



People of the Book

— Volume 3 —

Timothy Deborah
Gideon Jezebel

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Introduction

Welcome to the third volume of *People of the Book*—a booklet series that is rapidly becoming one of the popular resources we offer at Plain Truth Ministries. In the first two volumes we took an up-close and personal look at Joseph, Sarah, Peter and Ruth (Vol. 1) as well as Nathan, Mary/Martha, Daniel and Esther (Vol. 2). Our goal is to present an interesting mix of male and female personalities from both the Old and New Testaments—with powerful and helpful spiritual insights to help us as we walk with God in this 21st century. In this third volume you will read about Timothy, Deborah, Gideon and Jezebel.

The Bible, as you probably already know, is a refreshing and honest book—providing the ups and downs of the personalities it profiles and records. The Bible tells us of the triumphs and the tragedies of its people, for after all, these people were just like us. They struggled with the challenges they faced, and sometimes wondered if God really loved them.

We appreciate the Partners in our media ministry who help us provide free literature such as this third volume in the *People of the Book* series. By God's grace we are able to provide insight into the timeless message of the Bible and examples of the people who populate its pages. May God bless you as you read these pages.



Greg Albrecht
Executive Director, PTM



Timothy: Honored of God, Mentored by Paul

At the risk of losing half my readers, let me pitch this article to the guys. Not that a profile of Timothy, especially his relationship with Paul, is “for men only.” Not that Paul-Timothy type mentoring isn’t something women also need. It’s just that my experience is limited and gender-specific, and so I challenge you women to listen in on another’s conversation and translate this stuff to your situation.

Have you attended any Promise Keeper events in the last decade? (Women, remember, hang in there with me.) Then you’ve heard countless calls to spiritual fatherhood and mentoring relationships. To quote their mentor’s credo: “A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.”

The mentor’s challenge, issued at Boulder, Colorado, in July 1993, by the PK platform speaker, Howard Hendricks, gets straight to the point. I was to find a “Barnabas,” a “Paul” and a “Timothy” in my life. That is, I need someone to be my spiritual father (a Paul) and my spiritual brother (a Barnabas), as I seek to parent a spiritual son (a Timothy). The mentor’s creed, as expressed by Paul to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:1-2), applies, in turn, to all of us: “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable

men who will also be qualified to teach others.” That mentor’s creed—and the call to be a “father in Christ,” as Paul was to Timothy—is the focus of this truncated study, heavy on application.

Beginning with Timothy

Timothy’s beginning in life was a mixed bag—full of assets and liabilities, virtues and weaknesses—yet he became one of Paul’s chief associates, even bishop of Ephesus. Timothy was also the product of a mixed marriage. His father was a pagan Greek, his mother and grandmother, pious Jews (Acts 16:1-3; 2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy was raised in the Jewish faith and converted to Christ under Paul’s influence.

Paul was not only Timothy’s father in the faith, but his on-the-job mentor. Paul selected Timothy as his associate because of Timothy’s bi-cultural background and the respect afforded him by people at Lystra and Iconium. Joining Paul’s second missionary journey meant submitting to painful adult circumcision and spending time in Roman jails (Acts 16).

Young Timothy, whose name means “honored of God,” suffered from lack of respect from elders (1 Timothy 4:12). Timothy also suffered bouts of ill health and moments of anxiety (5:23). Hence, Timothy’s mission to Corinth was cut short, considered a failure by some standards. Paul warned the Corinthians to go easy on Timothy and named the more forceful Titus—not “timid Timothy”—as his apostolic delegate.

Despite a reputation for being too young, timid, sickly, even lustful or greedy (1 Timothy 6:6-19), Timothy proved to be affectionate, sensitive and loyal (Philippians 2:19-22). Paul and the church elders laid hands on Timothy to receive a special gift for ministry that would help him persevere in hard times. Thus Timothy could complete—by divine grace—whatever was lacking in his faith and character.

