

On Dying in a City-Gate: Socio-Historical Implications and Irony in the Deaths of Eli,  
Abner and Jezebel.

*City Gates Death Irony Eli Abner Jezebel*

## **1. Introduction**

Previously one could easily find works on the archaeology or biblical study of cities, defences, temples and houses, but in the past year, two publications on city gates have caught the eye.<sup>1</sup> What follows is concerned with applying these new conversations about the role and function of ancient Israelite city gates to the biblical texts in a socio-historical manner, and in doing so, it draws attention to the way in which the author in 1 & 2 Samuel and 2 Kings uses gates as a literary device. As will be demonstrated, city gates were a place of judgement, execution, and public displays in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East, and so it should be of some interest when a notable character in biblical narrative is reported as having died in a gate. In line with this it seems plausible that in a text reporting a death in a gate, we need to understand what a gate was, what it meant, what it symbolised, and what some of the cultural values attached to it were. Then we must view our dying character the same way; who they were, what they did, what they symbolised and the cultural [or narrative] impact of their death. We will first outline some of the functions of city gates in ancient Israel, before turning our

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie N. May, 'Gates and their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel,' in Natalie N. May and Ulrike Steinert (eds.), *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 77-121; Carey Walsh, 'Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City-Gates in Biblical Memory,' in Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.), *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2014), pp. 43-61.

attention to three examples; the death of Eli (1 Sam 4.13), the death of Abner (2 Sam 3.27), and the death of Jezebel (2 Kgs 9. 31-33).

## **2. City Gates in Ancient Israel**

The term שַׁעַר can refer to the area inside the gate building (2 Sam 3.27), the area between the inner and the outer city gates, a public square inside the city next to the gate, or possibly a gathering place just outside the city (2 Sam 18:4; 19:8; 1 Kings 22:10), or a specific gate inside a city (e.g. 2 Kgs 14.13; Neh. 3.3).<sup>2</sup> Geus also notes that “By understanding the gate complex, consisting of two gates with an open space between them, as one unit, archaeologists nowadays interpret such a gate complex as the largest public building of an Iron Age town in these parts of the ancient Near East.”<sup>3</sup> He also notes that the gates are thus the center of social, economic and administrative matters, where ‘whoever wants to know what is going on in a town talks with people in the gate.’<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the gate as a place of gossip is also noted in Ps 69:12; ‘I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate’. The size of the gate, as well as public spaces or squares often being next to them, means that they were naturally, in many Israelite cities, the place where people would gather. In terms of archaeological

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<sup>2</sup> A full list of references can be found in *BDB*, pp. 1044-45.

<sup>3</sup> C.H.J. Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel and in the Southern Levant* (Palaestina Antiqua 10; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2003), p. 34; David Ussishkin, ‘The City-Gate Complex’, in David Ussishkin (ed.), *The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish 1973-1994* (Tel Aviv: Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, 2004), pp. 504-34.

<sup>4</sup> Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel*, p. 33.

evidence, Beersheba, Lachish, Tel Dan, Gezer and Megiddo all provide useful examples.<sup>5</sup>

Natalie May has provided a list of nine functions of city gates in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East in her recent article, but here we can only pay particular attention to only two of them.

1. Gates as a place for judicial activities: judgement, litigation, legal agreements, publication of court decisions and legal documents.
2. Gates as a place for public executions (not only of legal character).<sup>6</sup>

