

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2023 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

**From Harlots to Heroines:
Royal Women in the Hebrew Bible**

Why are some royal women in the Hebrew Bible criticized while others are celebrated? This reading group focuses on how three royal women – Jezebel, the female lover in the Song of Songs, and Esther - are portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and what this might tell us about how queenship was perceived in ancient Israel and Judah. Each week we will read the primary sources for these royal women: Jezebel’s narratives (scattered throughout the Books of Kings) in week 1, followed by the Song of Songs in week 2, and finishing with the Book of Esther in week 3. The purpose is to identify how royal women appear in these texts, with a specific focus on how their gender is constructed and what this might tell us about the writers’ biases towards female royalty. Female royalty is not static in the Hebrew Bible, as highlighted by the fact that Jezebel has often been interpreted as a ‘harlot’ while Esther has been interpreted as a ‘heroine’.

This reading group will also explore how royal women’s speech, clothing, and actions are portrayed as elements of their queenship and indicative of their gender, status, and royal power.

By the end of the 3-week reading group, participants will have a better understanding of the nuanced presentations of royal women in the Hebrew Bible, and an increased awareness of the importance of studying royal women in a field that has mostly focused on royal men.

Your SASA Educational Ambassador:



I’m a first year PhD student in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. My thesis looks at how royal women are constructed in the Hebrew Bible and in Neo-Assyrian texts and iconography. My prior research has focused on Queen Jezebel and the Song of Songs.

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[Session Recordings Playlist - Youtube \(Private\)](#)

[Reading Group Folder Link](#)

Week 1 (Jezebel)

Primary readings:

- 1 Kings 16:29-34
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2016&version=NRSVUE>
- 1 Kings 18-19
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2018&version=NRSVUE>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2019&version=NRSVUE>
- 1 Kings 21
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2021&version=NRSVUE>
- 2 Kings 9:30-37
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Kings%209&version=NRSVUE>

Secondary readings:

- Janet Howe Gaines. "How Bad was Jezebel?"
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/>
- Everhart, Janet S. "Jezebel: Framed by Eunuchs?" *CBQ* 72 (2010): 688–98.

- Kalmanofsky, Amy. *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms*. RIPBC Vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 2017 (pp. 95-113).

Discussion points:

- How is Jezebel portrayed in the text?
- How is Jezebel contrasted to her husband Ahab?
- How is Jezebel's gender constructed in her narratives and what does this tell us about the writer's opinion of her?
- How does Jezebel speak?

Week 2 (The Female Lover in the Song of Songs)

Primary readings:

- The Book of Song of Songs (SoS 1-8) NRSV

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Songs%201&version=NRSVUE>

Secondary readings:

- Meyers, Carol. "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs." *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 209–23.
- Brenner, Athalya. "The Song of Solomon." In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (pp 429-32).

Discussion Points:

- What are your impressions of the female lover's speeches in contrast to the male lover's speeches?

- Do you think these are separate poems?
- How is the female lover presented through the male gaze differently to how the male lover is presented?
- What assumptions does the song make about gender? What gender norms do you think the song follows, and where does it differ?
- How is royalty and queenship represented in the Song?

Week 3 (Esther)

Primary readings:

- The Book of Esther (Esther 1-9) NRSV
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Esther%201&version=NRSVUE>

Secondary readings:

- Quick, Laura, and Ellena Lyell. "Clothing, Conformity, and Power: Garment Imagery in the Book of Esther." *VT* 72 (2022): 1–21.
- Crawford, Sidnie White. "Esther." *Women's Bible Commentary*. Edited by Carol A Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Discussion Points:

- How is Esther presented differently to Vashti?
- How does Esther speak?
- What do you make of the way Esther dresses as a queen in contrast to the other main characters' clothing?
- How is queenship represented differently in Esther than it was with Jezebel?