Paul tutored Timothy with noble intentions and high hopes, taking him on various missionary trips and pastoral calls. Paul was his “father

in Christ” and Timothy was Paul’s “true son in the faith” (see 1 Corinthians 3:6,10; 4:15,17; Philippians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; also 2 Timothy 1:2; 2:1).

Eventually, a well-tutored Timothy took on a mission project in the racially-mixed hub of Ephesus (1 and 2 Timothy). Timothy would “entrust reliable men” with the gospel, men who would then “also teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Why “Timothy” Needs “Paul”

True fathers are precious few and hard to find. That fact is well-documented in today’s schools, divorce courts, penal institutions and welfare systems. With a 1,420 percent hike in the divorce rate since 1920, fifteen million children are now growing up without any father in the home.

Many social ills—poor academic performance, truancy, poverty, welfare dependence, juvenile violence, gang warfare—have been attributed to the lack of a strong father figure in the home. That much seems to be obvious. But would you believe that when the father is an active Christian, the family’s children are five times more likely to become Christians than when only the mother is a believer?

Evidently, there is a 75 percent conversion rate when Dad is a spiritual father compared to a mere 15 percent when Mom alone is a spiritual mother. Yet Timothy overcame these odds with Paul’s help—and God’s grace. If you feel like a novice, look around for a Paul to learn from. If you’re new on your job or in your marriage, look for a mentor.

Finding Teachable Moments

Once you find your Timothy, as Paul did, look for “teachable moments.” One teachable moment strengthened a mentoring relationship for me—and led to a whole new career of “teaching others also.” I was due to be married in June (for the second time), but I got cold feet and called it off one month before the

wedding. My career in life insurance sales had also come to a dead end at this time.

Dick, a seminary professor and sometime mentor over the years who was to officiate at the wedding, came out from Boston to Wisconsin on the weekend the wedding would have happened. He comforted me in my disappointment and guided me in my ongoing search for meaningful work. As we shared heart to heart, Dick ended up inviting me to write Bible studies for him. I changed careers to apprentice myself as a “Timothy” to this veteran communicator of the faith. That mentoring relationship continued for several years, as we partnered on several Bible projects. But, were it not for a crisis of confidence—a teachable moment—I would not have embarked along this path.

To jump-start your mentoring relationship, you and your Timothy must simply be open to change and acknowledge both gifts and needs. People are often most open or teachable when: (1) struggling through crisis, (2) overwhelmed by inadequacy, (3) confronted with an unresolved need or problem, (4) challenged and/or measured by a goal or (5) searching for a more meaningful relationship. Age-appropriate learning activities can enable fathers to teach and instill values in children. Team sports can teach discipline, self-sacrifice and loyalty. Through sports children can learn to overcome fear, set high goals and finish what they start.

Don’t discount so-called “dangerous activities,” such as hunting and dirt-biking. Fun and adventure with Dad also teaches wisdom, careful decision-making and environmental stewardship. Fun with youth leaders and friends is valuable, but Dad still has the primary responsibility to model and instruct his children in faith and godly living. Where will you be a Paul to a Timothy—at church, at work or at home?

Finding Your Timothy

Keep looking inside and out. There is a Timothy in your life yearning for fathering in the

faith. To find that Timothy, you must be creative and persistent.

First, consider the needs of your own extended family. Then look outside for some “dear son” with whom you can share your life as a supplemental or surrogate father. Check out programs like Big Brother/Big Sister, the Scouts, Sunday school, confirmation class, youth groups, community clubs, hobby organizations, recreational leagues, the local YMCA or neighborhood associations.

Once you find your Timothy, you’ll find yourself asking, “What would an elder like Paul do for a young protégé like Timothy?” You’ll then act like a real nurturing father, blessing the children in your charge, admonishing them, praying for them, perhaps even writing to them.

Paul nurtured Timothy through “father-son” letters (1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2) that were very personal and pastoral. Likewise, if you were to write a personal, pastoral letter to your son or daughter, what Paul-like elements would you include?