In the biblical texts, judgement and disputation is commonly enacted at city gates by various groups, including the elders.<sup>7</sup> Recognition of this can be found variously in commentaries on these verses in the biblical texts as well as in studies dealing more with archaeological evidence of gates, or differently, studies on law and justice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Z. Herzog, 'Beersheba', in Ephraim Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society, 1993), pp. 161-73; See also Z. Herzog, *Archaeology of the City: Urban Planning in Ancient Israel and its Social Implications* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Archaeology Press, 1997), p. 246; Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel*, p. 34; Y. Aharoni, 'Excavations at Tel Beer-Sheba,' *Biblical Archaeologist* 35 (1972), pp. 111-27; A. Kempinski, *Megiddo: A City State and Royal Centre in North Israel* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1989); I. Finkelstein, David Ussishkin and Baruch Halpern (eds.), *Megiddo IV: the 1998-2002 Seasons* (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2006); See also A. Biran, 'Tel Dan', *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974), pp. 26-51; A. Mazar and G.I. Kelm, 'Tel Batash (Timnah)', in Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopaedia*, pp. 152-7; J.R. Zorn, 'Tel en-Nasbeh', in Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopaedia*, pp. 1098-1102.

<sup>6</sup> May, 'City Gates', p. 78. The other functions are: as a sacral or cultic space, a place for installation of royal monuments, a place of military or ritual procession, a place of public appearance of the king, a place of public assemblies, a market place, and a place of control.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 19.1; 23.10; Deut 1.1-2, 19; 22.15; 25.7; Ruth 4.11; Jer 26.10; Isa 29.21; Amos 5.10, 12, 15.

<sup>8</sup> May, 'City Gates in Israel', p. 95; Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 14; Walsh, 'Testing Entry: The Social Functions of City-Gates in Biblical Memory', p. 49, 54; Geus, *Towns in Ancient Israel*, 36; Frank S. Frick, *The City*

Hertel has noted the old Assyrian ‘judges of the step gate’ as well as the reference in CCT 5, 18d to ‘the gate of God’ being a place for arbitration or possibly another law court.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, the point has been well made in several spheres of study. May convincingly demonstrates that in Mesopotamia the gates were a place of judgement, and the orders of the judge were carried out there, meaning that torture and executions would have been visible.<sup>10</sup> She notes that the Assyrian inscriptions demonstrate a practice of executing prisoners of war and displaying their heads in the gate, and that Sennacherib and Esarhaddon imprisoned disloyal kings at their gates to be mocked by a mob.<sup>11</sup> The biblical texts also attest to similar practices; 2 Kgs 10.8 narrates the piling of the heads of the king’s sons at the gates, Jer 20.2 has Jeremiah being placed in stocks at the Upper Benjamin gate, and the elders in Deuteronomy commonly give judgement and see people punished or executed at the gates (Deut 17.5; 21.1-2; 21.19; 22.15). The punishing of criminals in the gate also attests to the public nature of the

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in *Ancient Israel* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 120-22; William G. Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 137; Biran, ‘Tel Dan’, p. 45; Thomas Hertel, *Old Assyrian Legal Practices: Law and Dispute in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2013), p. 316-29; Pietro Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible* (Trans. Michael J. Smith; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 232; Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Trans. Jeremy Moiser; London: SPCK, 1980), p. 31; Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Revision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 125-6; J. Gray, ‘The *goren* at the City Gate: Justice and the Royal Office in the Ugaritic Text “Aqht”’, *PEQ* 85 (1953), pp. 118-23; Victor H. Matthews, ‘Entrance Ways and Threshing Floors: Legally Significant Sites in the Ancient Near East’, *Fides et Historia* 19 (1987), pp. 25-40.

<sup>9</sup> Hertel, *Old Assyrian Legal Practices*, 328-29.

<sup>10</sup> May, ‘City Gates in Israel’, pp. 100-101; See also Hertel’s comments on the “gate of God” in Assyrian litigation – Hertel, *Old Assyrian Legal Practices*, p. 329.

