

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

AJ: Sure. My name is Amy-Jill Levine, I go by AJ, because when I was in graduate school, which was still when Noah was on the ark, I found that I wasn't getting the contacts or the publications that men in my program were getting, and I knew I was just as good, if not better, than most of them. And one of my professors said, go by AJ, and like the gates opened up. Things are better for women in Biblical studies today.

I'm a Jew, I'm a member of an Orthodox synagogue, but I'm not Orthodox in practice. I retired in 2021 after teaching for close to thirty years at Vanderbilt University, both in the Divinity school and in the College of Arts and Science, and I now teach for Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, which is interested in bringing together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices, and I thought that would be a good place to spend part of my retirement years.

I'm a specialist in Second Temple Judaism and Christian origins, and my major concern is the Bible, which is so often used to hurt people - it becomes weaponized to hurt women, to hurt Jews, to hurt gay people, whatever. I try to find readings that undermine the weaponization of the Bible, and readings that lead to liberation for all people, so I'm politically invested in this text and I have an agenda in my scholarship, but to have an agenda does not necessarily make me a bad historian. One can be a really good historian, and still have an agenda, and still have a bias. And if your listeners want to write to me they can write to me at my Hartford address or at my Vanderbilt address, and those are easily found on the internet.

Anne: Could you give us a brief overview of what we know about Mary from scripture?

AJ: Surprisingly, the New Testament tells us very little about the mother of Jesus. I wish there were more. Mark barely mentions her, and she doesn't have a positive role there. The Gospel of John never mentions her by name, John just calls her the mother of Jesus. She shows up at the wedding at Cana, she shows up at the cross, and I kind of want to know what she's doing in between. Matthew actually doesn't have much on her either, there's a little bit in the infancy material about how Joseph is engaged to Mary, Mary is pregnant, Joseph knows the child is not his, and wants to divorce her quietly - and then, you know, good things happen because his name is Joseph and his father's name is Jacob, so of course he has dreams, just like that original Joseph back in the Book of Genesis who had dreams.

So we get the most about her at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, where we have the annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel, we have that magnificent hymn called the Magnificat, where Mary speaks about her soul being magnified, and then gives this manifesto of social justice. The Book of Acts tells that Mary was among the followers of Jesus following the crucifixion, in that small community based in Jerusalem, and then she disappears. She's not really in Paul. Whether she's in the Book of Revelations as the woman clothed with the sun in revelation twelve, that's debatable.

So we get a lot of additional material on Mary from post-biblical concerns, where Mariology really, really blossoms, and then it blossoms even more in Roman Catholic and Eastern

Orthodox traditions. Protestants don't talk that much about Mary, so in teaching my Divinity students - most of whom are Protestants - they're like, "Oh, you know, we don't do Mary," or, "Yeah, we know she's there, but she's not really important." Because she's collateral damage during the Reformation. I say, no, when Mary says in the Magnificat that all nations will call her blessed, well, then, you know Protestants have a role in that as well.

And for me, as a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, I look to Mary as part of doing the history of Jewish women in the late Second Temple period, and I wonder as a mother myself, you know, what did Mary teach Jesus? Because some of his stuff, he must have gotten from her.

So that's a quick overview of what we've got in the New Testament, and, in fact, what we don't have.

Anne: And how do we situate Mary and her experience within the historical and political situation of first century Judea?

AJ: Right, not only for first century Judea, but also for first century Galilee. And the difference is important, because Judea, following the year six of the common era, or AD, if you prefer, Judea is under direct Roman rule, Galilee is not, and there aren't any Roman troops stationed in the Galilee.

We also have to clear out a number of the misconceptions that my students typically have about women in first century Judea. For example, my students are convinced that Mary, when she became pregnant with Jesus, was like thirteen or fourteen. But from what we know about women's lives at the time - which we know from inscriptional evidence, we know from later rabbinic sources working back, we know from what's going on in the broader Roman Empire - Mary is probably nineteen or twenty. That's the time when Jewish women were getting married, husbands were usually eight to ten years older. So she's not a child, she has the opportunity of deciding whether to marry or whether not to marry. Jewish women were not simply sold off by their parents.

Jewish women at the time had access to their own funds, and we know this, remarkably enough, from the New Testament, which tells us that Jewish women had access to their own funds, like the women who float the mission, who serve as patrons, or the women who anoints Jesus with Chanel. Women can own their own homes, like Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, or the mother of John Mark who runs the house church in Jerusalem following the crucifixion. They have freedom of travel, they show up in public, and no one ever goes, "Oh my God, it's a woman in public!" They're in the synagogue, they're in the Temple.