To help you outline this letter, imagine your child is going away for a long period of time (moving cross-country? military service?), taking on new levels of responsibility (marriage? management?) or entering new passages of parenthood. Picture yourself during significant changes—perhaps a mid-life crisis, retirement or in the process of dying. Reflect on those to your child through a letter, even a last will and testament (which is what Paul’s second letter to Timothy proved to be).

The example of Paul’s mentoring relationship with Timothy is worthy of your imitation to the extent that Paul is a “father in Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:16) who follows the “example of Christ” (11:1). By the grace and strength that is in Christ Jesus, your Timothy will become a future leader of the church, of his family or of his team in the marketplace. Remember, the life you invest in could be your own. (*Originally published March 2000*)



Deborah: “Judge Judy” and “Joan of Arc” of Ancient Israel

When looking for a biblical role model for women aspiring to leadership, we need look no further than the “prophetess” of Israel. Deborah, who lived about 13 centuries before Christ, is the only person among the so-called “judges” of Israel said to be a prophet.

Deborah rose to political power during a time when the Israelites were afflicted on every side by pagan oppressors and torn asunder by their own idolatry.

Pressed into leadership during a time of war and oppression from pagan Canaanite forces, and given the shameful lack of male leadership, she rose to the occasion and answered the call of God for deliverance. The triumph of Deborah is told and retold in Judges 4-5, with additional commentary handed down to us through Josephus, the first-century A.D. Jewish historian.

A closer look at Deborah will tell us how God can do extraordinary things through ordinary people who put their faith in the almighty God.

“Judge Judy”

Before leading her country into battle against Jabin, Sisera and the Canaanites, it is evident that her counsel in times of peace was highly sought after. Deborah “was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill

country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided” (4:4-5).

Evidently, Deborah was so trusted as a counselor that tribal leaders from miles around used to beat a path to her door to settle their disputes. Long before she became a leader in war, this prophetess/judge could be found saying and doing whatever made for peace among the tribes in Israel.

As she entertained throngs of disputing, restless people gathered in the courtyard outside her home in the Ephraim hill country, Deborah dispensed godly wisdom. She foretold the future. She inspired others to adopt her religious fervor and patriotic zeal. This she did for days on end, “leading Israel at that time”—presumably for all twenty years that King Jabin oppressed Israel.

We can envision Deborah holding court sessions under one of those royal date palm trees that flourished in hilly Ephraim, between Ramah (to the north) and Bethel (to the south).

Her national popularity is evident from the fact that one such date palm came to be called “the Palm of Deborah” (4:5). From under those royal palms, like a Judge Judy perched behind her royal desk, this prototype Jewish mother “held court.”

As a perennial arbiter of civil disputes, she was as renowned in her day as Judge Judy is in ours.

But unlike Judge Judy, Deborah’s moral authority was regarded as from the Lord. Therefore her judgment was both highly sought after and trusted by various tribal leaders.

This gifted judge held court in the normal, non-military sense of the word “judge.” For twenty years she had listened to the children of Israel complain about life under the cruel Jabin.

Deborah’s people no doubt had their vineyards burned to the ground, their women raped, their children slain and their places of worship dishonored by this regional king of the pagan Canaanites.

More than judicial decrees of protest were called for. These trying times called for a heroine to deliver Israel.

“Joan of Arc”

Judges in Israel were noted more for warrior-like heroism than their judicial decrees. In this respect, Judge Deborah is most like Joan of Arc, the national heroine of France. Joan was a simple peasant girl who likewise acted under what she believed was divine inspiration, rallied 10,000 men to the cause of a nation and led her oppressed people to victory.

In the case of Joan of Arc, her victory was that of a martyr’s death (in 1431 A.D.) which proved pivotal in the Hundred Years’ War between the French and the English (intermittently fought between 1337 and 1453 A.D.).

The outcome of that medieval war persuaded the English monarchy to turn inward for their development instead of invading continental Europe.