<sup>11</sup> May, ‘City Gates in Israel’, pp. 101-2.

gates – criminals are punished there as a visible example to the many people that would pass them by. The Assyrian practice of punishing miscreant kings or prisoners of war in such a public location also serves to reinforce the king's power, or the community rules, to all those who witnessed such events. With these characteristics of city gates in mind, of judgement, punishment or execution of criminals and public reinforcing of order, we perhaps start to see the references to certain biblical characters reported to have died in a gate in a different light. Victor Matthews notes “Since justice is generally conceived to have originated with a god or gods, both physically and metaphorically the gate provided a link between two realms of existence. The gate was the tie that bound the average citizen to the operations of his government and of the temple. And it was the symbol of the continuity of law and social stability.”<sup>12</sup> It is of little surprise then that public reinforcement of order and stability, achieved via the public law court and the carrying out of its judgements, was enacted in city gates. Perhaps this also contributes to explaining why the kings would on occasion in the biblical texts, be sitting in the gate – sometimes they were serving as judges, but perhaps also their physical presence there served to demonstrate that the internal order was under control.<sup>13</sup> Just as the gate acted as the boundary between the outsiders and the insiders, so it also served as the place of establishing internal order and security. I

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<sup>12</sup> Matthews, ‘Entrance Ways’, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Sam 18.4, 24, 33; 19.8; 2 Kgs 22.10; Jer 38.7. McKeating has also suggested that the king in this role may have acted as a sort of “public go’el”, as a protector of those who did not otherwise have protection. Henry McKeating, ‘The Development of the Law on Homicide in Ancient Israel’, *VT* 25 (1975), pp. 46-68.

suggest that the people of the time would have recognised themes of judgement, punishment and order to be intertwined institutionally with gates in ancient Israel, and this, on the literary level, allows the biblical author to make use of these themes in writing their narratives.

### **3. The Death of Eli (1 Sam 4.18)**

In verse 13 Eli is presented as יָשָׁב עַל־הַכִּסֵּא יָד דָּרָךְ מְצַפֶּה although in verse 18 this is explained more clearly as being (וַיִּפֹּל מֵעַל־הַכִּסֵּא אַחֲרָנִית) בָּעֵד יָד הַשַּׁעַר. The textual issue with יָד in verse 13 is solved by the versions following verse 18 and suggesting בָּעֵד יָד was meant there also. In this case we would have in verse 13 “Eli was sitting upon his throne by the side of the road watching”, and in verse 18, “and he fell backwards from upon his throne by the side of the gate.” The use of כִּסֵּא is immediately interesting, as it generally denotes a throne or a seat of honour, as is the location of where Eli is sitting. In the books of Samuel and Kings the only people described as ‘sitting in the gate’ are Eli, David (2 Sam 18.24; 19.8), and the king of Israel and king Jehoshaphat of Judah (at the entrance of the gate, 1 Kgs 22.10). Other notable characters appear around gates, though notably do not sit in them; Absalom (by the road into the gate, 1 Sam 15.2), Samuel (1 Sam 9.18) and Joab/Abner (2 Sam 3.27). In view of these comparisons, it seems unlikely to have been an accident that Eli is placed upon a כִּסֵּא in the manner of the kings after him, only to fall off it backwards.

Whether Eli is sitting by the city gate, or by a temple gate has been interpreted differently by scholars.<sup>14</sup> The narrative gives no real indications either way, though 1 Sam 1.9 has Eli יָשָׁב עַל־הַכֶּסֶּא עַל־מְזוֹזוֹת הַיְכָל which is where the temple interpretations have come from.<sup>15</sup> The movement within the narrative does not help us, as the messenger runs into the city and tells the people his news and then Eli hears, which seems a plausible chain of events if Eli is sitting by the temple, further on into the city, and so the messenger reaches the people first. Equally, we are told that Eli is blind and so had he been sitting by the city gate, he would not have seen the messenger run past him. Here I will be using the city gate scenario for two reasons. Firstly, there is no other reference to a tradition of sitting upon a seat by the temple other than the reference in 1 Sam 1.9, whereas there is a known tradition of leaders, whether kings (in Samuel and Kings) or elders (in Deuteronomy and Ruth) sitting in a city gate. Secondly, on a biblical level, whether the temple in Shiloh had a gate is open to question, as 1 Sam 1.9 only mentions Eli sitting by the doorpost. Thirdly, the archaeological evidence from Shiloh suggests that Shiloh was a religious *temenos* in Iron Age I; with a high degree of building planning and construction, public buildings

