

## Bullying

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I Kings 21:1-16

What *in the world* was Jezebel's problem?

We see something of her problematical *modus operandi* in this morning's Old Testament lesson.

Ahab, Jezebel's husband and the King of Israel, coveted one Naboth's vineyards. He coveted it simply for its location: it was adjacent to his palace. And so, Ahab attempted to gain it for himself. To Ahab's credit, his initial negotiations for the vineyard were above board. He made Naboth two fair offers – He offered either to give him the vineyard's fair market value, or to give him another vineyard of greater value. But Naboth had to decline Ahab's offers. His hands were tied. The vineyard was an ancestral holding. When a piece of property is an ancestral holding, you never really quite own it. You hold it in trust for future generations. At the very least, Naboth had a conscientious obligation not to sell it, but too it was probably somehow entailed.

King Ahab didn't take it well. He thereupon revealed himself, his two fair offers notwithstanding, to be little different from a spoiled child. He thought being king meant he could have everything that his heart desired. And so, as our Old Testament lesson puts it, "He lay down on his bed, turned his face away, and would not eat." In other words, he took to sulking.

Jezebel got wind of her husband's sorry condition and questioned him about it. She then revealed that she shared her husband's view that being king meant he could have everything his heart desired; and because she had fewer scruples than her husband, she promised him that she would obtain the vineyard for him. She did so by framing Naboth in such a way that would call for his immediate execution. She seated him at an official function next to two n'er do wells who accused him of blasphemy and treason. He was straight away stoned to death, whereupon Jezebel informed Ahab that the vineyard was all his.

As I said, what *in the world* was Jezebel's problem? And the episode of Naboth's vineyard is by no means isolated. It squares perfectly with Jezebel's larger *modus operandi*.

Jezebel was not, as was Ahab, a native Israelite. She was a foreign queen from the land of Tyre. This meant she was a pagan. As a courtesy to Jezebel, when she married Ahab she was permitted to practice her religion in Israel, but this was not sufficient for her. She set about to stamp out the religion of Israel and replace it with paganism, and this she in fact did. She saw to the assassination of the prophets of Israel and replaced them with 850 pagan prophets, and paganism became the religion of Israel. Only one man, the prophet Elijah, who had hidden himself during the bloodletting, had courage enough to take her on.

Elijah publically discredited, not to say humiliated, her 850 pagan prophets, whereupon the Israelites, hard ridden by Jezebel, rose up against her. In a spontaneous coup, they exterminated Jezebel's 850 pagan prophets, but their momentum was halted by the sheer force of Jezebel's rage. In that rage, she swore that Elijah would be dead before the day was through. Again, Elijah sought to hide himself, but not as he done before - to live to fight another day. He sought to hide himself in surrender to Jezebel's rage. Elijah felt himself to be out mastered, as often people do when they realize that those who are out to get them will literally stop at nothing.

So again, *what in the world* was Jezebel's problem?

The answer is not long in seeking. The matter is not all that complex. Jezebel was a bully. Bullies are by no means limited to school yards. A bully is anyone who is, for whatever reason, incapable of healthy relationships, relationships that are based upon mutuality - mutual respect, regard, and understanding. This can occur for any number of reasons. The bully could have been bullied as a child. The bully could have some genetic aberration. The bully could have been taught racism, sexism, bigotry, or homophobia. The bully could have personality traits that make healthy relationships difficult. But for whatever reason, bullies are incapable of healthy relationships. And in that lacking, they attempt to dominate others. The tools of their domination are on the spectrum of coercion, intimidation, and terror. Yes, Jezebel was a bully. She was a bully who happened to be a queen. This meant the scope of her domination was broad. She could pretty much dominate indiscriminately. Had she been a subject rather than queen, she would

still have been a bully. The scope of her domination would simply have been less broad. She would have dominated her husband and her children. And as a bully, as we've seen, Jezebel took victims. She did real damage. She was destructive to all those she targeted.