Ancient Israel, like medieval France, was also being invaded and oppressed by outside forces. The Amorites, Moabites, Midianites, and Ammonites (all to the north) plus the Philistines (to the south), were continually invading Israel, each seeking to plunder.

Internally, the Israelites were also victims of Canaanite uprisings and oppression. The most evil Canaanite king of Deborah’s day was Jabin of Hazor.

In seeking to liberate her people, Deborah did not act alone. She tried summoning a following from among her male contemporaries and military leaders. Deborah of Israel (like Joan of Arc) claimed and demonstrated divine inspiration for her leadership and vision. Yet she found few takers at first. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, Dan, Asher, plus the city of Meroz, were particularly rebuked for ignoring God’s call (Judges 5:15-17, 23).

So Deborah called on Barak of Naphtali, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you:

‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands’ (4:6-7).

Even though Deborah prophesied that Sisera would die, the fainthearted Barak agreed to join the divine cause very reluctantly. He depended on her inspiring presence and spiritual counsel, without which the deal was off. As he admitted: “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go” (4:8).

Such a statement of dependence, spoken from a man to a woman, is most unusual. He must have seen her abiding faith in God, without whom this was a “mission impossible.”

Before we berate Barak, we should note in passing that other men of God, each called to be deliverers of Israel, were also faint of heart and had to be persuaded.

Remember, Moses was reticent to accept a divine call (Exodus 4:13); Gideon felt ill-suited to be any kind of deliverer (Judges 6:15); Jeremiah tried to opt out, excusing himself as too young (Jeremiah 1:6).

So Barak is in good company, as it were. Yet this coward was soundly rebuked. “Very well,” Deborah said, “I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman” (Judges 4:9).

Inspired and accompanied by Deborah, Barak did prove willing and capable—and fortunate. After receiving God’s instructions from her, Barak gathered a rag-tag army of 10,000 men, mostly from Zebulun and Naphtali. They agreed to meet up on Mount Tabor, which stood high above the valley below.

Later, presumably in a second phase of this campaign, portions of Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh and Issachar joined the fray at this chosen rallying-point (4:10; 5:13-18). This small force was to be deployed against Sisera. His coalition of Canaanite forces advanced along the strate-

gic open plain of Megiddo (5:19), the site of many battles in biblical history—past, present and future (see 1 Kings 9:15-16; 2 Chronicles 35:22; Revelation 16:14-16, where Armageddon means “hill of Megiddo”).

But Sisera’s army was suddenly thwarted when the heavens opened and a violent rain-storm flooded the Kishon river, turning the valley floor into mud (5:4-5, 20-21). Sisera’s army, including hundreds of horses and chariots, became completely bogged down.

The Israelites descended upon the helpless Canaanites and over-powered them. Sisera fled and was killed, as prophesied, “by a woman” (not Deborah, but Jael). On that day, and for the next 40 years, Canaanite domination over northern Israel was broken.

This remarkable story of Deborah’s victory is recounted twice in the book of Judges: first in prose (chapter 4), then in song (chapter 5). The latter not only celebrates the Lord’s triumph over Sisera in poignant imagery, but the Psalm of Deborah (with commentator Josephus) provides details of Sisera’s defeat not found in the prose narrative.

For example, we are told that the storm of sleet and hail that burst upon the plain had a more adverse affect upon the slingers and archers of Sisera’s army who were facing into the storm, than on Barak’s men, who were aided with the wind at their backs.

The Psalm of Deborah—one of the oldest martial songs in history—gives credit to others and especially to God Almighty: “When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the Lord!” (5:2). The final chorus declares: “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength” (5:31).

To which the narrator adds: “Then the land had peace forty years.” Childless Deborah proved she was a great mother to Israel. (*Originally published May 2000*)



Gideon: Relying on God to Overcome Great Odds

Although Gideon was one of the twelve judges (or *deliverers*) of Israel highlighted in the book of Judges, he did not lead or rule as the others did. Yet Gideon's heroic role and uncommon faith has been singled out as an example for all of God's people to follow.