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<sup>14</sup> Temple: Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 49; Graeme A. Auld, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 69; City Gate: Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (HB Monographs 19; Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2008), p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1999), p. 24.

found in Area C, and no living dwellings uncovered at the site.<sup>16</sup> This being the case it might not be unreasonable to suggest that the gates of the ‘city’ of Shiloh were also in some way the gates to the temple – that is, to the cultic settlement. In fact, if the excavators are correct and Shiloh was indeed dominated by its cultic associations and function in this period, then one would have expected the gates to be a notable aspect of its layout, marking the crossing from the outside world into the cultic place, and there would have been no reason why Eli would not be found there. Perhaps the reference in 1 Chronicles 9:26 to the Levites acting as chief gatekeepers to the sanctuary is also worth noting. Although a late reference, it supports the idea of Levites having a role in the gates, and if Shiloh was a cultic settlement in Iron Age I then the city gate or entrance would have had a similar function to a temple gate – which, it should be said, was not found. To have Eli presented in the gate of the city therefore, does not seem an unreasonable reconstruction.

A first glimpse of irony in the passage comes with the mention of Eli ‘watching’ (v13) despite being blind (v15). The second Bodner sees with Eli’s asking for the ‘word’ from the battlefield *מִהַּיְהוָה הַדְּבָר בְּנֵי* – which he interprets as a reference to the word of Yahweh in 1 Sam 2.27-36, where the sign of the fulfilment of Yahweh’s word will be the death of Eli’s two sons on the same day (1 Sam 2.34). In 1 Sam 4 the messenger

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<sup>16</sup> Israel Finkelstein, ‘The History and Archaeology of Shiloh from the Middle Bronze Age II to the Iron Age II’, in Israel Finkelstein (ed.), *Shiloh: The Archaeology of a Biblical Site* (Monograph Series no. 10; Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, 1993), pp. 371-94, esp. 386.



reports the death of Eli's sons, the narrator thus demonstrating in the messenger's words the fulfilment of the earlier words of the man of God.<sup>17</sup> Commentators have differed with what to do with the reference to Eli having judged Israel for forty years at the end of 1 Sam 4.18. Some, like Alter, have seen it as language carried over from the book of Judges, whether accidentally or deliberately.<sup>18</sup> Robinson has suggested it may be taken as preparing the ground for presenting Samuel as a judge in 1 Sam 7.15.<sup>19</sup> Jobling has suggested that it is ironically presenting Eli as a failed judge; "the irony is made complete by the Philistines; instead of Eli's being 'raised up' to defeat them it is his corrupt regime that brings them back from their long absence to defeat *him* (1 Samuel 4)!"<sup>20</sup> It seems that these are all good points, and it seems that they can be taken together without contradiction. It seems reasonable that our author may have been setting the stage for Samuel's judgeship, as well as making an ironic point about Eli's failures, and at the same time the language of forty years is stereotypical enough to suggest it may have been a stylistic device as well. However, another aspect that should be considered is that of the gate. The fact that Eli sits in a gate and is referred to as having judged Israel cannot be lightly ignored when we recall the role of gates in judgement and litigation in ancient Israel. Bovati defines a judges as "someone who,

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<sup>17</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, p. 47-8.

<sup>18</sup> Alter, *The David Story*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Gnana Robinson, *Let us be Like the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> David Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 51.

so to speak, embodies the judicial institution: an *individual* (or a college of individuals) to whom the task and power to make decisions for everybody has been entrusted.”<sup>21</sup> He also notes that judges sit to hear a case (and are characterized by the verb יָשַׁב) and then arise (קָוַם) to give a final judgement.<sup>22</sup> And he later notes that keeping silent in a lawsuit signified defeat: “when one party falls silent and has no more to say, thus implicitly recognising the other is right.”<sup>23</sup> The fact that Eli never rises from his אִשְׁתּוֹ, nor speaks again before his death is certainly suggestive. With this in mind it is noticeable that Eli is characterized in this passage as a judge; he sits on a designated seat, by the city gates, and is named as having judged, which makes it rather ironic that he dies in the place where judgement would usually be given. In this reading, it seems that as Eli previously judged Israel, now Yahweh judges Eli and finds him to be at fault. If social order was linked to judgment and public displays in the city gates, then the death of a man who is said to have judged Israel being linked to the gate, suggests that the old social order is publicly judged to be unworthy by Yahweh, and a new one can now begin.