So I'm not saying that first century Judea or first century Galilee were, like, feminist wonderlands. They weren't. It was a patriarchal, androcentric society - but women had a fair amount of freedom at the time, and I look at Mary as participating in that broader freedom. They can express themselves the way they want, they can choose their husband, they have an opportunity to divorce should they wish to do so. They are not being stoned for adultery - that whole thing in the Gospel of John, about the woman taken in adultery, nobody's carrying a stone, they're not about to stone her. The Jesus interlocutors are trying to trip him up on a point of law.

So when we look at Mary, it is best to start by looking at a relatively independent woman who has some say over her life, who has access to her own funds - should she have any - rather than look at her as oppressed, depressed, and repressed, and then she needs Jesus to come and liberate her.

Anne: What are some of the other misconceptions about women living at the time of Jesus in Judea and Galilee. Is there anything you want to expand on that subject? Where do these misconceptions come from when they come from Christians?

AJ: Sure, happy to talk about that. We started getting the idea of Jesus as a feminist - it had floated every once in a while earlier on in nineteenth century work, for example, but it really came to the fore as part of what we might call second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when women in Christianity - Protestant, Catholic, and to a lesser extent but still there, Eastern Orthodoxy - were wondering how come we're not getting ordained in certain traditions, or how come we're not becoming senior pastor, or why are we always given like the youth ministry work (not that there's anything wrong with youth ministry), or we're always working with kids, or we're doing hospital visitations, but we're not in the pulpit on Sunday morning. And the idea was, well, if Jesus were progressive on women's issues, then we could appeal to Jesus. Paul was, if - because Paul had some somewhat problematic things to say - but if Jesus were inventing feminist liberation, then we could appeal to Jesus, and therefore the church has no right to marginalize us, or marginalize our voices.

And the problem was, they couldn't find anything in the New Testament to give them Jesus the feminist. There's no woman among the top twelve you figure, like, a woman could have gotten the Judas seat or something like that. There's no woman at the transfiguration. There's no woman explicitly at the last supper - they may well have been there, because absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence, but it's really hard to make a compelling argument on what's not there. You can use your imagination, but history can only get you so far.

So if you can't find Jesus being proactive, the easiest thing to do is you lower the bar on first century Judaism, and then any time Jesus talks to a woman, he's breaking through Jewish tradition. And then to bolster that view, go to the Talmud - well the Talmud is a massive collection of work, and it's written over five to six centuries of work. And the Talmud has everything in it, because generally in the Talmud, you know, Rabbi This says something, Rabbi That says something else, the people over here say a third thing, and then the other people do what they want. So what generally happened was that many Christian feminists went to the Talmud - or they went to commentaries on the Talmud, because they didn't have the linguistic skills to read the text in its original - and they picked out some really, really negative things that a few rabbis said about women, retrojected all that stuff into the first century, even from a fourth century or fifth century source, and then read Jesus over against it.

And that's just a nasty way of doing history. That would be like my going to the church fathers who aren't the most progressive when it comes to women, or select citations from Paul, and saying, "Oh, that's what early Christianity took." And then I go to select citations from the Talmud, which are extraordinarily progressive on women. You know, to be a decent

historian, or a conscious one, I don't think you take the worst of one tradition and compare it with the best of another. So you still find "the rabbis say," - as if they all agree on the same thing, which God knows is not going to happen - "the rabbis say that women should be silent, and then Jesus comes along and lets women talk." It's just not helpful, it's bad history, and I don't think you can get good theology on the basis of bad history.

Anne: So what would you say is a more useful framework for feminist understanding of Mary?

AJ: Well, just to rephrase your question slightly: it wouldn't just be a feminist reading, it would be a good historical reading. Because you don't have to be a feminist to be a good historian, right? Or the two categories can overlap, they don't always.

For me, as a good historian, what one does is try to re-create what we know about women in Second Temple Jewish life, and then and then locate Mary therein. We know that some women were teaching, we know that in the household - and this is still the case to this day - that women are the primary teachers of little children, not only how to function in the household, but also their initial religious trainers.

There's a book in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican canons called the Book of Tobit, sometimes called what's part of the Old Testament apocrypha, or the deuterocanonical literature, and Tobit tells us that he learned Torah, he learned Jewish tradition, from his grandmother, whose name was Deborah. So that gives us a sense right there of where that initial teaching comes from.