This is readily apparent from the heroic exploits of Gideon extolled in Scripture itself (Judges 6-7; also Psalm 83:11 and Hebrews 11:32), to the fact that his name adorns *Gideon Bibles* we pick up while traveling.

However, there is a lesser-known story of Gideon that his champions and namesakes would sooner remain untold. According to Judges 8, Gideon fashioned an idolatrous gold image from the booty he took from the vanquished pagan Midianites. Gideon's sinful example subsequently led Israel into immorality.

Let's take a closer look at the stories in Judges 6-8, which give rise to these stereotypes. Are the traditional and sometimes conflicting reputations of Gideon deserved? Which aspects of Gideon's faith are worth emulating and which should be avoided?

Wheat Farmer to Mighty Warrior

Gideon's beginnings were quite humble and despairing. Along with a horde of other desert raiders, the nomadic Midianites, in their scorched earth policy, "did not spare a living for Israel" (Judges 6:4). The impoverished Is-

raelites cried in agony to the Lord for deliverance, which is where Gideon comes into the picture. Our first glimpse of him is as a wheat farmer doing something unusual—“threshing wheat in a winepress” (6:11).

Why take your field work indoors? Because our would-be hero was taking cover and avoiding the enemy at all costs. Who wouldn’t hide from merciless marauders? When an angel first called him to openly engage the enemy and deliver Israel from the oppressive hand of Midian, Gideon protested. He claimed to be from a lesser tribe—“the weakest in Manasseh”—and low man on the totem pole—“the least in my family.” But resisting God was futile (6:11-16).

God has a habit of using the lowly and powerless to serve him and advance his kingdom in a mighty way. An angel of God saw in Gideon not a coward but a “mighty warrior” (6:12) who would purge Israel of idolatry. Unconvinced it was God who was calling, Gideon stalled and bargained further, “‘If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you.’ And the Lord said, ‘I will wait until you return’” (6:17-18).

When Gideon’s offering of meat was consumed with fire generated by the angel, Gideon finally realized he was indeed in God’s presence and worshiped in awe. Now he was ready to be commissioned for God’s work. At the Lord’s bidding, Gideon dismantled the hill-top altar built to worship the local deity Baal and replaced that with an altar to worship Yahweh, the singular God of Israel. Fearing reprisals from his own idolatrous people who strayed from Jehovah and accommodated themselves to Baal worship, Gideon carried out his demolition work at night, in secret. Indeed, he was found out and threatened with death by an irate mob. But his father Joash the Abiezrite intervened and persuaded them to spare Gideon’s life.

God keeps his promises. To Gideon was promised, “The Lord is with you.... You will strike down all the Midianites together.... You are not going to die” (6:12, 16, 23). God had even bigger plans for Gideon, now also known as Jerub-Baal (“let Baal contend”).

Gideon’s Faith Tests God’s Will

Yet this near-death experience was confidence draining. Fear caused Gideon to surround himself with a formidable army for his own protection. But obedience caused him to yield to God’s plan. Having amassed a formidable army of his own, Gideon went to God to confirm the military strategy, saying, “‘If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised...’” then you will honor this fleece (6:36-40). Not once, but twice, the insecure Gideon tested God with this proposition.

The first time, Gideon laid the fleece (a strip of wool sheared from a sheep) on the threshing floor. He asked God, if victory was assured, to let dew gather on it overnight while the rest of the floor remained dry. Sure enough, that’s what happened. Still unsure whether this sign of victory was from God, Gideon put out another fleece. This time, Gideon reversed the terms: If victory over the Midianites was assured, then the fleece would remain dry, while the rest of the floor gathered dew overnight.

Upon closer examination of this unusual story in Judges 6, we see that “Gideon’s fleece” represents a weakness in faith. Anyone wanting to actually know and obey God’s will is more blessed if they proceed by faith—not by sight (John 20:29). Why? Because such visual aids to faith can be rationalized away as coincidence, not providence. Accordingly, more and more “tests” must be repeated by the “believer” until the results all line up. As things turned out, God condescended to honor Gideon’s faith. But we should not count on God doing so for us.

