

# The Jezebel Letters

RELIGION AND POLITICS  
IN NINTH-CENTURY ISRAEL



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## 2

# Tyre

### Omri Becomes King of Israel

885 BCE, EVENTS IN THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL, AS DESCRIBED MUCH  
LATER BY PRIESTLY SCRIBES FROM JERUSALEM<sup>○</sup>

In the twenty-sixth year of Asa king of Judah, Elah son of Baasha began to reign over Israel in Tirzah; he reigned two years.

But his servant Zimri, commander of half his chariots, conspired against him. When he was at Tirzah, drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza, who was in charge of the palace at Tirzah, Zimri came in and struck him down and killed him . . . and succeeded him.

When he began to reign, as soon as he sat on his throne, he killed all the house of Baasha; he did not leave him anyone who pees against a wall,<sup>○</sup> neither of his kindred nor his friends. Thus Zimri destroyed all the house of Baasha. . . . Zimri reigned seven days in Tirzah.

Now the troops were encamped against Gibbethon, which belonged to the Philistines, and the troops who were encamped heard it said, “Zimri has conspired, and he has killed the king”; so all Israel made Omri, the commander of the army, king over Israel on that day in the camp.

And Omri went up, and all Israel with him, from Gibbethon, and they besieged Tirzah. When Zimri saw that the city was captured, he went into the stronghold of the king’s house; he burned down the king’s house over himself with fire, and he died. . . .

## Tyre

Now the rest of the acts of Zimri, and the conspiracy that he conspired, are they not written in the Book of the Daily Affairs of the Kings of Israel?○

Then the people of Israel were divided into two parts; half of the people followed Tibni son of Ginath, to make him king, and half followed Omri. But the people who followed Omri were stronger than the people who followed Tibni son of Ginath; so Tibni died, and Omri reigned.

### Jizebul's Betrothal to Ahab

883 BCE○

“DAUGHTER, you will be my eyes and my ears.”

The words of my noble father Ethbaal king of Tyre filled me with pride. It was the spring of my fifteenth year, and, for more than a year, ambassadors from several kingdoms had been seeking a marriage alliance. Their real purpose was to acquire most-favored nation status for trade along Tyre's maritime network. I would be merely the seal on an agreement.

But my father was not willing for me to be a diplomatic hostage in a distant palace. Instead, I was to be his insider, his correspondent in a province of Tyre's expanding empire of commerce. Our fleet was a marvel, a better defense than chariot or wall, so strong that any king whose army controlled the land must have our ships for warfare and trade. Better to befriend the island city of Tyre than to destroy her, my father said.

He had started my formal training early, in my eighth year, while he was still priest in the Lady Astarte's temple. Even earlier, I had delighted in the marks that carry one's words to another. Writing takes many forms—the pictures of Egypt, the bird tracks of the Assyrians. I liked ours the best. There were fewer signs to learn because the scribes had reduced them to the simple sounds. Other peoples were even adapting our *alef-bayit* signs for their writing.

## The Jezebel Letters

When I was very young, I pestered Abdi-Ptah, the Egyptian scribe, to let me help him finish my father's letters. After the ink dried, he would roll the papyrus sheet, wrap it with cords, and add a dab of soft clay to secure them.<sup>o</sup> My job, when he let me, was to press the flat side of the seal into the clay and pull it off again, leaving the sculptured image in reverse. He wore the seal on a leather thong around his neck and reached for it often, turning it in his fingers before replying to a question. On the rounded side was the sacred scarab—the Cosmic Beetle that pushes the Sun across the heavens like the dung beetle rolls its eggs in balls across the ground.

Abdi-Ptah taught me to practice the marks myself by copying sayings on wax-coated wooden tablets. The name of each letter corresponded to its shape: *alef* for the head of an ox, *bayit* for the walls of a house, *gimel* for the hump of a camel.



Phoenician A, B, C  
(read right to left)

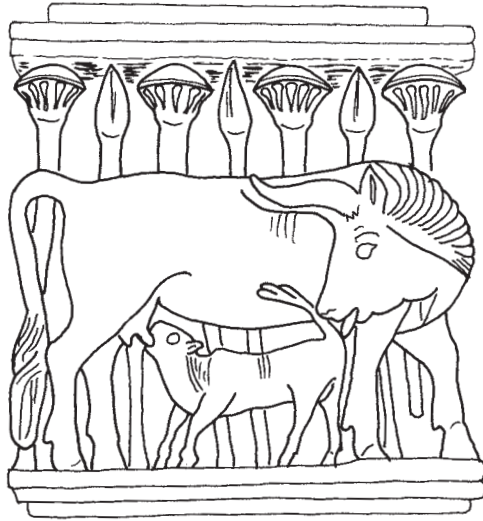
Ox, house, camel. Ox, house, camel. And the letters were also numbers: one, two, three. The name of the first letter and number made a pun, *alef*, having the same letters as the word “to learn.” And with the names, I learned the stories.

The horned oxhead was first, my father said, because it stood for Bull El, king of the gods. But Father El of the old stories<sup>o</sup> did not have a temple at Tyre. The storm god whose stone image wore the bull's horns was Baal Shamem. His temple had once stood on its own islet, but King Hiram, may his name be preserved in honor, had joined that reef to the Sor, the Rock of Tyre, many years ago.<sup>o</sup>

Abdi-Ptah had a different story for *alef's* horns. “Look at the other end,” he teased, pointing to a carved ivory cow on the banquet couch, who turned to lick the rump of her suckling calf.