So it seems to me that if Mary, who would have grown up during the early years of the transition in Judea from direct Jewish rule over to Roman rule, who would have known about the Roman destruction of the city of Sepphoris, in the Galilee, which is where she is from, who would have understood what it was like to have Rome in the neighbourhood, and to have Jewish kings propped up by the Roman emperor - like Herod the Great, propped up by Rome, and his son Herod Antipas, who is ruling Galilee, propped up by Rome - she would have known the stories of the Maccabean martyrs.

Also, books in the Old Testament apocrypha, the deuterocanonical literature, have people - women indeed - who gave up their lives because they insisted on circumcising their sons, because they insisted on honouring the Sabbath and keeping it holy, because they insisted in learning about Torah. And it would not surprise me that some of Jesus' own teachings about what the kingdom of God looks like, as opposed to the kingdom ruled by the Roman empire, it would not surprise me that some of those teachings came directly from his mother.

Anne: I know you've written about, and also alluded to a bit already today, the parallels that you see between stories from the Old Testament and these narratives at the beginning of the New Testament, especially as they have to do with Mary. I would love if you could speak a bit more to that

AJ: It's a really good question. Because of those parallels, or those those allusions, and also because of connections between what the gospels tell us about Mary and what we know about Greek and Roman literature at the time, what we call gentile literature or pagan

literature, it's very, very hard to get to the historical Mary. So we don't know if Mary did something, and it just kind of looks like what Hannah the mother of Samuel did, or it kind of looks like some of these human women who had relations with pagan gods. How do we know who the real Mary is?

In terms of the allusions, the Gospel of Luke is very, very helpful here, because Mary's Magnificat looks very, very much like the song of Hannah, which you find at the beginning of the biblical book called First Samuel, where Hannah, who has had problems with fertility, and suddenly by divine grace - because it's God who opens and closes wombs - becomes pregnant, and she sings this wonderful hymn about how the poor will be cared for, and the rich will be treated in a sense that they will be punished if they've oppressed the poor, and that comes right into the Magnificat

In the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew starts with the genealogy. It starts with Abraham, and then it works its way down to Joseph, who is married to Mary, and in that story, we get other women. Tamar, who shows up in Genesis thirty eight, and Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, who shows up at the Book of Joshua, and Ruth the Moabite, who marries into the Davidic family, and then finally so-called the wife of Uriah, or Bathsheba, and that gives us this idea of, well, wait a minute, all of these women have what might be called obstetrical irregularities. Tamar seduces her father-in-law - he doesn't realize she's his daughter-in-law. Rahab's a prostitute. Ruth is a Moabite, and the Moabites descend, according to Genesis, from the incest of Lot and his daughters, and plus the seduction scene in the Book of Ruth. And then there's Bathsheba, who's guilty of adultery with King David.

And then you get to Mary, who is pregnant, and Joseph isn't the father. So how much of that is history, where the gospel writer is saying, wait a minute, there's some problems in the older text as well? Or how much is it saying, well, Mary anticipates the beginning of gentile women coming into the church, because all these women are somehow gentile-coded. So the upshot is, we don't know how much of the historical Mary we've got, other than that Jesus had to have a mother, and I have no reason to think that his mother's name was not Mary, because it was the most popular name for Jewish women in the first century. We don't actually know.

Anne: This is actually not a very important question, but just something I'm interested in. I read a biography of Herod that was very fascinating, but it talked about how one theory of the glut of Marys that we see in the New Testament had to do with that being a very common Hasmonean name. Is there any basis for that?

AJ: There may well be. So King Herod had at least ten wives, a bunch of whom he killed, a few he got rid of. Among his wives was a princess from the previous Jewish royal family, the Maccabean royal family known as Hasmoneans, and her name was Mary - Mariamne. Apparently he loved her. Josephus, the Jewish historian, talks about her, and she actually, along with Herod, shows up in rabbinic literature as well. They had a number of sons together, all of whom Herod, by the way, killed, and then he killed Mariamne, and he killed her brother, who was also the high priest, and he killed her mother.

But she was very, very popular, and she represented, in the late first century before the time of Jesus, that Jewish nationalism, independence, autonomy apart from Rome. So it would

not surprise me that a lot of Jewish mothers were naming their daughters Mary at the time, or Miriam in Aramaic, or Mariamne - and in fact Mary's name shows up variously in the gospels, as well, as Maria and Miriam and so on - to express that sense of Jewish political independence.