Gideon misunderstood the promises of God, which he took to be a stamp of approval on

Gideon's strength in numbers—about 32,000 altogether. Having stooped to meet Gideon on his terms, God imposed a test of his own (Judges 7). To test Gideon's faith, God ordered him to reduce his massive army to a mere 300 men.

“With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place” (7:7). When Gideon's small band later triumphed over the horde of Midianites, the victory would be attributed not to certain human strength or large military numbers, but unmistakably to God alone.

When first chosen to be an instrument of reform for the nation of Israel, Gideon was fearful but obedient. But here again, on the brink of another assured victory by the hand of God, Gideon hesitated. He needed more proof that what God was telling him was, in fact, true. Again, God condescended to honor Gideon's wavering faith but willing spirit. The confirmation of victory came from a dream given to a Midianite: A barley loaf smashing into the Midianite camp and collapsing their tent!

The divinely-inspired band of Gideonites—in three groups of 100—surrounded the enemy camp. Under cover of night, Gideon's band, each with torch in hand, blared their trumpets and broke pottery jars—all simultaneously—to simulate the noise of a much larger army. This tactic threw the 135,000-man Midianite-Amalekite coalition into confusion. Thinking that Gideon commanded a far superior army, the eastern desert peoples turned on each other. About 120,000 men fell on their swords; 15,000 more fled and were finally captured and killed.

Gideon's Success Induces Immorality

The biblical account of Gideon does not stop there. In the third chapter of this unusual sequence of events (Judges 6-8), Gideon let success go to his head. He was offered kingship but he declined (8:22-23). Bravo. But, puffed up with his own sense of importance, Gideon felt entitled

to “one request”—the spoils of war—namely, golden earrings, which he fashioned into an “ephod” (a complex vest worn by Old Testament priests). Led by Gideon's example, the people of Israel began to “prostitute themselves” by worshipping it. Instead of worshipping the God whose guidance was often discerned by Old Testament priests wearing an ephod, the ephod itself became the object of worship and “a snare to Gideon and his family” (8:27).

There is a lesson to be learned here. Whenever a means of divine guidance—whether it be a burnt animal offering, a wet-dry wool fleece, or a golden priestly vestment—becomes the object of worship instead of God himself, this is idolatry and it is dangerous. Furthermore, initial success can breed failure down the road if we take the credit from God back on ourselves.

Commissioned by God to lead his people in a reform movement—away from idolatry and back to God and monotheistic worship—Gideon's success was short-lived.

No longer menaced by desert marauders, Israel enjoyed peace during Gideon's lifetime for forty years (8:28). But a generation later, upon his death, Gideon's countrymen ended up doing the same immoral things as their neighbors. Their worship of Baal was led by Abimelech, son of Gideon by his concubine, who set himself up as a Canaanite city-king. Abimelech was the very antithesis of his father, who had once stood on this principle, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (8:23).

The story of Gideon's faith bears repeating, both for the parts we should emulate and pass along, and the aspects we should avoid like the plague. May your family embrace the parts of Gideon's faith that were genuine and exemplary. May you eschew the spoils of success and avoid the snare of idolatry. May you grasp firmly the torch of God's truth and pass that torch to the next generation. (*Originally published May 1999*)



Jezebel: Wickedness Personified

Jezebel is one name in the Bible no one would ever think to name their daughter. Because she ranks as the most evil woman in the Bible, Jezebel is a name used proverbially to warn believers to repent of pagan practices and spiritual adultery.

Treachery, cruelty and shame are associated with this name—and its powerful and proverbial significance in the history of Israel and the early church.

What's in the Name *Jezebel*?