### **5. The Death of Abner (2 Sam 3.27)**

The Joab-Abner confrontation that comes to a climax with Abner’s death in the gate in 2 Sam 3.27, and ends some time later with Joab’s death in 1 Kgs 2.32-34 has been

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<sup>21</sup> Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice*, p. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice*, pp. 232-5.

<sup>23</sup> Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice*, p. 342.

written on extensively in scholarly works. Most scholars agree that Joab is guilty of murder, or at least homicide, as it is thought that a blood feud should not have legally arisen between Joab and Abner, due to Asahel's death occurring in a battle scenario, as made clear by 2 Sam 3.30. However it has certainly not gone unnoticed that a potential rival to Joab was removed from the scene, and the timing, after Abner has made a covenant with David and sent word to the elders of Israel, is suspiciously fortunate for David.<sup>24</sup> The subject of homicide and legal punishment has arisen from awareness of blood guilt and blood feud as well as the lack of immediate punishment for Joab. As Abner's death is portrayed as murder, the legal material of the time demanded Joab's death.<sup>25</sup> Pamela Barmash's study of homicide gives a thorough treatment of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources, but on Joab's action she concludes that Joab

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<sup>24</sup> See for example, F.H. Cryer, 'David's Rise to Power and the Death of Abner: An Analysis of 1 Samuel XXVI 14-16 and its Redaction-Critical Implications', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 385-94; N.P. Lemche, 'David's Rise', *JSOT* 10 (1978), pp. 2-25; George Nicol, 'The Death of Joab and the Accession of Solomon: Some Observations on the Narrative of 1 Kings 1-2', *SJOT* 7 (1993), pp. 134-51; James C. Vanderkam, 'Davidic Complicity in the Deaths of Abner and Eshbaal: A Historical and Redactional Study', *JBL* 99 (1980), pp. 521-39; J.W. Wesselius, 'Joab's Death and the Central Theme of the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel IX-1 Kings II)', *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 336-51; David Janzen, "'What he did for me': David's Warning About Joab in 1 Kings 2.5', *JSOT* 39 (2015), pp. 265-79; Daniel Friedmann, *To Kill and Take Possession: Law, Morality and Society in Biblical Stories* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Pamela Barmash, 'The Narrative Quandry: Cases of Law in Literature', *VT* 54 (2000), pp. 1-16; Pamela Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jonathan P. Burnside, *God, Justice and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 267; Jonathan P. Burnside, 'Exodus and Asylum: Uncovering the Relationship Between Biblical Law and Narrative', *JSOT* 34 (2010), pp. 243-66; McKeating, 'The Development of the Law on Homicide'; David P. Wright, 'Homicide, Talion, Vengeance, and Psycho-Economic Satisfaction in the Covenant Code', in David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans (eds.), *Religion and Violence: the Biblical Heritage* (Recent Research in Biblical Studies 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 57-78; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'Tit for Tat: The Principle of Equal Retribution in Near Eastern and Biblical Law', *Biblical Archaeologist* 49 (1980), pp. 230-34. M.E.J. Richardson, *Hammurabi's Law: Text, Translation and Glossary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

is too powerful for David to execute him for the murder of Abner.<sup>26</sup> Andrew Mein similarly notes that “The king’s servants are both the source of his power and the most potent threat.”<sup>27</sup> It is an interesting point, and perhaps is clearly demonstrated in the case of Abner and Ishabaa. As Janzen’s recent article suggests, if David’s words in 1 Kings 2.5 are read as “the things which he did for me” rather than the usual “the things which he did to me”, then we may have a clearer answer as to why David did not seek to punish Joab.<sup>28</sup>

