oaths are not only contradictory in terms of their content. There is also a glaring contrast in terms of the identity of the god in whose name the person taking the oath swears. Whereas Jezebel swears using the generic name, *Elohim* [God], in the plural form – “[*verse*]” – Elijah goes out of his way to specify at great length in whose name he is swearing: “[*verse*],” “[*verse*].” The very way in which the gods are referred to in the oaths conveys the essence of their message. The opposing oaths are part of the conflict between the different faiths.

**Opposition until their Death/ Disappearance**

The conflict between Elijah and Jezebel continues until their disappearance. Even though Jezebel’s death is only mentioned at the end of chapter nine,[[9]](#footnote-9) seven chapters after the narrative of Elijah’s ascent to heaven, there is a clear connection between the two narratives in terms of content. Elijah the prophet is mentioned explicitly in the story of Jezebel’s death (II Kings 9:36). Jezebel’s death, as noted by Jehu, was the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy. However, Elijah’s death does not only relate to his prophecy. It also relates to the narrative of his ascent to heaven. Elijah ascends to heaven in a tempest in “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:11). Jezebel’s death is also connected to horses: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 9:33). The disciples of the prophets at Jericho pressure Elisha to allow them to go and search for Elijah; and, in fact, they do search the mountains and valleys without success: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 2:17,18). Jezebel’s body also disappeared in her property following her death. Jehu commands the people who were with him to go and bury Jezebel. They go, but only locate some of her bones: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 9:35,36). Jezebel, like Elijah, is not buried.

1. Triebel, *Eliyahu Ve-Izevel*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Garciel, *Sheimot B’Sipurei Eliyahu*, pp. 149-150.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Lee, *Izevel*, p. 848. Compare Lionstam, *Izevel*, p. 258 and Garciel, ibid., pp. 150-151, who hold that the name Jezebel is composed of the words *Avi-Aevel*, my father is the prince. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is possible that the later Massoretic vocalization reinterprets the name pajoratively: Jezebel is merely *zevel*, meaning fertilizer. This connotation fits with the verse: “[*verse*]” (II Kings 9:37). See e.g. Garciel. ibid., pp. 150-151, and Triebel, *Eliyahu Ve-Izevel*, p. 15. However, it should be noted that this connotation of the word *zevel* is not found in biblical language and is later. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Lionstam, ibid., p. 258, Kaplerod, Ras Shamra, p. 33, Lee, *Izevel*, p. 848, and Triebel, *Eliyahu Ve-Izevel*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is possible that the contrast between the names is explicit in the text, according the reading of the Septuagint; which, in Jezebel’s reaction to Elijah’s killing the Baal’s prophets, contains the phrase: “If you are Elijah, then I am Jezebel” (Septuagint, I Kings 19:2). A name contrasting with a name, a god contrasting with a god. See Triebel, Eliyahu Ve-Izevel, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Jubling, *Mashma’ut Hamikra*, p. 80, and Triebel, *Eliyahu Ve-Izevel*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Triebel, *Eliyahu Ve-Izevel*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gray, *Melakhim*, pp. 371-377, understands the narrative of the rule of Ahab and the fall of Omri’s dynasty as one litterary unit. This unit is comprised of the sets of stories concerning Elijah, Elisha and the dynasty of Omri. For a discussion of the process of assembling this unit from the three sets of stories contained in it, see De Paris, *Navi Keneged Navi*, pp. 112-127, ibid., *Melakhim Alef*, pp. 206-210, and the bibliography there. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)