The original, contemporary name of this foreign queen of Israel and wife of Ahab, has been found on ninth-century earthenware as “Yzebel,” meaning ‘[Baal] is prince’ or ‘[Baal] is exalted.’ But in her epitaph (2 Kings 9:37), the name Jezebel appears as “Ayzebel,” which sounds like Yzebel, but means something like “where is the excrement?”

This insulting pun-in-a-name is unmistakable: “the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung [refuse, excrement],...so that they cannot say, ‘This is Jezebel’” (2 Kings 9:37, NASB).

The name Jezebel has become synonymous with treachery and evil—and has been used to label false prophets, shamefully deceitful and wrathful women and cruel “powers behind the throne”—ever since the original bearer of that name earned that reputation in ninth-century Israel.

The original Jezebel was the Phoenician wife of Israel’s king Ahab, whom she incited to do unspeakable evil: “There was never a man

like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel”(1 Kings 21:25-26).

She did not worship Yahweh, rather just the opposite happened: Ahab was converted to her pagan idolatry.

Jezebel Establishes Baal Worship

Instead of attending to worship in Solomon’s temple, Ahab built a temple to Baal, the male fertility and nature god of the Canaanites and Phoenicians. At her urging, Ahab built a pole for worship of the goddess Asherah, Baal’s companion deity.

Idols to Baal were often made in the shape of a bull, symbolic of strength and sexual prowess, reflecting the people’s lust for power and sinful pleasure. The goddess Asherah is commonly represented in art and literature as a whore riding nude on a lion, thus encouraging followers to ride along and take control of their own sexuality.

Jezebel kept 850 prophet-priests of Baal and Asherah on the government payroll (18:19). She may even have been a priestess of Baal herself. In any case, Bible writers paint Jezebel as a wanton whore and wicked witch.

To establish her heathen religion, Jezebel gave orders to have the Hebrew prophets killed (18:4). But Elijah challenged the Ahab-Jezebel alliance with their false gods and prophets to put up or shut up (18:18-29).

The pagan gods did not rise to the challenge but remained powerless to do anything; the God of Israel brought fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice set up by Elijah. The people saw the difference between God and Baal, and the evil prophets were seized and killed (18:30-40).

Elijah ran six miles down Mount Carmel to be the first to give the news to Jezebel. With her investment in prophet-making lost and her hold on power now being threatened, Jezebel was

enraged and vowed to kill her nemesis Elijah. What Jezebel wants, Jezebel usually gets. So Elijah, fearful of her wrath, and exhausted from his six-mile run and recent spiritual triumph, ran for his life and hid in a cave to be taken and revived by God (19:1-10).

A foiled Queen Jezebel and King Ahab were eager to regain their power base. The next pretense for a power-grab was presented by Naboth, the Jezreelite landowner who refused to hand over his family inheritance coveted by Ahab. Ahab pouted at the rebuff, but not Queen Jezebel, who schemed to get Naboth stoned to death so she could repossess the coveted land. But their sin was not about land-grabbing or blood-letting or conniving, *per se*. Elijah confronted their sin of idolatry—that is, committing to anything or everything outside the one true God.

Has Jezebel Been Given a “Bad Rap”?

In this spin on historical events and Jezebel’s evil character, some think that she has been unfairly scapegoated as the impetus behind Ahab’s sin and Israel’s demise.

Whereas Ahab was Israel’s most wicked king to date (16:31-33), Jezebel is blamed for “inciting” or “urging” him to do evil. Just how much fault for Israel’s sin should lie with Jezebel?

Some historians consider the male-dominated society in which Jezebel lived. For thousands of years, Near Easterners had traditionally worshiped numerous gods and goddesses. Jezebel’s parents, in addition to being King and Queen, were the high priest and priestess of Baal in her Canaanite hometown of Sidon.

This ancient religion was matriarchal; that is, knowledge, power and property passed down through the mother.

Women had social, political, legal and economic independence. Naturally, Jezebel’s camp would resist the cultural values, moral discipline and exclusive worship introduced by the Hebrews and their God.