What is the role of the gate in this episode? Perhaps part of the answer can be seen in David’s lament for Abner in 2 Sam 3.33-34. Scholars have sometimes interpreted the reference to Abner dying a fool’s death, and not having his feet bound and fettered as his foolishness (as a military general who should have known better) for allowing himself to be murdered so easily.<sup>29</sup> However, given the role of the gate in passing judgement on, and execution of, criminals perhaps it makes better sense to view David’s lament in this way. David is not so much lamenting that Abner is dead in these two verses, but rather how he has died – as a common criminal, executed in the city gate. It is interesting that the MT reads אֶל-תּוֹךְ הַשַּׁעַר which perhaps reinforces the idea of Joab killing Abner in public, in the midst of the gate. The references to his hands

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<sup>26</sup> Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World*, p. 34 n. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Mein, ‘Psalm 101 and the Ethics of Kingship’, in Katharine Dell (ed.), *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 56-70, (67).

<sup>28</sup> Janzen, ‘What he did for me’, pp. 266-67.

<sup>29</sup> John Machine, *1 and 2 Samuel: the New Century Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), p. 211; Auld, *1 and 2 Samuel*, p. 383; William McKane, *1 and 2 Samuel: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 194.

and feet not being bound may serve as an attempt to distinguish his death from the others that would have taken place there; i.e. that although Abner was killed in the gate, the people must be aware that he was not bound like a criminal, and his death was not what it looks like. For a man of Abner's standing and military achievements to die in the gate would have been a shameful end, and perhaps this contributes to the efforts of David to bury Abner with a state burial and public mourning. Not only must David distance himself from the killing, but also from the manner in which it was done. It also may serve to partially explain the emphasis on shame in the curse David utters against the house of Joab – as Joab treated Abner shamefully, so too is his house cursed in shameful terms.<sup>30</sup> The gate serves to throw a different light on the way in which Abner's death may have been perceived, and also functions as a literary law court. Two men enter a form of disputation there and one is killed. But the dead man is perceived to be innocent by the author, as he makes sure to inform the reader that Joab is the guilty party. Ironically the victor of the disputation is the one that having deemed himself correct, and implicitly having taken the role of judge upon himself, kills the other, and in doing so, condemns himself. As Matthews says, "the gate was the tie that bound the average citizen to the operations of his government and of the temple. And it

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<sup>30</sup> On the curse on Joab see Steven W. Holloway, 'Distaff, Crutch or Chain-Gang: The Curse Against the House of Joab in 2 Samuel III 29', *VT* 37 (1987), pp. 370-75; T.M. Lemos, 'Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible', *JBL* 125 (2006), p. 235. Slightly differently see Lyn, M. Bechtel, 'Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming', *JSOT* 49 (1991), pp. 47-76 (53).

was the symbol of the continuity of law and social stability.”<sup>31</sup> In the place symbolic of law and social stability, Joab commits a murder, and rather than acting in accordance with the law, he acts against it. Instead of the guilty party dying in the gate, Joab’s actions make him the guilty party.

## **6. The Death of Jezebel (2 Kgs 9.31-33)**

In 2 Kgs 9.31 Jehu is stated as entering the gate – ׀יהואָ באַ בשַׁעַר. It is from here that Jezebel calls down to him and is eventually thrown down to be trampled and killed. It is not made clear in the passage whether the gate in question is a palace gate as commonly assumed in commentaries, or whether it is the city gate. Williamson has noted that Jehu enters by the gate, from which a window of the royal residence was visible, and “since when Jezebel is thrown down from this window, he tramples her underfoot on his way into the residence (verses 33-34), we must assume that there was a space between the gate and the residence and that at this point, therefore, the residence itself was not directly built on the outside wall.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the excavations at Jezreel demonstrated that the gatehouse was a separate structure to the casemate walls, rather than bonded to them.<sup>33</sup> However, 2 Kings 9.17-20 narrates the sentinel of Jezreel

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<sup>31</sup> Matthews, ‘Entrance Ways’, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, ‘Jezreel in the Biblical Texts’, *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 1 (1991), pp. 72-92.