However, that's not the only possible explanation. There is another Mary, who would be Miriam, who is the sister of Moses. And Miriam - that original Miriam - led the women at the Exodus from Egypt in the Song of Moses, which I think Miriam wrote, and then Moses cribbed. Miriam, who is a prophet, Miriam who challenges Moses' authority, Miriam, who is really, really popular, not only, as you can tell, from the stories in the Book of Exodus, but from later Jewish literature.

So the name is doing double duty, saying "My daughter can be a prophet, my daughter can be a leader, my daughter can represent an anti-Roman Jewish autonomous perspective, my daughter is one who going to be important in her own life, in her household, in her community, and she's going to be known for more than being a wife and a mother, she's going to be known for having an independent voice that speaks for justice." That would not surprise me.

Anne: Could you speak a bit about the difference between the Christian perspective on Isaiah's prophecy, about a virgin or a maiden bearing a child, and the Jewish perspective, and the difference between the words used, and how that came about.

AJ: Sure. For people who are interested, there's a whole chapter on this in a book that I co-wrote with my friend Mark Butler who teaches at Duke University called *The Bible With And Without Jesus*, and what what we did in that book as we looked at the major - I'm gonna use Christian terminology, here - the major Old Testament quotes that get re-purposed in the New Testament to say, well, what did those quotes mean at the time?

So in other words, in Isaiah chapter seven verse fourteen, what did Isaiah's initial audience, sometime around seven hundred or so before the time of Jesus, what were they getting from this message? How else did Jews read these stories, because it's not as if Jewish biblical interpretation stopped? How does the Church read these stories? And then, following the writing of the New Testament, what did Jewish readers responding to Christianity do with those various verses once they knew what the Christian readings are?

Complicating this, by the way, is that a number of the so-called Christian readings are also Jewish readings. It would not surprise me that the author of the Gospel of Matthew came out of a Jewish environment. Paul is clearly a Jew. But these are Jews who also worship Jesus as lord and saviour, because we don't have, in the first century, Christians over on one side and Jews are over on the other side, as if there's some sort of split and you can tell where that is.

So here's what's going on. Isaiah, writing in Hebrew, says: "See that pregnant young woman over there? (*Ha'almah* - *almah* is just a woman, and *hare* means she's pregnant, it's an adjective). By the time her child is old enough to eat solid food, O king-to -whom-Isaiah-happens-to-be-talking-to-at-the-time, all of your international problems are going to go

away." This woman's pregnancy is no more and no less miraculous than any other woman's pregnancy, she's just a pregnant young woman.

When the text gets translated from Hebrew into Greek a couple of hundred years before the time of Jesus, the Hebrew word *almah*, young woman, comes into Greek as *parthenos*, and we know *parthenos* from words like Parthenon, the temple dedicated to the virgin goddess Athena, or if you do biology, parthenogenesis, which is conception without the need of sperm. Now at the time, *parthenos* could mean just young woman, it's the word that the Septuagint uses for Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, who was either raped or seduced by a local prince, this is back in Genesis 34, when the prince says to his dad, get me this *parthenos* for a wife. She's clearly not a virgin, because that was taken care of in the previous verse. As time goes on, the word *parthenos* increasingly comes to mean virgin in the technical sense, so Matthew reading Isaiah in the Greek sees - and the verb is in the future, "will conceive," rather than "is pregnant" - says, "Oh, a virgin will conceive."

Now, to say a virgin will conceive is not necessarily a miracle, right? You can pick a five year old girl, and say, "See that virgin? She will conceive, preferably after she graduates college, gets a decent job, finds a life partner, and has financial security. Then she will conceive." So, what the Greek is doing, is giving this young woman a little bit more time, and that actually works, given when the political problems Isaiah was facing finally dissipated.

Matthew takes it as a miracle, so that in Matthew's gospel, Joseph realizes that Mary is pregnant, they are engaged - that's a contractual obligation, they've done the paperwork. Well, in order to get out of a contract, you have to file another contract, so you have to file a divorce document. Joseph, realizing she's pregnant, resolves to divorce her quietly - he's not going to stone her, they're just going to do the paperwork. He's not going to make a big deal, you know, things happen, and then he has a dream - and this is Matthew completely relying on the Book of Genesis - and in the dream, an angel says to him, Joseph, son of David (just so we know the family line here), do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife, because that which is conceived in her is conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew does not give us the biological details, we have to go to second, third, and fourth century church documents to figure out exactly how that happened, and that kind of miracle is well above my pay grade. And this was to fulfil, as Matthew puts it, the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah. Matthew loves fulfilment citations, there are seven of them in the first two chapters - behold a virgin will conceive and bear a child, and you will call his name Emmanuel, which means God is with us, which is in fact what Emmanuel means in Hebrew. And then Joseph marries Mary, and no divorce, and then we have baby Jesus.