According to some, Jezebel's sin is no worse than being a female and enjoying her sexuality, being a non-Israelite or foreigner, usurping or seizing control where others (namely, men) fail or subverting patriarchy (as when she took Ahab's power or Naboth's land and life).

No one doubts Jezebel had a tremendous influence on her times. But her impact, for better or worse, extended for generations, even centuries.

She not only corrupted Ahab but also the northern kingdom, who adopted her gods as the state religion in Israel.

Jezebel also corrupted Ahaziah, her son and successor to Ahab, so much so that on his deathbed he cried out not for the Lord, not even for Baal, but for Beelzebub—the “fly god” or “god of the dung heap” (2 Kings 1:1).

Jezebel's influence extended, as well, to her second son, Jehoram, who had to be assassinated before Baal worship could be eradicated from Israel.

Jezebel did no better raising daughters. Daughter Athaliah, in a political marriage to another Jehoram, king of the southern kingdom of Judah infected him and the southern kingdom with Baal worship, then had all his brothers killed.

When her son died, Athaliah took the throne for herself and ravaged the Solomonic Temple to furnish Baal's temple. Jezebel's daughter also began to eradicate all princes of Judah so there would be no claimants or contenders for the throne.

She almost succeeded. Jezebel's daughter killed all of David's dynasty except little Joash, who was hidden away by his nurse for six years. Had God not kept Athaliah from doing what she set out to do—killing all her grandchildren—there would be no further descendent from King David. With David's line cut off, there would be no Messiah.

The bottom line on Jezebel is that she corrupted five kings, a queen and two kingdoms,

and she almost extinguished the Messianic line. One woman did all that evil.

Oops! Have I just succumbed to misogynist patriarchy in that sweeping condemnation of women? No, the name Jezebel can apply to men, as well as women. Turn to Revelation 2:20-25 and read on.

The Symbol or Spirit of Jezebel

After commending the church at Thyatira of first-century Asia Minor for her love, faith, service, perseverance and “doing more than you did at first,” Jesus nonetheless holds this count against the Thyatirans (Revelation 2:20-25):

“You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

“I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.

“So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways.

“I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

“Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you):

“Only hold on to what you have until I come.”

Is Jezebel Alive and Well at Thyatira—and Beyond?

Thyatira's economic survival depended on membership in trade guilds, inscriptions of which have been found by archaeologists.

Each guild had its patron god and its feasts or festivals. The “food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20) took place in the context of these guilds.

The “Jezebel” noted here may even have been married to a religious leader in the church, as the Greek word for “woman” can be translated “wife.”

This supposedly Christian woman at Thyatira was claiming to be a “prophetess,” presumably gifted or inspired by the Holy Spirit and “tolerated” by the majority (2:20). Yet a small minority saw through her pious scheme (2:24).

Just as the Old Testament Jezebel led Israel astray and persecuted God’s true prophets, so also this New Testament Jezebel was enticing God’s servants to abandon their exclusive loyalty to him and become “her children” (2:23), that is, devotees of a false religion.

This Jezebel has a contemporary, cross-gender appeal. Evidently, many in God’s church at Thyatira believed that the patron deities of the guilds need not be taken seriously, that pagan guild rites could be combined with Christian worship without losing anything.

Little did these guild-and-church members realize they were actually learning “Satan’s so-called deep secrets” (2:24).

Whether or not this New Testament Jezebel was an actual person, she is a powerful symbol, loaded with all the Old Testament significance of the original wicked woman. Meanwhile, rejecting God, or combining belief in Christ with other incompatible or eclectic practices, will have disastrous consequences.

Tolerance—The Universal Religion?

Many Christians today believe that tolerance is the universal religion, that commitment is all that counts as long as one is sincere. However, those who are today’s children of Jezebel are likewise called to repent of any commitments that take one away from the one true God of the Bible.

There is always time to repent. Both Ahab and Jezebel were given this opportunity. So also God offers us that invitation to accept and speak his truth and persevere to the end. (*Originally published January 2001*)