<sup>33</sup> David Ussishkin and John Woodhead, ‘Excavations at Tel Jezreel, 1994-1996: Third Preliminary Report’ in *Excavations at Tel Jezreel 1994-1996: Third Report* (Reprint Series no. 10; Repr. From *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 24 [1997], pp. 3-180), p. 69.

being aware of a military force approaching and the sending out of two separate messengers to find out what they are doing. When they do not return, in verse 21, Joram's instructions are to ready his chariot, and kings Joram and Ahaziah go forth (אָצַף) to meet Jehu in their chariots. Do we really believe our authors that they went alone? This is not the action of a king casually meeting a returning general; the city was concerned enough to send a messenger, concerned again to send another, and then finally they ready their chariots and go forth (אָצַף), a verb often used in military contexts, to meet the approaching force. Na'aman has also questioned the Kings account of an uncontested Jehu entrance, on the basis of the Iron Age arrowheads found around the gate and walls at Jezreel.<sup>34</sup> On the basis of historical military action, I suggest it is plausible that the city gate of Jezreel would have been shut either until the king returned, or left open until they saw that he would not return and then shut. As Jezebel remained alive in the city, I find it highly likely that she would have wanted the city gates shut, once she realised the outcome, so that she could attempt to negotiate with Jehu from a position of strength. Shutting the gate would have left Jehu needing either to enter a state of siege with Jezreel, or rely on the people giving up Jezebel, which as it turns out, they did. But perhaps this also is why she is thrown from the window – because the city gates were closed. To be sure this is speculation, but I find it more plausible than presupposing a city who had seen a hostile force approach

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<sup>34</sup> N. Na'aman, 'Historical and Literary Notes on the Excavations at Tel Jezreel', *Tel Aviv* 24 (1997), pp. 122-28 (126).

and had its king ride out to meet it, would have opened their gates immediately and let Jehu enter and ride straight up to the (unmentioned) palace. Thus I suggest that Jezebel died at, or in, the gates of the city.

Elijah's oracle in 1 Kgs 21.17-24 proclaims Jezebel's death by being eaten by dogs as a judgement from Yahweh because Jezebel and Ahab have 'sold themselves to do evil'. The message from the young prophet in 2 Kgs 9.1-10 reiterates the judgment, although this time it is more clearly stated as vengeance for the blood of the prophets and servants of Yahweh (v7). Jezebel's death at the gate fulfils the prophecies as, no doubt, our narrator intended.<sup>35</sup> Jezebel is judged by Yahweh to be deserving of death and dies appropriately in the place of judgement. Nielsen has noted that Yahweh uses dogs to punish in Jer 15.3, but more generally they are used elsewhere because they are despised. She notes that we are used to seeing bodies of enemies left unburied on the open field, and that the themes in 1 Kgs 20-21 are paralleled in 1 Kgs 14.11 with Jeroboam's kin.<sup>36</sup> The dogs devouring Jezebel's body is ironically mirrored in Jehu's eating; as he eats to sustain himself, so the dogs devour Jezebel, rendering her less than a person.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>E.g. Burke, O. Long, *2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 129; John Gray, *I and II Kings* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 495; Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 223; Volkmar Fritz, *1&2 Kings: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 287.

<sup>36</sup> Kirsten Nielsen, 'Construction of Meaningful Contexts on war, Lions, Dogs, Birds and a Vineyard', *SJOT* 21 (2007), pp. 218-27.