No, bullies are by no means limited to school yards, but school yard bullies are scarcely less problematical. All bullies take victims. They do real damage. They are destructive of all those they target. When I was growing up I was taught to take a rather benign view of school yard bullies. I was taught they were a fact of life. I was taught I had to learn to deal with them. I was even taught that I should feel sorry for them. There was a bully on my school bus, and I became his target. My folks never dressed me in the same kinds of clothes the other girls wore or fixed my hair like theirs. They weren't attentive to that kind of thing, and it meant I stood out. Each morning he was waiting to belittle and humiliate me. I became so afraid of that bully that I couldn't sleep nights. It is no exaggeration to state that my young life became a living hell. I dreamed about going to live with my grandmother, or run away even, just to be free of that bully. I finally found a solution. I began getting myself ready for school all by myself and leaving early. My parents were impressed that I had suddenly become so organized and responsible, but it was so I could run two miles to school and avoid the bus. I couldn't tell them what I was doing, because I was afraid they'd make me stand up to him. He soon found another target, a shy little boy with thick glasses. I watched him once as he held him down, pulled off his pants and threw them in a tree. I cried for him. I could have used a little support, and so could he. I've never taken that rather benign view of bullies, and it seems society is coming around to my way of thinking. You can see this in the public outrage and outcry in the wake of the death of Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University who committed suicide after being bullied because he was gay. Tyler obviously didn't take a rather benign view of bullies. He too could have used a little support, but it's too late now.

The Bible, needless to say, is right on the same page with regard to bullies. It doesn't think much of them. This is why the Bible portrays Jezebel as it does -- to expose bullies as anything but benign -- to expose bullies and to warn against them. And what does the Bible say to do about bullies? The account of Jezebel, as it continues, makes it plain. Bullies are to be resisted. It would be nice if you could simply kill them with kindness, but it doesn't work that way. That's not realistic. Not with bullies. Imagine trying to subdue Jezebel with a little TLC or perhaps a word of reason. No, bullies are to be resisted.

But the path of that resistance in the account of Jezebel can hardly be deemed to be advisable. Elijah, Jezebel's only surviving antagonist, was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire, but not before he anointed successors. One of them, Jehu, realized that the only way to resist Jezebel was to kill her. At his approach Jezebel, "painted her eyes and adorned her head," and waited for him at the window. This illustrates the many faces, so to speak, of domination. Domination takes many forms, some obvious, some subtle. Domination can be aggressive, but too it can be passive aggressive. Jezebel switch gears from aggression to passive aggression. She was now endeavoring to dominate by seduction. It didn't work however. Jehu had her all sized up. He called to some eunuchs in her attendance to throw her out of the window, which they did. She was dead on impact; her remains trampled under horses. Grudgingly, Jehu gave orders to his attendants for her remains to be buried. She had been a queen of Israel after all. But by the time they got around to it, what was left of her had been consumed by wild dogs. Surely this can't be the path of our resistance to bullies, to gather horses and dogs below their windows and give them a good shove. It doesn't sound quite Christian, but of course, Jezebel lived nine hundred years before Christ.

Let us look then to Christ for the path of our resistance to bullies. He too was bullied - he by the religious authorities of his day. From the beginning of his ministry, the religious authorities sought to dominate him. And they sought grounds to do so under the law. This illustrates something else about bullying. It is often perfectly legal. Eventually the religious authorities put him on trial, but it nearly backfired. The witnesses were inconsistent. Their testimony did not agree. They couldn't establish their legal grounds. So the high priest Caiaphus took matters into his own hands. "Are you the messiah, the Son of God?" Jesus realized that if he answered in the affirmative, Caiaphus would have the legal grounds he sought, the grounds of Blasphemy. None the less Christ testified, "I am, and from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Caiaphus had his legal grounds. He moved forward with the ultimate act of domination - execution.

Christ here demonstrates the right path of our resistance to bullies. It is, first, to refuse to grant them their terms, to refuse to play by their rules, to refuse to acknowledge their right to bully and dominate. At his trial, and throughout his ministry, Christ never gave them so much as an inch. And it is, second, confident that the worst they can do is to kill the body but not the soul, to testify before what we believe through Christ to be the truth of things - and to do these things not just for ourselves, but especially for

others who are in need of our support. This is the spirit in which Christ sends us as sheep unto the wolves. So that the wolves' ravaging will be in vain. Amen.