So what happens? The synagogue reading in the Hebrew sees no virginal conception whatsoever. It's only a virgin birth in the second century, that means Mary's a virgin after the birth, right. It's a virginal conception. The followers of Jesus, both Jewish and gentile, reading the Gospel of Matthew are seeing a virginal conception. This was such a major concern in the second century after Jesus, that there's this church father who comes into history sometime in the 160s, Justin Martyr - and I have to explain to my students that his parents didn't name him Justin Martyr, I mean, he's probably a Samaritan put to death by the Roman state. He writes this extremely long and quite tedious document called Dialogue with

Trypho. And Trypho's a Jew, and somewhere around chapter 67 or so, they get around to talking about this Isaiah prophecy.

Trypho the Jew says it doesn't say virgin, it says young woman, and the whole prophecy probably refers to King Hezekiah, which it probably doesn't, but it's a good guess. Justin says, in effect, you Jews changed the text, it originally said virgin, you came along and you screwed up with the text. Did they? No. How do we know that? The Dead Sea Scrolls, which clearly says in the Hebrew, *ha-almah hare* - pregnant young lady. So they're fighting about it, and they're fighting about it in literature.

My view is that if you read the Old Testament - here using the Christian term - with Christian lenses, you're going to see Jesus on every page, and that's perfectly okay. But if you take those Christian lenses off, and you put on non-Messianic Jewish lenses, you're not going to see him at all. And that's okay too. Because even in the synagogue, when we read our scriptures, what we would call the Tanakh, we're going to read them through rabbinic lenses, or we're going to read them through Medieval Jewish lenses. So I don't think it's helpful to say Matthew got it wrong. Matthew, reading the Greek, has a legitimate reading. And the synagogue, reading the Hebrew, has another legitimate reading. And the better question today is not who got it right and who got it wrong, but what do we do with this text today?

Let's say it points to Jesus - it should not exhaust the meaning of the text. So for me, particularly living in the United States, with strange things that our current Supreme Court is doing, I read, "See that pregnant young woman over there," and I'm thinking, what happens if that pregnancy is ectopic, and can she get medical treatment? Who's going to take care of her prenatal and postnatal medical concerns? So that Isaiah can still be speaking to us today, without that debate about right or wrong.

Anne: Do you mind just explaining quickly for listeners who might not know the term what Tanakh refers to?

AJ: Oh, sure! The Jewish canon is typically referred to as the Tanakh, it's not a word that the Bible uses. Tanakh, it's an acronym, so T is for Torah, which means instruction, and that would be the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. N is for Nevi'im, a *nevi* is a prophet, and those are the former prophets and latter prophets, like Joshua, and Judges, first second Samuel, first second Kings, and then all the classical prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the book of the twelve. And then Ketuvim, which is writing, that's all the miscellaneous stuff like psalms, and proverbs, and the Book of Esther, and Lamentations, and the Book of Ruth, and so on.

As it's mostly the same material that you would find in the Protestant Old Testament, but it's in a different canonical order, which is why I don't like the term Hebrew Bible. Hebrew Bible is really a Protestant term, because the canon of the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, and the Orthodox Church has all that Greek stuff in it, like first and second Maccabees, or Judith, or the Book of Tobit, which we've already mentioned.

The Protestant Old Testament - in fact the standard Old Testament, Christian bible part one - ends with the prophet Malachi, and Malachi predicts at the end of this book the coming of the prophet Elijah to predict the Messianic Age. The Tanakh, the Jewish canon, tucks

Malachi in the middle, because that's part of the Nevi'im, the prophets, and ends with the miscellaneous stuff. It ends with second chronicles, which pretty much nobody reads, because second chronicles is really first and second kings without all the juicy stuff in it.

And second chronicles ends with the edict of King Cyrus of Persia, who has just conquered Babylon - we're about the year 538 or so before the time of Jesus. And Cyrus of Persia says to the Jews in exile in Babylon, go home, go be repatriated. So the reason I like the term Old Testament is because it's telling me that I'm looking at the Christian bible part one, which anticipates at its end the Messianic Age. So you can go from promise in the Old Testament to fulfilment in the new. And I like the term Tanakh for the synagogue, because it tells me the message is: go home, go back to the beginning, go back to your homeland, and try to live out the life that God wants for you there. Different messages for different communities. Again, it's not that one is right, one is wrong, it's just that one is right for this group and one is right for this other group.