<sup>37</sup> Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 70;



There may be further irony here with the image of the woman at the window falling to her death in the gate. As many have noted, Jezebel being described in a window puts her in a literary line with a few other women in the biblical texts (Sisera's mother, Michal, Rahab), and also in conversation with the woman in the window reliefs found at Khorsabad, Arslan Tash, Nimrud and Samaria.<sup>38</sup> The woman in the reliefs seems likely to be cultic, perhaps a goddess, if the triple recessed window is anything to go by, as triple recessed doors were a known feature of Mesopotamian temples.<sup>39</sup> Whether the woman at the window in biblical literature is drawing off these ideas is rather more difficult to ascertain; Fritz for one thinks it is not.<sup>40</sup> One of Jezebel's defining characteristics in the biblical narratives is her association with foreign religion and with killing prophets of Yahweh (1 Kgs 16.31; 18.4, 19), and so I suggest that Ackerman (and others) are correct to identify her with a foreign goddess in this way. Though the strength of the argument is perhaps better found in the image of Jezebel styling her hair and make-up and then standing in the window, rather than her simply standing in the window, as the reliefs depict a woman with a carefully done hairstyle.

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<sup>38</sup> Don Seeman, 'The Watcher at the Window: Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif', *Prooftexts* 24 (2004), pp. 1-50; Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 161; Eleanor F. Beach, 'The Samaria Ivories, *Marzeah*, and the Biblical Text', *Biblical Archaeologist* 55 (1992), pp. 130-39; Judith E. McKinlay, 'Negotiating the Frame for Viewing the Death of Jezebel', *BibInt* 10 (2002), pp. 305-23; Tina Pippin, 'Jezebel Re-Vamped', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 196-208; Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 13-18.

<sup>39</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> Fritz, *1&2 Kings*, p. 286.

If however, as Ackerman has suggested, the queen in the window (Jezebel) is a mirror of the goddess in her temple, then Jezebel's fall from the window takes on new significance. As Aschkenasy says, "the woman at the window highlights her removal from history."<sup>41</sup> As she falls from window to gate she falls from queen to less than a person, and, if her presence at the window mirrors a goddess, then the goddess ideas and imagery fall with her, to be crushed under the hooves of Jehu's horses at the behest of Yahweh himself, in the place of his judgement.

## **7. Conclusions**

Ironic contradiction is usually limited to one shared value, assumption or piece of knowledge, and different ironic texts focus on different aspects of context as the means of signalling irony. One of the chief difficulties for detecting irony in ancient texts is our lack of knowledge of the ancient socio-cultural and political context.<sup>42</sup>

This study has focused on the role of the gate in biblical narratives in which a notable character is reported as having died in a gate. The functions of city gates have been studied from archaeological, socio-historical, comparative biblical-ancient Near Eastern, and biblical memory perspectives, but until now, have not yet been applied to biblical narratives on a literary level.<sup>43</sup> In all three examples we have seen that there is an intertwining of gates and themes of judgement and punishment in the literary

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<sup>41</sup> Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Howling Over Moab*, p. 116.

<sup>43</sup> May, 'City Gates'; Walsh, 'Testing Entry'.

construction of the narrative, often leaving an ironic message behind. With Eli and Jezebel, Yahweh acts through his word and through the gates as the judge, though ironically, he never appears explicitly as a judge in the narratives. With Joab and Abner in 2 Sam 3.27 we see the gate acting more as a marker of situational irony than a judgement of Yahweh. It is because of what the gate represents symbolically as an institution of law and order that enables the author to demonstrate the chaos Joab's actions have caused within the kingdom's order on a literary level as well as drawing attention to the condemnation of Joab himself. Some scholars have identified justice and ethics as having implications for the conceptions of order and chaos in ancient Israel.<sup>44</sup> If the gate functions as a symbol of these, as I have argued above, then a notable character dying in a gate in biblical narrative surely signals that deeper ideas and meanings are at work than we otherwise might have realised. As Camery-Hoggatt has said; "irony occurs when the elements of the story-line provoke the reader to see beneath the surface of the text to deeper significances."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 104.

<sup>45</sup> Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel*, p. 1.