A cow with long horns! Egypt's Hathor, the wild cow of the Nile and goddess of the western hills of the dead, had great horns set with a disk. It was she, Abdi-Ptah said, who gives

life and rebirth to her calves, to pharaohs and kings. Was his Hathor the same as Tanit, the Lady whose sign was scratched into stones in our cremation cemetery on the shore? Or was she like Anath in the old stories, who mated as a heifer with



Ivory plaque with cow and calf

the stormy Baal—Virgin Anath who killed Baal’s enemies and mourned for him as a cow yearns for her calf? Or, was that warrior-goddess our Astarte, whose figure looked out from her temple to the pillars of Baal Shamem’s sanctuary across the city? Could not the horned *alef* stand for a cow as well as a bull, for a goddess as well as a god?

The gods were my family. My own mother had died before I could remember her, and Lady Astarte took her place for me. My Lady’s sea provided Tyre’s safety and prosperity. Her voice sang me to sleep with the sounds of waves and gulls. In the old stories, the white-bearded Father El ruled from a high throne with a footstool, as did my father, who seized the throne of Tyre when I was eleven.

When he became king, my future changed. I was no longer a priest’s daughter, a priestess in training for Tyre. A king’s daughter must go away, to live in another house. Writing and the reports of messengers would be my only contact with Tyre.

Not that I would have to write my own letters—I thought there would always be a scribe to mark down my words or read to me. But my father insisted that I should read and write well, so I could check a scribe's work. And, he said, I should have a special seal to show I had reviewed what I dictated and sent to him, so he could be sure of its source.

When I showed the first blood of the moons, the women celebrated in our quarters, but I preferred my father's way. He had promised he would not start the marriage talks until I was a true woman. Then, I should choose my seal as a token of my womanhood and of my role as his deputy. After my second moon flow, he had sent Abdi-Ptah to me with a small pouch of softest leather, holding several seals for me to inspect. I knew mine at once—the largest one, the moon-colored stone with all the mighty creatures of Egypt. The seated guardian cherub, winged and with a woman's head, holds the ankh between its long lion paws, balanced by its upraised, almost twitching, tail. The winged Sun rises above the sacred falcon with royal flail, framed by two crowned cobras. The letters of my name would be engraved among the creatures.

My father always looked beyond the present. Before he became king, he sometimes sat with me to play the game of colored stone markers on the ivory board, to be won by those who could see many moves ahead. As king, he saw the Great Sea as such a board. He would outmaneuver our rival city-state, Sidon, and build a Tyrian base beyond Byblos, near the northern river valley leading to the inland routes. He would carve out a second harbor at Tyre, facing Egypt, and make a secure port on the coast west of Egypt, on the way to the silver mines. He would establish an outpost for Tyre near the copper mines of Kition. But all his game pieces—sailors and traders and settlers—must eat, and there was not much land around our sister city Ushu on the mainland, which supplied our island with food and water. The highways of the sea must be served by fields of earth. He looked to the south, inland from Tyre's port

at Akko, to the fertile valleys and hills of Israel. King Hiram had once linked Akko's plain to Tyre by grants from the House of David in Jerusalem; now the plain was controlled by an Israelite army commander, Omri.

“Daughter, you will be my eyes and my ears. You are betrothed to Ahab son of Omri the Israelite.”

### The Covenant Ceremony on Baal's Headland

882 BCE

ON THE MOUNTAIN, the west wind stole most words of the covenant ritual, but I heard part of a hymn from my place at the assembly's side: “Baal will give his people power, Baal will bless his people with peace, as our two Houses will live as one.” I was that one, I thought, but at that moment, I had no house.

Seven days earlier, I had bowed to the ground in farewell before my father and my brothers at Tyre's harbor, before boarding a ship to Akko. The same west wind had blown there, flapping and slapping the loose canvas. The gulls and the rumbling carts and the sailors' cries and the creaking ships had raised their familiar music against the rhythm of waves hitting the dock's stone wall. These were the sounds of my house.

But the harbor breeze had also carried smells that were rare at our higher wind-cooled palace on the western ridge. Leeward, in the lower sector built on fill by King Hiram, ships' cargoes fed an industrial district—metal foundries and glass workshops, fish-processing sheds and vats for distilling precious purple dye from sea snails' nauseating glands.

I picked up a smooth sea-washed pebble from the gravel path and walked to the ship.

I had seen our island city from the mainland but not from the sea. I had watched ships glide over the water like great pelicans, double banks of oars on each side raised and lowered like wings, tips dipping into the foam. But the ship I rode

was not gliding. To shift my thoughts from my stomach and the unsteady deck, I picked out the buildings on the western ridge—the king’s house and the temples of Astarte and of Milkqart, divine king of the city—and I counted the towers on the high enclosure walls. The Rock receded from my view, smaller and smaller, until it vanished against the background of the coastal range like a ship going below the horizon. I busied my mind with the changing shoreline and the marriage ceremony ahead and my father’s trust in me and the life to come. Only later did grief catch up on its own wings.

Now, on Baal’s Headland,<sup>o</sup> that promontory south of Akko where Baal Shamem’s storms first touch land, there was still the west wind but no familiar sounds. If not for the heavily embroidered veil, I might have looked toward the Great Sea, but I could not hear the waves. I might have looked eastward over the fields of Jezreel’s wide valley, but I could not hear its birds. The wind itself moaned around the ceremonial stone pillars and stone altars. It carried cries of animals at the knife and the smell of burning flesh.

When the Israelites looked at me, they saw Tyre’s wealth. If they could have seen my face, they would not have thought me any different from one of their own girls—small, dark, active, with long black hair the weight of which lifted my chin, like the bird—“Cormorant,” that was my mother’s name for me—but the gold claimed their attention. Rows of gold disks hung on chains across my chest over the finely woven stripes of my linen robe, embroidered with gold. Gold rings, some set with carnelian and crystal, covered my fingers, and links of a gold bracelet rang on my right arm as I held my robe to walk.



Phoenician gold bracelet